

Looking After You and Your Child's Mental Health During COVID-19 (and other crises)

Managing change. It's a challenge for everyone, especially when the change is not something we chose, but has been forced upon us by circumstances outside our control. As adults we have the capacity to deal with things in our own way, to rationalise things in our own mind, but in children that ability is not yet developed. What can we do to help?

First, remember that not all children will react in the same way. Some may become irritable, some will become withdrawn, worried or frightened, some may not want to leave your side. Others may become aggressive, some will have trouble sleeping, while others will accept the situation and adjust easily and happily and still others will have a list of questions they want answered. All of these reactions are normal and natural.

Where Do I Start?

As with all situations, the best advice is communication! Talk openly and freely with your child and answer their questions the best way you can in an age appropriate manner. Prepare yourself by thinking about what questions your child may ask and how you'll respond.

How Are You Feeling?

Before you begin though, ask yourself if you are ready. If you're feeling stressed, the chances are you'll communicate that to your child and any conversation aimed at easing your child's worries will be counterproductive. Just as the airlines tell you in case of an emergency to put on your own face mask before helping others, the same applies to reassuring children in uncertain and unfamiliar times. Take a moment and ask yourself how calm and relaxed do you feel? Are you taking time out to do activities that you enjoy? Are you eating well and getting a good night's sleep? Beyond that, consider how much media you are watching and how much faith you have in its accuracy. If you have doubts about some of what you hear, check out some reputable sources such as the World Health Organisation's website or various government websites.

When's The Best Time To Talk?

Having established you are in a good frame of mind and are confident you have all the facts, when is the best time to talk? The best time is when everyone is feeling relaxed and there are no time constraints. Maybe that's when you're going for a walk, maybe it's when you all have dinner together, maybe it's bath or shower time or maybe just before bedtime. The *ideal* time is when your child initiates it, because you know then they're ready, they have some questions and they want to talk.

How Do You Open The Conversation If They Don't Initiate It?

With older children, ask them what they've heard about coronavirus and what their friends are saying. Tune into their feelings and gauge whether you feel they're anxious about it and if so, think what you can do to help. Tell them what your feelings are and the steps you and they can take to make sure you all remain safe. Reinforce the fact that the virus spreads either from an infected person coughing or sneezing directly on you or else coughing or

sneezing on a surface which you then touch. Reinforce the importance of effective hand washing. Not just a quick rinse under running water, but with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Have them hum “Happy Birthday To You” through twice while they’re washing their hands – that’s about 20 seconds. I’ve got a great fun activity at the end of this article to check those hands are being washed properly. Little children in particular will love it!

Where Do You Start?

Your first and most important job is to listen. Ask what they already know. Keep in mind that some of what they “know” may be inaccurate and may be causing unneeded worry and concern. Put their minds at rest and correct any misconceptions they may have. Listen to their fears and worries, but don’t minimise or trivialise anything they say. Inaccurate as they may be, those worries are very real to them. Encourage them to talk and to feel that they can do so freely. Speak calmly and reassuringly in response with honest, simple answers. Stick to facts, but don’t go into graphic or distressing details. Finally, keep things in perspective. Explain that this situation very rarely happens and that most people who do catch it, get better.

The big thing is to focus on hope and all the positive things that are going on in the world today. Tell them about all the doctors and research scientists who are working every day to solve this problem and about what you can do to stay safe and prevent the virus from spreading. Seek out every wonderful, inspiring story you can find about everyday people doing their bit, however small it may seem, to help others. Think and talk about what contribution you as a family might be able to make. By doing this you’re taking the focus off how it’s affecting you and putting it on helping someone else.

What About Day To Day Activities?

Just like adults, children need structure and routine in their day, balanced with time to play. At present their normal routines have gone out the window, so it’s time for new ones. The best advice I have come across is from a website called Emerging Minds. They suggest:

- Create variety in their day. This will comprise:
 - Schoolwork
 - Physical activity
 - Downtime
 - Playtime
 - Time with you.
- Limit exposure to media stories about the virus
- Follow cyber safety practices
- Encourage them to stay in touch:
 - Maintain online connection with friends & family
 - Social distancing doesn’t mean isolating from online contact. Schedule time for phone or online contact.

By following the above, your child will be better equipped to deal with the changes and feel safe and secure knowing that you are there to protect and guide them through this period of adjustment.

Fun Handwashing Lesson For Children

This lesson comes from www.confidencemeetsparenting.com and is summarised here by kind permission of the author, Jill Riley. I think it's a great way to show children just how easy it is leave germs on their hands even after they think they're clean. Although it was originally posted in 2013, it is perfect for today's situation.

What You Need: oil, cinnamon, paper towel, soap & water and one small child

Pour about one tablespoon of oil onto your child's hands and let them squish it about a bit. That will be fun! Now shake some cinnamon all over their hands. The point is the cinnamon represents germs and by doing this, they'll see for themselves every unexpected place those germs can go and how tricky it can be to get rid of them all.

Turn on the tap and see if all the cinnamon washes off. It won't! Give them a paper towel and see if it can all be rubbed off. Again, it won't.

Now, hand them some soap and let them rub it onto all the places they need to, in order to thoroughly clean those little hands. In between the fingers, on the front of the hands, on the back of the hands, maybe even over the wrists – everywhere.



*Wash, wash, wash your hands, play our handy game,
Rub and scrub, rub and scrub, germs go down the drain!*