Colorado kids are stressed about coronavirus. Here are some ways adults can help.

To ease children’s anxiety fueled by COVID-19, one child psychologist recommends families maintain structure and take time to step outside.

With most schools across Colorado closed for a week or more beyond spring break and many adults resigned to work from home amid the new coronavirus, families have entered the first stretch of a long period together.

For some kids, the time outside the classroom may come as a relief. No more waking up with the sun or abiding by a strict bell schedule.

But for children in general, breaking routine because of a global pandemic can mean confusion, uncertainty and a fear of what’s next — much as it can for adults.

Kids rely on parents to better understand the coronavirus and calm their worries, said Angela Narayan, assistant professor of clinical child psychology in the University of Denver’s Department of Psychology. She said parents need to clearly explain the virus in ways children can comprehend and regularly check in with their emotions.

How else can parents ensure everyone under their roof is able to cope with the spread of the COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus? Here are five ways.

1. Break explanations down in “child-friendly” terms

How traumatic is a wide-scale event like the coronavirus for a young child?

Narayan said it’s difficult to say about the pandemic, itself, as so much is being learned each day. But the possible repercussions stemming from the spread of the virus can weigh on children — including a cut to a family’s income or a parent having to quit their job to care for their kids.

Parents’ health also has direct impacts on young children, particularly when their health deteriorates. If parents become physically ill or their mental health suffers, perhaps due to stress
over fear of losing their job, that affects their ability to parent and can take a toll on a child’s wellbeing, Narayan said.

Children also struggle with tolerating and understanding uncertainty.

“They don’t reason like we do as adults because their brains are still developing,” Narayan said.

Kids are more likely to automatically link illness with death because those two concepts are often talked about in the same sentence in news stories, she said.

Sixth-grade students work through a Spanish language exercise at Telluride Intermediate School. (William Woody, Special to the Colorado Sun)

To ease some of the anxiety, adults can clearly explain to kids in “child-friendly language” that people often get sick but ultimately recover and that children aren’t the ones who are most at risk for falling ill from the virus.

One reminder parents can offer their kids, Narayan said, is “your body is new and it’s healthy and it has systems in place to help fight this off.”

She added that it’s helpful for parents to also reassure their children that they, themselves, have recovered after getting sick in the past.

2. Limit children’s exposure to news

As much as the news keeps people in the know, it can be harmful for children who are exposed to it without an explanation from adults, Narayan said.
Children’s minds want to figure out how the world works, and they’re constantly looking for things to make sense. They can take information from the news out of context or connect dots of information in inaccurate ways.

For instance, closing public places to limit the spread of COVID-19 makes sense to adults. “To kids, that could signal there’s danger,” Narayan said.

Adults can help them better understand by explaining that staying away from public places is a precautionary measure to avoid catching the virus.

Children also tend to have a hard time understanding that news broadcasts often repeat stories and information, instead interpreting replays as fresh pieces of information, she said.

Narayan, who suggests that parents shield their kids from social media as well, emphasized that children look to adults for cues about how they should react and for reassurance in situations that are threatening or ambiguous.

She acknowledged that COVID-19 has ignited a lot of stress and that it’s impossible for parents to completely hide their own anxiety. Still, it’s best to try to keep kids from picking up on those feelings. Children will likely feel alarmed “if they see their parents reacting with a high level of alarm,” Narayan said.
3. Remember that kids function best with predictability and structure

Young children need predictability and structure, with flexibility.

Setting and maintaining a predictable schedule each day offers reassurance for children and parents, especially as a sense of normalcy is replaced by school and work closures, Narayan said.

Everyone appreciates feeling they have control over parts of their lives, she said, so if a child can wake up and know there are certain parts of their day they can depend on, “that can be a source of reducing anxiety and worry.”

To put predictability into practice and create stability during this time of disruption, Narayan recommends that parents keep their kids in the loop on future plans, perhaps letting them know at bedtime what’s on the agenda, what expectations are in place and what they can look forward to.

One important component of an agenda: positive time with parents.

Narayan said children benefit when parents carve out time from their busy schedules to spend with their kids and to check in with them about how they’re doing and what emotions they’re feeling.
For children, she said, it goes a long way to know that they can go to their parents with questions or worries and get reassurance or support.

4. Make time for sunshine, potentially in small groups

With all the sunshine that washes over Colorado, Narayan prioritizes the need to get children outside for fresh air — which is one way families can spend quality time together, perhaps by taking walks or going for bike rides.

The sunlight is a source of nutrients and health, Narayan said, and stepping outside on a beautiful day curbs stress and worry among both children and adults.

That kind of time together, with “shared joy” and “positive interactions,” is among the most effective ways to boost children’s physical and mental health and their behavior, she said.

Setting foot outside may be a little easier these days as families gain flexibility in their schedules by sticking close to home. Playdates may also be possible, so long as they’re approached with caution, Narayan said, meaning only a few people at most who are healthy, who don’t exhibit symptoms of COVID-19 and who agree to maintain their distance.

That can benefit everyone, particularly parents, who need support for their stress as much as children do.
“Parents can’t effectively support children if they’re not effectively supported themselves,” Narayan said. She added that virtual playdates can also be a beneficial option for both parents and children.

5. Keep communications open with teenagers

When it comes to keeping teenagers calm amid the spread of the coronavirus, many of the same rules apply, according to Narayan.

The main difference is that teenagers have a greater ability to reason and can understand the severe risk circling the globe right now.

As opposed to their younger counterparts, teens are often relied upon to provide support to a family, potentially through contributing to the work of a family business or helping care for siblings, Narayan said.

Connor Tarrant, 14, left, leaps over a frosty section of Bear Creek while playing with his friend Kodiak Kellogg, 14, both of Kittredge, as they play near Kittredge Park on January 27, 2020 in Kittredge. (Andy Colwell, Special to the Colorado Sun)

Those additional responsibilities could add layers of stress onto a teenager, she said. To guard against excess stress, Narayan touts the importance of ongoing family conversations that measure how everyone is doing. Teens also need outlets for support, joy and distractions and need to know that their own mental health is prioritized in the family as much as their physical health.

If people are overly stressed, they’re more susceptible to illness, Narayan said.

She added that there’s a balance for the whole family system, and if the system is too stressed, then everyone in the family becomes vulnerable to illness.