

# COFFEE TALK 3: LESSONS LEARNED FROM INCLUSIVE ESSENTIAL CHILDCARE PROGRAMS

## What are some strategies that have helped children cope with wearing masks, following safety guidelines, and physical distancing?

- Just like all new learning-- continuous teaching, reteaching, and reinforcement of these skills has been key! Roleplay, picture stories, and social scripts have helped children (and staff) understand and practice expected behaviors. There are tons of great resources out there to use as templates or springboards to develop these for your camp--don't reinvent the wheel! Coffee Talk panelist Sarah Thorsen shared an example picture story she & her staff have implemented with great success! [You can find it here...](#)
- Be sure to follow your local/state/program guidelines for mask wearing, interactive touch, physical distancing etc. For example, some suggest that masks be worn indoors but are not required for outdoor physically distanced activities. Whereas, others require mask-wearing outdoors as well. Some helpful websites: [CDC Covid-19 page](#); [A complete list of every state's health department Covid-19 pages](#) and the [National Association for the Education of Young Children Covid-19 page](#).
- Play "show me" type activities during which staff & children take turns showing what their different feelings/expressions look like when masked or from a distance using facial expressions, body movements, sounds, etc.
- Use feelings/disposition charts, puppets etc. with drawings or photographs of children & staff to show facial expressions.
- Use signals, cues, signs & verbal reminders often. These will help children (and staff) implement procedures diligently, even if not perfectly, throughout the day.
- Creatively use tape, rulers, streamers, pool noodles, hoola hoops, dance scarves, beach towels, ribbons, bands, etc. to visibly show what 6 ft looks like and promote physical activity and interaction at safe distances.
- Teach through play! Young children learn, discover, & do by playing games, singing songs, using their imaginations, moving & dancing, reading stories and more. All of the creative instructional practices you'd use to teach skills before the pandemic apply to teaching skills during the pandemic too.

## How do you satisfy young children's tactile need to touch people, touch things, hug, hold, etc.?

- It is definitely a challenge, especially virtually. But as panelist Renee Roccato put it, "It's different but doable!" Try to create opportunities for children to express their emotions in varied kinesthetic ways. Encourage touch within families and pets at home. Demonstrate hugging stuffed animals, air high fives, shadow handshakes, etc. Squish play dough, bounce balls, wring towels, pop bubbles, and so on. Physical interaction may be limited-- but active movement is not.



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## How do you meet the unique needs of children with disabilities during such a difficult time?

- Panelists & participants all agreed that required reduced program ratios have positively impacted the both the student & staff inclusionary experiences! Small groups allow for more flexibility, attention, responsiveness, creativity, and connectedness. In many cases, the low ratios have been “a dream come true!”
- Zoom and other video-based web tools have been effective teaching and interaction tools for broad ranges of ages and abilities. Platforms like these allow for 1:1 instruction, small group instruction, and large group instruction and even preschoolers have become adept (with some adult assistance) with using features like mute/unmute, chats, hand raises, screen sharing, annotations, drawing, etc. to engage & interact.
- Brief in-person or “front porch” home visits by staff or “drive-by” school/program visits by families have been very helpful in maintaining connectedness for virtual programs.
- Communication between families, staff, teachers, administration, and related service providers about strategies for meeting children’s needs have actually improved during the pandemic. There is more brainstorming, collaboration, and innovation in implementing support strategies-- because there has to be!
- Panelists in this Coffee Talk & prior Coffee Talks all have mentioned that there has been a positive & powerful shift in inclusive mindset across their programs over the last few months. All staff have become more attentive to universal design, better at promoting accessibility, more invested in adapting & modifying activities, more attuned to children’s social emotional needs, and more aware of communication & relationship needs than ever before. As one practitioner put it, “I’ve come to realize that everyone needs something unique right now. Including all kids is all of our responsibilities. We’re all in this together!” And another, “I have been witnessing a true inclusive environment that we haven't had before!”

## How do you distribute & maintain materials?

- If guidelines suggest limiting physical touch even within small groups, consider providing children with individual supplies rather than shared materials- everyone loves to get their own bucket, bag, or box of materials!
- Schedule time for/plan for sanitizing materials and spaces & be sure to attend to the instructions for different cleaning supplies.
- Schedule drop off or pick up days for at-home supply kits to supplement virtual learning experiences.
- Alternate/dispose of used materials (even if sanitized) & provide new ones as frequently as possible.
- Ask for materials donations and patron local businesses for supplies and resources.



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## How can we promote and sustain interaction and communication with children who need to see facial expressions, lip reading, etc. when wearing masks or physically distanced?

- Consider using masks with see-through or transparent panels. Some resources suggested by participants can be found at [The Clear Mask](#); [Safe N Clear](#), and [Etsy](#).
- There are also great options for [kid-friendly face-shields](#).
- Proximity control is still possible even at a distance. For children who see, hear, or learn best when close to an instructor, position materials and orient instruction to promote good sight lines, vocal projection, cues/signals, and positive reinforcement.
- Symbols, signs, signals, & cues are also great aids to instruction that help gain & hold students' attention.

## What are strategies for positive behavior support and intervention that can be implemented when physically or socially distanced?

- Consistently modeling, teaching, practicing, and reinforcing behavioral expectations, procedures, interaction & engagement strategies will help diminish some of the challenging behaviors you might see grow from children's anxiety, frustration, or curiosity related to change.
- Using cues or signals help ease transitions, keep order, and create predictable routines.
- Establish a safe space or place campers (and staff) can visit to decompress, deescalate, or take a break when needed. It may look a little different than in the past and that's ok! Just introduce the space and its purpose to campers as you would any other time.
- Model, teach, practice & reinforce effective problem solving, self-control, conflict resolution, and self-calm strategies with all children- especially those who may need more emotional, social, or behavioral support.
- Remember that behavior is communication- especially for young children who are still developing language. Children may exhibit intense or escalated behaviors this summer to communicate they are having difficulty coping with change. Develop a plan for how you will create opportunities for children to communicate these feelings in appropriate ways.
- Remember to teach, model, practice and reinforce only what you want children "to do" instead of drawing attention to what you "don't".
- Often, disruptive and distracting behaviors stem from a need for attention. Be creative in how you will keep children engaged in activities. Reduced group sizes create wonderful opportunities for increased attention & natural supports.



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## What “go-to” resources do you recommend that you haven’t been able to live without?

- Customized visual materials, downloadable resources, & creation tools: [Lessonpix](#)
- Resources for positive behavior support for young children in school and home settings: [Conscious Discipline](#)
- Games for social distancing: [Asphalt Green](#)
- Example teaching story about wearing masks: [Mask Social Story](#)
- Sesame Street Covid-19 resources: [Caring for Each Other](#)
- The Council for Exceptional Children’s Division for Early Childhood: [Covid-19 Resource Page](#)
- YouTube’s virtual resources: [Learn at Home](#)
- Successful virtual instruction relies heavily on at-home friendly easy to access materials so be sure to survey families about what supplies they have and need. Easy recipes for playdough, clay, “kid-safe” foods are a plus!

## What’s your best advice for programs?

- Hand sanitizer, hand sanitizer, hand sanitizer!
- Kids are bright & resilient.
- Most of what we thought would be challenges or predicted would be problems haven’t been an issue at all!
- We’re pleasantly surprised at how easily and how quickly our children have adjusted-- it’s going great.
- Children reflect the behaviors and emotions that surround them.
- Don’t underestimate your kids, families, teachers, or staff- we’re doing amazing things and seeing amazing results.
- Don’t sabotage your success before you give yourself a chance to succeed.

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**PLEASE NOTE:** Responses listed here represent information provided by NIP partners and participants contributing to the Coffee Talk series—lists are not exhaustive or exclusive.