

FS1957 (Revised February 2025)

Children and Illness: Helping Young Children Ages 4 to 8 Years Old



Common Reactions of Young Children

- Need for support from parents and other loved ones
- Tantrums or irritability, anger, aggression or sadness
- Withdrawal or restlessness due to illness, changes in normal routines
- Repeated questions about the illness, safety, care from loved ones
- Regressive behaviors may include thumb sucking, clinging to adults, bedwetting
- Sleep or physical problems such as nightmares and stomach problems

What to Say and Do

- ✓ Ask children to share their thoughts and feelings with you. Let them know “being sick” is a topic they can ask questions about. Ask them about their feelings and let them know such feelings are normal. Reassure the child that talking about feelings helps people. Allow repetitive questions and a search for understanding. Acknowledge their feelings and concerns. They need to know they are being listened to and heard.
- ✓ Calm yourself, then give honest answers at the child’s level of understanding. Monitor adult conversations around children. Be cautious when talking about your own fears and the illness of the child or others.
- ✓ Give children physical comfort and verbal reassurance of safety. Young children need to hear and feel messages of support and security. Develop a routine that provides time to manage school work, family work (chores), sleep and rest, and share time together with healthful meals and snacks as possible. Children these ages need an hour or more of physical activity each day, if possible, but appropriate rest if feeling ill.
- ✓ Provide materials for children to express feelings through play, puppets, drawing or telling a story. Read children’s books about a character who is dealing with an illness. Limit your child’s exposure, as well as your own, to prolonged or intense media coverage related to illness outbreaks (pandemic, etc.).
- ✓ Tell children what adults will do to keep the family healthy as much as possible. Explain what they can do to keep their hands clean and away from their nose, mouth and eyes. Also, talk to your children about staying home if needed, and how to sneeze and cough properly into a tissue or the crook of their arm.

Children have different temperaments and experiences, even within the same family, so their reactions to an illness or illness outbreak may vary greatly. Give each child the help that child needs to find inner calm and build resilience. Those gifts last a lifetime.

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www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/kids-family/talking-to-children-about-pandemics

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