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Helping Our Children Navigate Coronavirus

With the onset of Coronavirus, many parents have been reaching out asking for practical tips on how to help children cope with their fears and how to entertain them when they are home from school. We are going to provide a few tips to help you and your child deal with this new reality in a way that is reassuring and grounding. It is important to remember, we are all in this together, we will be strong together, and we will get through this together.

Taking care of yourself:

Children experience the feelings, worries, and fear of those around them. Keeping calm may help your children remain calm. Children learn from their caregiver's reactions. We want to navigate the situation in a responsible manner, and at the same time be there for our children, keeping a strong and healthy mindset.

Creating a self-care toolbox is a great way to manage and deal with your own anxieties. This is the first step to being more available for your children. As parents, no matter what is going on in the world around us, we need to recharge ourselves emotionally. Since your regular self-care protocol may not be available, try to be creative and come up with new ideas. You may make a mental list or a list on paper. Some ideas to include in your self-care toolbox are:

- a) Coping skills: This category includes ways to cope such as calling a friend
- b) Breathing exercises, staying hydrated, and eating nutritious meals. Engaging in deep relaxing breathing can be very helpful to relieve stress and reenergize yourself. Being properly nourished and hydrated is essential to help us manage our emotional health.
- c) Spirituality: People find it helpful to remind themselves that there is a Higher Power in charge and watching out for our good even when it is hard to understand.
- d) Distracting activities: This category includes activities to distract yourself such as reading a book, watching a comedy, or playing a game.
- e) Comfort activities: This category includes activities that bring you comfort such as calling someone to discuss the challenge, writing about it, or taking a hot shower.
- f) Release: This is an activity that allows you to let out the energy you are feeling, for example, running to release fear or anger.
- g) Express yourself: This consists of an activity that gives you an opportunity for self-expression, for example, singing a song, writing a poem, drawing, coloring.
- h) Empowerment: This is an activity that will empower you, for example, writing a list of good things about yourself or writing a list of things to be grateful for.
- i) Enjoyment: This is doing something you enjoy, such as baking, turning up the music, or drawing.
- j) Mindfulness: This includes being present in the moment and bringing awareness to what you see, taste, touch, smell and feel.

If you are pressed for time, even two to five minutes of self-care can have a positive impact on your day. Having a self-care plan can keep you empowered and recharge your batteries.

Taking care of your children:

When taking care of your children try to help them deal with their fears, create a healthy routine, empower them with a children's self-care toolbox, and encourage an atmosphere of bonding.

Helping children deal with their fears:

It is important to remember to have open ended conversations with your children allowing them to express what is on their mind. You can ask them questions about what they heard and how they feel. The more a child feels they can discuss their fears with you, the more reassurance you will be able to provide. You can help your child by explaining the facts to them and helping them filter out whatever else they are hearing. Children have a hard time conceptualizing what they hear. Having an honest discussion helps them with perspective. It is important to remember your child's developmental age when answering their questions and avoid giving too much information. Being supportive and validating is key, even if you cannot provide all the answers.

Creating a healthy routine:

It is helpful for all children to have a daily schedule. In addition to the learning program set up by the school, we recommend choosing 3-6 activities as part of each day's schedule.

Ideas of activities include:

- k) Learning activity: This can be the school's online learning program.
- l) Arts and crafts: Be creative; paper, markers, scissors, and glue can turn into a fun project such as a present box, an ocean filled with sharks, or a rainbow etc.
- m) Interactive activity with a parent or sibling. You should have a fun activity that includes some interaction, it can be as simple as ball throwing, tag, or a large obstacle course set up with household items. There are some more ideas for interactive activities in the game section below.
- n) Games or playtime activity: This includes board games, imaginary play, or thinking games. Ideas for thinking games are included in the game section below.
- o) Movement activity: Children need to move to help them develop and stay emotionally healthy. Examples of movement games include relay races, throwing a ball, obstacle courses, or hide and find games.
- p) Sensory activity for younger kids such as water activity, playing with toys in a bucket of rice, or jumping on old mattresses that are placed on the floor.
- q) Creative arts activities: For example, coloring, drawing, and creating story books.
- r) Fun activities include baking, music, dancing, storytelling and yoga. You can include a fun activity once or twice a week.
- s) Although this article is geared for children ages 2-11, it is important to remember your teenagers have unique needs. Helping the teen feel part of something will help them feel grounded. You can try to think about what your teenager's hobbies and interests are and think of ways of how you can support them at home. You can try to have your teenager keep a balance between screen time and non-screen time. You may suggest they actually call a friend to talk in addition to social media conversation. Your teenagers also need physical activities, although their interests will be different from those of the younger children. You can suggest going for a jog together, walking the dog, riding a bike, or skateboarding.

Additional points regarding the daily routine:

- For younger children you can have a picture schedule with the four daily activities. For older children you can have a list of six activities, and they can cross off each activity as they go along.
- For children ages 3-11 you can choose a theme such as colors, animals, transportation or numbers. Each week you can have one activity daily that has to do with the theme. For example, if you are doing a color theme and this week is red, you can make a fire truck and then play hide the fire truck. Get creative, your children may be able to help you come up with ideas.

- It is recommended that children (and adults) should keep a morning routine. This includes getting dressed in the morning and having a nutritious breakfast and lunch.
- You can have a chart where children can put on a star for each morning routine they completed in a timely manner. For example: they get a star if they brushed their teeth, got dressed, and ate breakfast before 9:30 am.

Children’s self-care tool box:

For children empowerment comes with feeling like there is something they can do. You can explain to them what the CDC website says about washing their hands frequently with soap, avoiding touching their eyes, nose, or mouth and cleaning surfaces regularly.

Children ages four and up can benefit from having their own self-care plan. You can use the ideas above, although you will need to modify the activities for younger children. You may create a box and call it the self-care box and put different activities inside the box. For example, a self-care box can include crayons, color paper, a water bottle, some paper that can be ripped up and used to release stress, and a picture of a ball to remind the child they can play ball.

Bonding as a family unit:

You can encourage family games that create a feeling of togetherness. Encourage games such as “The Laughing Frisbee” (as the frisbee falls you all laugh) or turning on music and doing silly motions.

Children like to feel empowered and enjoy taking part in activities that engender positive feelings. You can help them “count their blessings” even in such trying circumstances. One example would be to create a book of gratitude. Each day you can add three pages to your book by coloring or making a drawing of something you are grateful for. See how many pages of gratitude you can accumulate over the course of a week!

Ideas for Games:

Tag. Playing tag is a simple way to have an interactive game both indoors and outdoors. There are multiple variations too. You can play water tag, and each time you tag someone, you can spray them with a water bottle. You can play alphabet tag. Begin with the letter “A,” and each time you tag someone, you say a word that starts with the next consecutive letter in the alphabet.

The laughing game. Throw a Frisbee in the air (you can use a paper plate if you don’t have a Frisbee). Every time the Frisbee falls on the floor, start laughing. Each round, laugh and do a different movement while you laugh. For example, laugh while you jump, laugh while you run, laugh while turning around etc.

Jumbo Alphabet Fun. What you need. Construction paper that have the letters of the alphabet on them. Each paper should have one letter and each letter should be the size of paper. Create more vowels than consonants as you will need them.

How to play: Choose a theme. The theme can be summer, vacation, pool, or horror stories. Write out your favorite words that have to do with the theme by creating a connected word grid and connecting words like you would in scrabble. Words can be horizontal, vertical, upward, or downwards. This game is a great game that requires thinking and movement.

Double Focus: In this game you can watch a video or look through a book or magazine and connect as many words as you can to a topic that you choose. (Not a topic based on the content of the video/ book). The idea is to be creative. For example, tell your children to look through a

magazine and connect as many words as they can to your family. The child with the largest word list at the end is the winner.

Yes, No, Maybe not: This game is best played while sitting in a circle. Ask the person to the right of you a yes or no question. The person has five seconds to answer but they cannot answer “yes” or “no”. You also can’t repeat an answer that someone already used. Answers do not have to be true, but have to make somewhat sense. You go around the circle asking the questions. For example: Do you know what time it is? Really late. Do you like ice cream? Vanilla is my favorite flavor. Do you like to go on trips? What do you think?

Game of expanding and memory: Choose an everyday activity or occurrence such as bakery, amusement park, or getting stuck on an island as your topic. Each player will add an additional detail to the original topic after listing all the previous details that have been mentioned. For example, you start and say: I went to the food store and I bought an apple. The child continues and says I went to the food store and I bought an apple and a pear. You continue and say I went to the food store and I bought an apple and a pear and some corn. See how many items you can remember.

Puppet shows behind the couch: If you are looking for good old fun, this is another idea that can build happy memories for younger children. Gather stuffed animals, dolls, and puppets, from around the house. You can create additional puppets using brown paper bags or by simply drawing a face and attaching it to a popsicle stick. You can start to lead an interactive puppet show and have the children follow and join. Having the puppets express feelings creates an opportunity to build on the relational and developmental process. An example of this would be to incorporate the following into a show “even though the puppet feels disappointed, he is helping his mother”. Acting out a puppet show is a good way to model appropriate social behavior and help children learn about different feelings.

True or False: You say a sentence and the other player has to guess if it’s true or false. This game is fun and can be played with children, teens and adults. For example, I went on a school trip to the Zoo last year- true or false or I love foods that have coconut inside true or false.

Answer by Number: Create a set of cards with all different topics. Additionally, create a second set of cards with the numbers one through ten. On each player’s turn, they draw a topic card as well as number card. The player then has to mention a few things based on the number drawn regarding the topic that was drawn. For example you chose a three and the topic “school” you say three things about school, you chose a ten and the topic “summer” you will then say ten things about the summer, you chose a five and the topic “embarrassed” you will say five things that have to do with being embarrassed.

The main thing is to be there for your children with a listening ear, and to try your best to encourage healthy thoughts and positive activities. Stay well. Stay strong.

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