

How to Keep Kids Positive Through the Pandemic

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# How to keep kids positive through the pandemic

## Plus, why staying positive might help them become better learners.

BY JAMIE KIFFEL-ALCHEH

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When New York writer Nora Zelevansky learned her six-year-old daughter was playing “hotel restaurant,” the details surprised her. “She said that everyone needed to be laid off, that she was going to get fired too, that there wouldn’t be enough money, and that one of her stuffed animals was hoarding food,” Zelevansky says. “Usually her stuffies are donning capes to save the world or dressed up for birthday parties. They’re not getting fired from their jobs.”

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and parents are understandably concerned about the [impacts of COVID-19 on their children’s own mental health](#). They have good reason. Kids already have a hard enough time regulating feelings because the frontal lobe (the part of the brain that controls rational thought) develops through adolescence. But research also shows that trauma—like intensified fear surrounding a life-changing event such as the pandemic—can affect

brain formation, leading to problems with regulating emotions later in life.

“Studies are starting to show that when we’re more positive, it increases interconnectivity between nerves in the brain,” says Ashok Shimoji-Krishnan, a child and adolescent psychiatrist for Kaiser Permanente in Factoria, Washington. That means kids’ brains work better when they’re thinking positively. So kids who are in a positive frame of mind are more able to handle, say, a tricky distance-learning assignment.

Positive thinking also increases the levels of feel-good hormones like serotonin and norepinephrine, which prime the brain to seek more of the same positive vibes. “By being positive, we promote more positivity down the road,” Shimoji-Krishnan says. Here are some ideas from the experts on maintaining your child’s positive outlook.

## **Signs to look for**

Zelevansky tried hard to shield her two children from scary details. “But I had no idea how much they were absorbing,” she says. The trick is to look for subtle signs that your kids might be sliding into negative thinking.

“Anxiety looks different in kids than adults,” says developmental psychologist Cynthia Smith, director of graduate studies for the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. “You might see kids being more emotional and clingy, or asking a lot of questions.”

Shimoji-Krishnan, who’s also the child mental health lead for Kaiser Permanente—Washington Region, agrees. “Younger kids might be more overt, with more tantrums, whining, and crying. They might be more on edge. They might question a bit more, argue a bit more.”

Older kids will likely show subtler signals. "They might not be interacting as much with the family, playing their favorite video games, or hanging out with their friends online," Shimoji-Krishnan says. "You might see more withdrawal, quietness, irritability, and emotionality."

Yet all kids seem to have one reaction in common. "Kids who are sliding down into negativity might not sleep as much, or oversleep all the time," Shimoji-Krishnan says. "Some kids might eat a lot more than usual. They might crave sweets or carbs. Or they might not want to eat as much."