

How to manage it?

If the parent must stay abroad

Introduction

This leaflet contains information for those of you who are facing a difficult situation due to the closure of borders and are forced to stay away from your family and children for a long time, and for those whose partner or parent is stuck away from home long-term.

Your children may have a lot of information about the current situation – some that they might have heard in the media, some from an acquaintance or a relative, some directly from you. Not all of this information is appropriate for their age. Because of this, they may modify the information, distort it, make assumptions and have all kinds of fears. It is therefore important to know how to talk to them about the situation and how to provide reasonable explanations considering the way they may experience the pandemic and the separation from one of their parents at this stage of development.

In this text, we use the term “parent” to mean the person who must stay abroad and the person who is taking care of the child, even though both can be other close family members whom the child may also miss very much.

GROUND RULES

Communicate with the child honestly in an age-appropriate way

Don't lie, don't promise something you can't fulfill. Always adjust the information to the child's age. You can find specific tips how to do it below.

Work with the child's imagination

Help the child understand the situation by imagining it.

Express your understanding to the emotions of the child

Children have a right to be angry, irritated, not to understand the situation, not to believe the parent. Don't punish them for their emotions, don't shout at them.

Enable remote contact with the other parent:

Try to help the child keep in touch with the missing parent and be prepared that the child's behavior after the parent's return may be distant regardless.

Think of yourself as well

Don't forget to think of yourself and give yourself space to calm down and recharge.

Don't withhold information

Children are perceptive and know that something is happening. Don't withhold important information from them and communicate with them about the situation.

Admit your own emotions

Don't be afraid to admit that you are also experiencing the situation in a certain way. You can find advice concerning this below.

Be patient and kind

Give them the love and care they need. In this situation, they may behave differently than what you are used to, so be patient. You can find the information about how the child may behave and how you can help them below.

Do not forget the rituals

Make sure you follow daily rituals and try to implement them, if you don't.

Let the child be a child

The child may want to perform the duties of the missing parent. Be careful that they are not overburdened and that they have enough space to still be a child.

How to manage with an infant?

Or how to help a 0-1 years old child

What behavior is typical during this period?

- Unlike older children, infants are not able to understand the situation and it may seem that they are not affected by the absence of one of the parents because of their age. However, **the child can sense what is going on around them and notice that the people around are stressed.**
- When children are around 6 months old, they start **preferring** certain people, especially those who are in the closest contact with them, and become **distrustful** of strangers and those they know less intimately.
- There is a **danger** that your child may **react to the other parent as they would to a stranger** when the quarantine ends.

How may the child be behaving now?

- They may **cry and become irritated** more often.
- They may demand more **physical contact.**
- The child may start refusing to eat, and their sleep routine may change, you may also notice that the child gets worse at focusing their attention on something.
- After the return of the other parent, the child **may start behaving differently** than before the parent's departure – **the child may not interact with them spontaneously, may seek "shelter" with other people.**

What to do? (How to help your child)

During the separation

Are you at home with the child?

If the child demands **more physical contact**, provide it.

Are you the parent who must stay abroad?

Communicate with the child remotely.

If possible, speak with your child through Skype even during the separation – sing to them, tell them nursery rhymes, read fairytales and make sure that they don't forget your voice.

If online communication is not an option – for example due to a big difference in time zones - you can record these things and send those videos to your family regularly.

With an older infant, you can try games and nursery rhymes with the assistance of the other parent (such as Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star).

After the return

If your child **avoids you** after your return, don't take it personally – the child is neither refusing you nor punishing you for being gone for a long time, they only do what is normal and natural for them. **Don't be angry with them** because of this.

Be patient and connect with your child **step by step** – speak to them, play with them, be near them and don't get sad because of their negative reactions.

At the same time, **don't force** the child to interact with you; it is not recommended to be pushy despite their negative reactions. Give them space but **try again** after some time.

How to manage with a toddler?

Or how to help a 1-3 years old child

What behavior is typical during this period?

- The basic needs of the child are **sleep, food, playing and being close to** their parents. **Disruption** of these needs will have the most serious impact on the emotions and behavior of the child.
- **Rituals and repetitive activities** are very important for a child at this age.
- A toddler is not really aware of the passing of time and is not able to focus on what will happen in the future. They are interested in things **happening right now**. Even several days are a long time for small children.
- Around two or three years of age, **toddler defiance** appears and the child starts testing the boundaries of their behavior while not yet being able to control their emotions.

How may the child be behaving now?

- They might be saying and doing things which **don't make sense** to you as an adult. The child may not understand what they hear you or the others say and may be **confused**.
- They may **continue playing** even when things or people around them change (for example if Mom or Dad is crying) or, alternatively, they may react to those **changes** by changing their behavior significantly.
- **Separation anxiety** can manifest in the child; the anxiety being a reaction to losing one of the people closest to them. The child may cry more often, be restless, have problems with sleeping, refuse food and so on.
- **The manifestations** of toddler defiance may **get worse** or suddenly **disappear**.
- The child may **temporarily lose the skills** they have already learned (they may start wetting themselves again, it may seem that they can't put their clothes on or eat by themselves, although they managed perfectly a few weeks ago), or they can start trying **unexpectedly hard to be self-sufficient**.

What to do?



Are you at home with the child?

- Explain the fact that one of the parents can't be with the child in a **simple way and in short sentences**. „Mom can't be here with us right now. She is in another city and is working there. After the bath we are going to call her.”
- When informing the child about the future, focus on what **is going to happen today and tomorrow**. „One more sleep and you can speak with Daddy again.”

- Be **honest**; however, there is **no need to describe details** which the child doesn't understand and which could confuse them.

„Daddy is going to be away now. He must go to work in another city and he can't go back to us, but he will read fairytales to you through video. We will watch it after dinner, all right?“

- It is also recommended to communicate with the child **through a game**. Try to explain that the parent must stay in a different country to earn money for food and other things by playing with toys or by telling a fairytale. Add that because some people are sick now, we must not travel much so that more people don't get sick.
- **Speak about the child's experiences** in an age-appropriate way. Don't ask difficult questions, don't ask: "why do you feel that way?". Instead, **say what they may be feeling** and express your **understanding**. **Don't punish** the child for their experience, don't shout at them. Try to **calm** them down or **distract** them from feeling sad by a game or a fairytale.

„I see that you are sad because Mom is not here. I am also sad. I would be happy if Mom was here.“

- To maintain the child's wellbeing or to calm them down, **keep the habits** you have already introduced, or **introduce them now** - for example by always serving food or bathing the child at the same time each day, keeping the daily routine etc. **Explain** every change in the routine briefly. For example: „We are going to have a bath before dinner so that we can call Mom afterwards.“
- **Play with the child**, give them **attention**. However, don't overdo it. **You also need to have a rest** to recharge for other activities. Let the child play alone.

„Play with the plushie now, then we will look at the pictures of animals in the book together.“

- To keep the relationship as strong as possible, **talk with your child about the other parent**, and show them pictures where they are together.



Are you the parent who must stay abroad? **Communicate** with the child remotely

Try to keep in touch with your child at least **remotely**. Call regularly, Skype with them. The child may be **hesitant to speak** with you, especially if they are not used to this kind of communication. Be understanding about this. The child will notice your voice and your virtual presence even if they play in a different part of the room. They must **cope with the situation**; it doesn't mean they are not missing you. Give them **space** and **try again** in a moment, and then again. **Ask the other parent for assistance**, for example to hold the child in their lap for a second. You can also persuade them to cooperate by saying: „I know that you want to play now, but come here and at least wave at Daddy!“

If it's impossible, for example due to different time zones, to communicate with the child online, you can **record a video** for them. You can record for example part of the activities you perform during the day so that the child can imagine how you are doing, where you live, what you eat etc. You can also do an **audio recording** of a fairytale or a nursery rhyme. The other parent can then play it to the child **repeatedly** since toddlers love repetition.

How to manage with a preschooler?

Or how to help a 4-6 years old child

What behaviour is typical during this period?

- The child is **focused on their immediate surroundings** - how they are feeling, what is happening around them and what is going to happen immediately. They can't really imagine a more distant future yet.
- The child's thinking is closely connected to their **imagination**.
- They feel that many things are happening **because of them**.
- They are **trying to understand** the things they can't imagine.
- It can be **hard for them to understand** why some people can return from abroad and others can't.

How may the child be behaving now?

- The child may cry more, may have problems focusing their attention and sleeping, and may refuse food. They may **temporarily stop managing** things they have already learned; for example, they may need help with dressing up although they were able to do it themselves before. Alternatively, they may start behaving in an **unusually responsible and self-sufficient way**.
- Because it is still difficult for the child to speak about their emotions and understand them correctly (especially the feelings of stress and anxiety that they may be experiencing now), their experience may manifest by **somatizing** - for example a stomachache or headache. However, don't forget that not all pain is necessarily psychosomatic.
- The child may **tend to blame themselves** that the parent's absence is their fault ("Daddy is not here with us because I misbehaved").
- They might want to take over some of the missing parent's **responsibilities**.
- The child may **ask repeatedly** about the same thing while trying to process the new situation.
- They may **continue playing** even when the situation or people around them change (for example when Mom or Dad cries).

What to do?

Are you at home with the child?

- Keep explaining the situation **honestly** and **patiently**. However, if you don't know something or aren't sure about something, admit this to your child. „Unfortunately I don't know how long it will take before we see Mommy again. I also miss her and I am sad that she is not here. But it is not safe now for people to cross the borders so Mommy must stay where she is.“
„I am also worried about Daddy and hope nothing bad happens to him. But I believe he is doing everything he can not to get infected, just like we are.“

- If the child doesn't want to speak about it, **don't force the topic**. However, give them the **chance** to let you know **when they want** to speak about anything once more. You can for example make an agreement that there will be a plush toy in one particular spot and you will look at it every day. When your child wants to speak about the other parent, they will turn the plush toy and you will know that you can come to them and talk about how they feel or what they don't understand.
- You can bring the current situation **into a game** with your child (for example with plush toys, dolls, and cars). Let the child **express** their **emotions** but help them create a **happy ending** for the game - for example by meeting the parent who will cuddle the plush toy/child even in the situation when the plush toy is reluctant to meet them or is angry with them. The child can also draw the parent who is at work.
- If the child wants to **do the work of the missing parent**, be **careful** that it is not **too much** for the child; let them rather enjoy their games. „Thank you for wanting to help me clean. You can put away your building blocks which are lying around, then you can go back to drawing.“
- If the child thinks it is **their fault** that Mommy/Daddy are away because the child misbehaved, **assure them** that it is **not the case**. „You are afraid that Dad is not here with us because you misbehaved? It is not so, Dad loves you and is looking forward to seeing you even though you misbehaved sometimes. He must be away now so that he can work, and they won't let him return for some time.“
- **Don't** use the situation to **reprimand** the child (don't tell them: "If you misbehave, Dad will not come home.")
- It is important to show your **understanding**. Help the child name their feeling by naming **your own**. „I know that you are angry with Daddy because he is not here with us. I would also be happier if he was here.“
- To calm them down, keep the **habits** which you already have, or introduce new ones. Keep the time and order of meals, baths, sleep and so on.
- To keep the relationship as strong as possible, **talk** with your child **about the other parent**, and show them pictures where they are together.



Are you the parent that must stay abroad?

Communicate with the child remotely

Try to keep in touch with the child at least **remotely**. Call regularly, Skype with them. The child may be **hesitant** to speak with you, they may view your absence as a betrayal. Give them some time, be **patient**, and after a while offer communication once more, or agree on a **sign** which the child will use to tell you that they are ready. „I understand that you are mad at me. I can't come home right now, I have to go to work here. When you want to speak to me, turn Charlie the Plushie, and Mommy will call me.“

If it's impossible, for example due to different time zones, to communicate with the child online, you can **record a video** for them. You can record for example part of the activities you do during the day so that the child can imagine how you are doing, where you live, what you eat etc. You can also do an **audio recording** of a fairytale or a nursery rhyme. The other parent can then play it to the child.

How to manage with school children?

Or how to help a 6-12 years old child

What behaviour is typical during this period?

- The child is **curious**, wants to know how things work, why they happened and why the other parent can't be with them, where they are and what they are doing there.
- The child is good at handling **specific objects** but might have issues with understanding abstract situations and ideas – bear this in mind when you speak about the situation with them.
- At this age, children start to be able to see things from the **perspective** of the others and “walk in their shoes”, they are developing **empathy**.

How may the child be behaving now?

- The child may often ask you various **questions** while trying to **understand** the situation better.
- Especially for younger school children it may still be **difficult to speak about their emotions** and **understand** them **correctly** (especially the feelings of stress and anxiety that they may be experiencing now), their experience may manifest by **somatizing** – for example a stomach ache or headache. However, don't forget that not all pain is necessarily psychosomatic.
- The child may be trying to **hide their worries** so that they don't hurt you or make you sad.
- Especially if your child is younger, you may notice a significant **loss of self-sufficiency** (needs help with things they were already able to do themselves) or, on the other hand, an **increased effort to help** the parent at home.

What to do?



Are you at home with the child?

- Communicate with the child **honestly** and **openly**; if you are unsure about something, **admit it**. Don't be afraid to say what you feel, the child will sense it anyway.

„Unfortunately I don't know how long it is going to take before we see Mom again. I also miss her and I am sad that she is not here. But it is not safe now for people to cross the borders so Mom has to stay where she is.”

„I am also worried about Dad and hope nothing bad happens to him. But I believe he is doing everything he can not to get infected, just like we are.”

- Be **patient** if they don't want to talk to you now. **Assure** them that when they are ready, you will be available to them.

„I see that you don't want to talk about it with me now, but when you want, just come to me.“

- Especially for younger children, you can **simulate** the fact that the parent is in a different country **through play** (with toys the child has at home), through a story or a fairytale. They can draw the missing parent, the things they do abroad, what they eat or the place where they sleep.
- If the child wants to **do the work of the missing parent**, be careful that it is not **too much** for the child.

„It is nice of you to help me like this! But I will manage to do this by myself, you can go and play again.“

- It is necessary to show your **understanding** to the child. If they are crying, tell them that you also feel sad, **don't punish** them, and don't shout at them.

„I know that you are angry with Dad and that you are sad because he is not here with us. I would also be happier if he was here.“

- To calm them down, keep the **habits** which you already have or **introduce new** ones – for example a meal at the same time, reading a fairytale to the younger children before they fall asleep and so on.



Are you the parent who must stay abroad?

Communicate with your child remotely

Try to **keep in touch** with your family (call them or Skype with them frequently), talk together, and spend time with the child.

The child may be **hesitant** to speak with you; they may view our absence as a betrayal or be angry. Give them some time, be **patient**, and after a while **offer** communication **once more**, or agree on a **sign** which the child will use to tell you that they are ready.

„I know that you are angry with me, but unfortunately I can't come home now, I have to go to work here. When you want to speak with me, just send me a text message or call me and you will hear from me.“

How to manage with a teenager?

Or how to help a 13 years old and older teenagers?

What is a typical behaviour during this period?

- Emotional **instability** and frequent, sudden mood swings are among typical behaviors.
- Relationships with **friends** become more important; however, this **doesn't mean** that they don't miss the other parent and that the situation is not **difficult** for them.
- **Abstract thinking** is developing – a teenager is able to understand abstract concepts, and look up and gather information **on their own**.
- Opinions and information gathered from their **peers** become more **important**.
- Although it may **seem** that your child is **not affected** by the current situation and that they don't view it negatively (they may shut themselves in their room, play games, spend time with friends and refuse to communicate), the exact **opposite** may be true.

How may the teenager be behaving now?

- Their contact with friends is **restricted** during the quarantine – the teenager doesn't have a possibility to meet them and is forced to stay at home “against their will” – that may result in more frequent **conflicts**.
- The outbursts of their emotions may be **rough**; the teenager may **share** their problems and their **feelings less** with the parent.

What to do?



Are you at home with the teenager?

- **Invite** your child **to discuss current issues** and overall situation – they may be worried because they encountered fake news or don't understand some aspects of the situation very well – it is therefore important to **explain** the information to them and **offer** reliable sources of information
- Be **honest** about the reasons and length of the time when the other parent will be away from home.

„Unfortunately I also don't know when Dad will be able to get back home. The situation is changing all the time. It may be two weeks but also several months. Right now it is important for the virus to stop spreading so that we can return to normal life soon.“

- Give them **space** to express their **emotions** (and remember that those emotions may be **stronger** and manifest differently than how you were used to).

„I understand that you are upset. Can I help you in any way? Would you like to talk about it?”

- Don't be afraid to **express emotions** (such as missing your partner or your family) yourself but **don't overdo** it – the child shouldn't be your shoulder to cry on, your sole support or a source of important advice.

„I also miss him very much. But we will make it, you don't have to worry about me.”

- If it is necessary to **do the work of the missing parent** in the household, **don't overburden** your child with this work; give them tasks **appropriate** for their age (there is nothing wrong with the child being responsible for shopping or cleaning up, but you shouldn't place a significant part of caring for the family on their shoulders). Don't forget to **appreciate** their effort when they help with the household chores.

„Thank you for helping me, it means a lot. I will manage to finish the rest by myself.”



Are you the parent who must stay abroad? **Communicate** with your child remotely.

Try to keep in touch **remotely**. Call each other, Skype, send photos, and send messages about everyday things through social networks if you use them. However, give your child **space** as well and **don't overwhelm** them with the messages.

Be **understanding** that at times your child may **prefer their friends** over you – don't hold it against them.

„I understand that you have different plans right now. I would still be glad if you made some time for me tomorrow.”

<https://psych.fss.muni.cz/en/coronavirus>