

Supporting Mental Health for Louisiana Children, Families, and Child Care Staff During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Each of us is grappling with how to proceed in our daily lives while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who are child care professionals, there are countless ways in which this period of time has impacted you personally and professionally. You may be continuing to provide child care for those essential workers in need of it, you may not be providing physical care for children but may be consistently checking in on your families and staff, you may be worried about the impacts to your business, and you may be personally affected by the virus, or this situation may remind you of previous difficult times, among other concerns. While these situations are new for all of us, there is much already published research on how to support children, families, and caregivers during or after a traumatic experience. Building upon this knowledge we outline here basic steps you can take to support your child care community while the pandemic is ongoing.

- **Support stable, caring relationships.** Young children develop in the contexts of their relationships, including parents, teachers, and other caregivers. If children are not being cared for in their typical child care arrangements, they may be missing a trusted caregiver. Strong relationships serve as a buffer for children during a stressful situation. Work to support children in strengthening current relationships with adults, building new ones if needed, and talking with children about why they not be seeing a teacher, grandparent, aunt, or other trusted caregiver during the current period of isolation. Some examples of how to do this are:
 - If a child is not attending their usual child care, encourage parents and teachers to make contact and have a telephone or video call with children who are old enough to attend to a short call. This may help a child understand that their trusted caregiver is still there and misses them greatly. This should not be a time for learning or lessons, but a time to connect.
 - For adults to be prepared to support young children, they also need supportive, caring relationships. Directors can have regular check-in calls with staff to see how they are holding up. Teachers can offer the same to families. All caregivers, directors, teachers, and families should make use [TIKES teleMHC](#) for mental health support (see link at bottom of page).
- **Create or maintain familiar routines and consistent rules:** Children and adults are most successful when they have familiar, structured routines with some flexibility. Similarly, children feel safe when they have consistent rules to follow. Methods of creating this type of structure whether children are at home or in child care are:
 - Establish a routine that reflects what children are used to-consistent wake-up, nap, and bedtimes; consistent mealtimes; play times; etc. Allow for some flexibility and let children know if/when the routine may change. (e.g., Daddy has a work meeting this morning right after breakfast, which is when we usually play on the patio, so today we will play on the patio a little later and have some extra block building time after breakfast, while Daddy is on the computer).
 - It is tempting to give in to anything children ask for when we are under stress or they are having a tough time; however, these are the times it is most important to stick to consistent rules and boundaries. If at home, encourage parents to adopt some of the rules used in child care. (e.g., We use walking feet inside; Use gentle touches and inside voices; etc.). This is not the time to have strict punishments for breaking the rules, but instead work gently with children to model and practice the rules when they seem tough to learn. Gentle and firm guidance is supportive for children.
- **Have fun and show love and affection.** It is also important to remember that fun is necessary for everyone-especially young children. Children not only learn through play, but it is also a way of strengthening relationships and relieving stress-for children and their caregivers! Activities do not need to be complicated-crayons and scratch paper can become an art project, a few of Mom or Dad's baseball caps and scarves can be costumes, or stuffed animals can be puppets for a play. Build play and fun into your daily schedule, whether at home or in child care.
- **Answer questions using simple language.** Children will have questions about our current situation. Answer their questions as simply and directly as possible and consistently tell them that you and any other caregivers will keep them safe. If you are concerned about how to do that or your own mental health, please reach out a [TIKES mental health consultant](#) (contact information below).
- **Look for changes in behavior.** If children are demonstrating consistent changes in behavior or show regression in developmental skills it may be necessary to seek professional assistance. This does not mean that there is a diagnosable mental health condition, but a professional such as a TIKES mental health consultant can help you figure out next steps for your child, you, or others in your home or work family. See below for how to request a consultation.

TIKES Mental Health Consultation is available via telephone or secure video platform to Louisiana caregivers in need during the COVID-19 crisis. Parents, Type I, II, & III child care centers, respite care center caregivers, and others caring for young children can request a consultation. Requests are typically answered within hours and scheduled for the next day. [Click here to complete a request form.](#)