

summer activity guide

Staff Resource:
Recognizing and Managing
Stress in Youth

QUICK
Guide



About the Summer Activity Guides

Summers are for fun and engaged learning. In 2020 as the impact of the pandemic is widely felt, summer opportunities will be different for young people, families, and afterschool and summer program staff. The Summer Activity Guides were developed to help engage youth with supportive adults in a range of places.

The activities and resources in the Summer Activity Guides are intentionally designed to support youth-serving summer programs in driving consistent engagement and providing ongoing opportunities for youth skill-building and emotional well-being. In addition to the activities for youth, supplemental materials will be available to support professional development and enhance family engagement.

The Guides include 150 original activities and challenges organized by four different age groups (5-9) (10-12) (13-15) (16-18). The activities are adaptable for in-person and virtual instruction, or a hybrid of both, as well as sent as take-home packets.

All activities should be safely executed and aligned with state and local health guidelines.



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Recognizing and Managing Stress in Youth

Resource for Staff

INTRODUCTION

For the last few months youth everywhere have had to adjust to life during COVID-19. With school closures, extracurricular activity cancellations and social isolation, youth and their families have had to figure out how to live, work and play during the pandemic. These constant changes in their lives and isolation from their peers have left many youth feeling stressed. As staff of youth-serving programs, you may be wondering or worried about your youths' emotional well-being. You may be asking yourself questions, like:

- How are they doing? Is their behavior normal? How should they be coping?
- How can I help them manage their emotions?
- How can I support youth in gaining and using positive coping strategies?

Many youth will have the support they need to face the challenges of COVID-19 and their reactions to stress will be temporary. Unfortunately, some youth are at risk of developing significant mental health problems, trauma-related stress, anxiety, and depression. At especially high risk are youth who have already experienced trauma or have pre-existing mental, physical or developmental issues. The good news is that families, communities and youth-serving programs can work together to protect our youth and improve their chances of responding positively to the stressors associated with the outbreak. Your role as a staff member of a youth-serving organization is critical to helping youth address and cope with their feelings during these unprecedented times.

The purpose of this resource is to provide guidance to staff around recognizing signs and symptoms of significant stress and trauma in youth and to provide specific actions you can take to support youths' emotional well-being. This guide is a supplement to the [Summer Activity Guide](#), which is a suite of activities and resources intentionally designed to support youth-serving summer programs in delivering programming through multiple approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS AND TRAUMA

Living through an infectious disease outbreak is stressful, and unexpected changes and the unknown can cause many to become overwhelmed with fear and anxiety. Children and teens are particularly vulnerable to these stressful and uncertain situations, particularly when stress in the home is high and the expectations are changing constantly. Right now, youth are feeling a range of emotions, including both positive and negative feelings, and every child processes these feelings differently. Their reactions will vary depending on their age, developmental level, social support, and how they typically cope with other stressful events in their lives. As a first step, staff should be aware of these reactions and be able to identify them as a sign of stress. Common reactions to COVID-19 could include:

Signs of Stress during COVID-19 among Youth		
Youth (All Ages)	Youth (Ages 5 – 12)	Adolescents (Ages 13 – 18)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Changes in sleep or eating patterns○ Difficulty focusing and problems with attention○ Withdrawal from loved ones○ Crying or angry outbursts○ The emergence of new or re-emergence of old fears	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Irritability, whining and aggressive behavior○ Nightmares○ Separation anxiety or fear of being alone○ Tantrums or meltdowns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Ignoring health promotion behaviors (e.g., hygiene issues, or unhealthy eating)○ Physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches or rashes○ Agitation or decrease in energy○ Use of alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism

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Beyond normal signs of stress, some young people may experience more intense and long-lasting reactions. **“Traumatic stress”** occurs when a youth experiences a traumatic event and their reactions persist and affect their daily lives after the event has ended. It negatively affects their daily functions as well as their interactions with adults and peers. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, youth may feel or experience: “depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. Older children may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity.”

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDUCE STRESS

Reducing stress levels and improving coping skills will improve you and your youth’s mental and physical health. As a staff member of a youth-serving organization, you can create a safe and calming environment for our children to cope with the changes. A helpful tip is to remember to use the [3 Rs \(reassurance, routines and regulation\)](#).

HELPING YOUTH MANAGE THEIR EMOTIONS

LISTEN TO THEIR FEELINGS AND VALIDATE THEM

- Youth may struggle to find words to describe how they are feeling. As a first step, help them to label their feelings. You can start your sessions with an emotional check-in with you. As an example, if you are leading a virtual session, you could have youth select an emoji to represent how they are feeling today.
- Validate youth and reassure them. It may be tempting to solve the problem or downplay negative emotions, but it’s more important that you listen and show you understand. Reflect back what you hear them saying (ex. What I hear you saying is...) and ask clarifying questions (ex. How are you feeling about things now?).
- Avoid talking about how you feel or how you think they should feel. Their voice should be amplified – not yours.
- Teach youth about positive preventive measures – like wearing a mask and social distancing. This will help to give them a sense of control over infection that can help reduce stress.

MAINTAIN AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND ROUTINE

- Youth thrive when they have structure and routines. Routines can give youth a sense of predictability when things are unpredictable. The program schedule and expectations should be clearly communicated to youth.
- Encourage healthy habits virtually and support them directly in-person – youth will feel better when they get adequate sleep, eat healthy and get exercise. If meals are provided in-person at your program, you can design routines to support drinking water and eating healthy foods. As staff, you can model the healthy coping behaviors that you want your youth to use and share your healthy eating tips and routines.
- Teach youth how to manage their reactions (self-regulate) through positive coping techniques. Examples include deep breathing, exercise or meditation/yoga.
- Social distancing does not mean social isolation. You can help foster a sense of connectedness between youth in your program. Consider using groups in your programming. For example, putting youth in small groups (virtually or in-person) to work on activities and challenges together, so they have an opportunity to make a deeper connection with their peers.

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PROVIDE AGE APPROPRIATE INFORMATION

- Stay updated about what is happening with COVID-19 using reputable sources, such as the [CDC's website](#) or your state or local public health organizations.
- Encourage youth to reduce their exposure to news or social media that may cause fear or panic. Ask families and caregivers to avoid watching the news in front of their children.
- [Check-in with youth regularly](#) and encourage them to ask questions. Help correct misinformation about how the virus spreads or what you can do to protect yourself. For younger youth, provide brief and simple explanations that balance fact with reassurance. For older youth and teens, direct them to reputable sources of information.
- Reassure youth they are safe, and remind them that your program is doing everything they can to keep them healthy. Talk to your youth about everyday actions they can take to protect themselves.

MODEL HEALTHY COPING TECHNIQUES FOR YOUTH

With so much going on, it's easy to forget to take care of yourself. Managing your stress and feelings is equally as important as helping your youth cope. The youth in your program may be picking up on your stress and anxiety without you knowing it. Try to role model positive coping skills. For more ways to identify and manage your stress, check out "Supporting Your Emotional Well-Being", a resource for staff.

- Model calm for your youth. Try to avoid sharing your worries with youth. When you are feeling anxious, find healthy ways to ground yourself, like going for a walk or seeking out connection with friends and family members.
- Express feelings of hope, optimism and gratitude with youth. Share things that are happening in the world or locally that give you hope. Conduct gratitude exercises with youth, such as a gratitude jar.
- For moments when you are feeling anxious or stressed, give yourself a moment to step away and take a few deep breaths or other ways that calm you down.

SUPPORT FAMILIES

As staff, you can play an important role in supporting families, doing targeted outreach and connecting them with available community resources. Remember as a mandatory reporter, if something does not look safe, sound safe, or feel safe – follow your local guidelines and program policies to report it to your organization and/or local authorities.

- Help families with connecting to mental health services, even when in-person contact is not available. There are many counseling and mental health organizations offering [telehealth services](#).
- Encourage caregivers to connect with a trained counselor at SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 or by texting TalkWithUS 66746.
- You may be worried about the basic needs of your youth, such as food, shelter, clothing or healthcare. Your program can help families identify local services to assist them. These may include local food banks, family resource centers, or community resource specialists.
- Conduct [targeted outreach to youth and families that are in need](#). For example, if your program is delivering take-home materials, make sure to check-in with them about how they are doing during these visits. Offer remote options for staying in touch with families (e.g., telephone, texting or video conferencing).

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RESOURCES

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s Website on Coping with Stress:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with COVID-19: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/parent_caregiver_guide_to_helping_families_cope_with_the_coronavirus_disease_2019_covid-19.pdf

Teaching Tolerance: "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching through Coronavirus"

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/a-trauma-informed-approach-to-teaching-through-coronavirus>

The 50 State Afterschool Network



The Summer Activity Guide has been developed for the 50 State Afterschool Network with leadership from the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network to engage and support children and youth nationwide.

In each state, the afterschool network is broadening opportunities for youth. Seeking equitable outcomes for underserved children to succeed in school and future jobs, a statewide afterschool network brings together cross-sector leaders with a common vision and coordinated strategy to advance quality afterschool and summer learning programs

Alabama Afterschool Community Network
Alaska Afterschool Network
Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence
Arkansas Out of School Network
California AfterSchool Network
Colorado Afterschool Partnership
Connecticut After School Network
Delaware Afterschool Network
Florida Afterschool Network
Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network
Hawai'i Afterschool Alliance
Idaho Afterschool Network
Afterschool for Children and Teens Now (ACT Now) Coalition (IL)
Indiana Afterschool Network
Iowa Afterschool Alliance
Kansas Enrichment Network
Kentucky Out-of-School Alliance
Louisiana Center for Afterschool Learning
Maine Afterschool Network
Maryland Out of School Time Network
Massachusetts Afterschool Partnership
Michigan After-School Partnership
Ignite Afterschool (MN)
Missouri AfterSchool Network
Mississippi Statewide Afterschool Network
Montana Afterschool Alliance
Beyond School Bells (NE)

Nevada Afterschool Network
New Hampshire Afterschool Network
New Jersey School- Age Care Coalition
NMOST (New Mexico Out of School Time) Network
New York State Network for Youth Success
North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs
North Dakota Afterschool Network
Ohio Afterschool Network
Oklahoma Partnership for Expanded Learning Opportunities
OregonASK
Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network
Rhode Island Afterschool Network
South Carolina Afterschool Alliance
South Dakota Afterschool Network
Tennessee Afterschool Network
Texas Partnership for Out of School Time
Utah Afterschool Network
Vermont Afterschool, Inc.
Virginia Partnership for Out-of-School Time
Washington Expanded Learning Opportunities Network
West Virginia Statewide Afterschool Network
Wisconsin Afterschool Network
Wyoming Afterschool Alliance