



“Young Knocknaheeny Area Based Childhood Programme aims to get every child’s life off the best possible start”

We have put together the following information for parents/caregivers on how babies/toddlers might be experiencing the Covid-19 restrictions and/or other stressful situations. Guidance is also provided on how to respond to babies and toddlers during these times along with some recommendations for parent’s and caregivers self-care.

This information may also be a useful guide for practitioners. A video supporting this information can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9jiDuSQDJo>





Support and guidance for parents and caregivers of babies and toddlers during the COVID-19 restrictions and other stressful situations.

The past few weeks have been a very stressful and anxious time for parents and caregivers, in fact for all of us. No doubt there are changes and challenges in all your routines right now, especially as crèches and preschools are closed. Changes in routine may also affect your baby, toddler and indeed your older children and they will, understandably want more of your attention. You may also be worried about what your baby or toddler may be feeling and what might be on their mind.

It is sometimes thought that babies and toddlers won't remember stressful events that occurred early in their life and, since they cannot recall these stressful or difficult changes, it won't affect them. However, this is not true. Babies and toddlers can clearly tell us how difficult and stressful situations affect them.

Babies and toddlers communicate how they think and feel through their emotions, their behaviour and in the way they play. They can also experience feelings through their senses and can easily become aware of what their parents are feeling, especially during times when their parent/s may be anxious, distracted, feel in a low mood or when their environment is also stressful and tense. As a parent, it is important to wonder what your baby or toddler may be feeling.

Some of the typical behaviours often seen during stressful times are as follows:

What might your baby be feeling?

- Sad or flat faces, not expressing many emotions
- Not wanting to look at you
- Feeling fussy and restless
- Lack of responsiveness to you
- May not like being held or touched
- Sleeping difficulties
- Feeding difficulties, may not be thriving



What might your toddler be feeling?

- Clingy behaviours, may not like being separated from you
- Fussy, distracted, harder to settle and soothe
- Difficulty settling to sleep, having interrupted sleep, some may also have nightmares, wake up feeling upset and need their parent to help them settle back to sleep
- Be more irritable, upset and angry than is usual for their age or appear to want to withdraw from you
- Repeat or show their feelings in their play or drawings
- Regress in behaviour, lose established toilet training skills, or act like a younger child e.g. using baby talk

How can parents help?

To help babies and toddlers manage what they are thinking, feeling and how to cope with these different emotional states, they need their parent's help to understand what they are experiencing.

Babies and toddlers under 3 years cannot regulate their emotions and feelings on their own. In fact, young children are only starting to develop their ability to control their emotions between 3½ to 4 years. They will need their parent's support for many more years to help soothe and calm the many emotional states they will experience during early and middle childhood stages of development.

Your baby and toddler need to feel a sense of safety and security in their relationship with you. Keep your routines as predictable and familiar as possible. If you have to change an old routine to manage a new situation that is being experienced by your baby or toddler, be flexible as new routines may need to be established.

Behaviour has meaning: Tune in, be aware and respond quickly to the emotion and behaviour your baby and toddler is displaying. Watch, listen and observe what they are experiencing. These actions will enable you respond more effectively. Let them know you understand what they are feeling.



How to respond to you baby

- Keep your routine and theirs as predictable and consistent as possible. Your consistent predictable relationship and presence will help your baby feel safe and secure.
- Facial expression: As a parent, your face and the quality of your facial expression is a powerful source of stimulation and interest for your baby.
- Be aware of your facial expression when you are responding to your baby. A calm sensitive face or a face that looks a little less distressed than the distress that is displayed on your baby's face will help them understand "*that's what I feel*".
- Use soft calm words to name and let your baby know that you understand what they are feeling and experiencing. Name and/or explore what you see is happening (*Mum/ Dad wonders / sees you are tired, upset, teething*).
- Don't rush your baby to soothe and settle down quickly. Instead, wait, slowly follow their lead, check out what is the matter and give them time to respond to your gentle words, to experience your calm facial expression, soft voice tones and your relaxed body movements.

How to respond to your toddler

- Keep your routine and theirs as predictable and consistent as possible. Your consistent predictable relationship and presence will help your toddler feel safe and secure. If new situations arise that call for a change in routine, make this change and explain why the change is necessary. Use examples to explain other times when changes were made to help them and explain that sometimes things are not always the same.
- Respond quickly to their needs when they are showing distress and answer the questions they need answered, "*why can't I meet my friends or go to play school... I'm scared!*"
- Many toddlers may be anxious at the moment, take time to listen and talk with them about how they are feeling, move down to their level so you can get their eye contact.
- Your facial expression, tone of voice and sensitive responses are important ways to help soothe your toddler's distress.
- Check, label and discuss what may be causing these feelings. Repeating back to your toddler what they have just told you is a wonderful way to check and reassure them you understand what they are feeling. Remind them they are loved, that *Mum/ Dad are here to help and explain they do not have to manage these big/sad/angry feelings on their own*.
- Make time for play and fun activities with your toddler or involve them home activities, such as baking buns or cooking.



Self-Care as a Parent /Caregiver:

Self-care involves using strategies and accessing supports that will help you stay calm and mind yourself. Healthy self-care strategies are especially valuable during this stressful time and will allow you to be more available as a parent.

Take time for yourself, chat to your partner or adult family members and friends. Reach out and ask for support, this is an anxious time and it is perfectly normal to look for additional help. Relaxation techniques will help. Practice deep breathing exercises. Yoga is also helpful, make time for a walk or your favourite activity. You will most likely know the activities that soothe you the best; the main thing is to take time for your own rest and relaxation and ensure you can get enough rest and sleep.

Taking time for self-care is important. Doing so will allow you to be more available to your baby and toddler during this time. Remember, we are talking about *good enough* here. As a parent, your baby or toddler does not expect you to be perfect. By being a *good enough parent*, you will provide the most solid foundation, care and feelings of safety for your babies and toddlers during these demanding times.

If your baby or toddler is not settling and you are concerned about their health and wellbeing, do consult your local Family Doctor, Public Health Nurse or Out of Hours Medical Service.

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