

A Room of My Own? When a Young Child Enters Isolation

The second wave of the coronavirus brings up the difficulties that young children have with going into isolation. The long days, the distance from the extended family and the significant change to their routine - all strongly influence your child's mood and their ability to function. So how can it be done right?



How Does Isolation Affect our Children?

Over the last one hundred years, information has been collected from a number of periods during which children were isolated from their parents, due to either war or a pandemic. From this information we learn that there are emotional and behavioral consequences for both adults and children, even months or years later. Adults and children who experienced isolation tend to experience more anxiety, stress, nervousness, difficulty sleeping, social avoidance and depression, even after the isolation period is over.

Parents whose children have been exposed to a COVID-19 patient face the difficult question regarding the kind of isolation they choose: Is their child old and mature enough to be isolated alone in their room? Will they be isolated with another parent? Will the entire family go into isolation together?

When the time comes to decide, here are a few things to consider:

The child's age

The young child's parent or main caretaker is an inseparable part of their development and ability to calm down, to understand the world and to deal with difficulties. Younger children who are more dependent on a parent will experience the negative effects of being isolated alone in a room more severely, even if their physical needs are tended to. Children at kindergarten age or in lower grades will have a much harder time in isolation, to the point that their development can be significantly damaged. Actually, there's no way to actually have a child in kindergarten or the first years of school fully isolated from the rest of the family members.

Kids in elementary school, especially in the upper grades, will sometimes be able to cope well with this period. This ability depends on their character, skills that they have acquired for dealing with loneliness and emotional difficulties, and the family's ability to provide support and be at peace with this decision, also from afar.

Character

Sensitive children with social difficulties or those who tend to have strong emotional reactions are at a higher risk of suffering from depression, nervousness, and social avoidance as a result of isolation. If your child has a sensitive nature and deals with more anxiety, social or emotional difficulties than others, this is a sign that they need more support and adult presence in in isolation.

Readiness for support and a relationship from afar

Your child's ability to receive support and decrease the loneliness via a long-distance relationship develops over the years. For a child that's two-three years old a video call with grandma can be boring or irrelevant, while for a nine-year-old a conversation with a friend can be meaningful and experienced almost as a meeting. Try to think how your child usually reacts to using media to keep in touch with family members who are far away, to understand if they are ready for home isolation. A child that can maintain relationships with family and friends via a video or phone call, will probably be able to cope with isolation better.

Family composition

Parents report higher levels of distress when they enter isolation with one child while the other parent takes care of the rest of the kids. On the other hand, when in home isolation with a number of kids, although the load is greater, the emotional implications are usually easier over time. When you're deciding whether to isolate a child with one of the parents or to isolate the entire family, try to also think about the implications for the other parent and the other siblings who are at home, from a long-term perspective of the possible costs. Family isolation isn't always an easy experience, but when the family 'togetherness' allows to deal with difficulties better- it automatically becomes a better experience, less damaging and sometimes even creates experiences, memories and accomplishments that we wouldn't have created otherwise.

What Can Be Done to Decrease the Long-Term Risks that are a Result of Isolation?

Explain the new reality to your child, at the level that's right for them

One of the things that increase the risk for emotional stress is lack of understanding of the reality and a feeling of helplessness. Try explaining to your child, according to their age, the reason that they need to be in a separate room, how long they'll need to spend there, what they're allowed to do with the rest of of the family and what they aren't. The explanation needs to be clear and simple, but also create a sense of security and not be a threat to the life of the child or their close family.

Create a routine

Since young children don't understand terms like 'a couple of days' or 'a week', you can use a clear table of the days. You can also add activities or foods to the table that will allow them to maintain a routine and activity at a certain level. Write the timetable and choose the activities with your child. Maintain hygiene and daily washing. Change clothes every day, set bed times and eat at set hours, as much as possible. This kind of routine will help your child have an easier time ending the isolation and returning to their 'regular' routine.

Make sure to keep up parental presence

If possible, and according to the Ministry of Health regulations, it is preferable that one parent is isolated with the child, and that this parent maintains contact with siblings and the other parent as much as possible. Isolation with a child in a closed space can be stressful and difficult for the parent and the child, and you should prepare ahead of time and define times for different activities, some with the parent and some without. Equip yourself with games that your child likes and that you can expect them to play on their own, arts and crafts using different materials, specified screen time if the child is accustomed to this, and more. Also define times to be together with the parent- story time, games that include physical contact or movement like dance and exercise. Here too, write the time table and choose the activities with your child.

Learn calming and regulating methods together

This period invokes a lot of difficulties, for both parents and children. The constant changes in life's reality, large and small, can be unbalancing and cause a lot of stress and anxiety.

Your child is dealing with stress and a changing reality that they don't understand. It may not show on the outside or they may behave differently than they usually do; nervousness, closing down or becoming more dependent on the parent that's isolated with them.

As parents, you have the power to explain the reality to your child, in a calm and level-headed way, and provide them with real information on the one hand, but age-appropriate on the other. Make sure to be present for them, in the room or outside of it, be attentive to the feelings that arise and provide a sense of comfort and security. Try to encourage them to tell you how they feel and share your feelings with them. Tell them that this is a new and sometimes unclear time for you as well.

You can teach your child (and yourself) regulation and attentiveness games or Yoga exercises that will help them cope better with feelings of anxiety or restlessness.