

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH AND UNDERSTAND COVID-19

Be Honest and Tell Children The Truth

Information and truth are reassuring so tell the truth. Be sensitive to your child's age, development and how they process information. Don't offer false reassurance but don't catastrophize. Don't tell them they'll be OK but do tell them you are doing everything you can to keep them and to keep you safe. Tell them what these things are. Emphasize the things that increase safety and model these behaviors for them (for example, hand washing). Because it is safe to touch and be close to those in your home if they are not symptomatic, be sure to give your children hugs and kisses.

Give Them Information They Can Use and that Matters To Them

Talk to them about things in their lives that will change for now and things that won't. When discussing COVID-19, let your children lead the discussion or at least a part of it. This will help you know what they need to know, allowing you to meet that need rather than guess what matters to them or what information they can use to help them cope. This also empowers children, helping them to ward off feelings of helplessness that are part and parcel of coping with COVID-19.

Limit Children's Access to TV and Media

Limit screen time and remember that too much information or attention to a topic can dramatically increase anxiety. Keep this in mind for you, the adult as well. Yes, you want news and information but tuning into the news all day is likely to make you more anxious too!

Keep Children Involved With Friends

Set up virtual playdates. Involve them in games and activities with peers that can be done on a computer platform (yes, you can play checkers, chess, Sorry, Monopoly etc. online with friends). Try and make some kind of safe social interaction with people outside your household a part of your children's daily routine (and yours too!)

Empathize With Your Children

Empathy means you understand someone else's feelings even if your feelings are different. It's easy! No matter what they feel, even if their feelings are hard for you to listen to, validate and mirror their feelings to them. If they express fear, tell them you understand their fear (don't tell them not to be afraid – it will make them more afraid). If they are sad, let them know that sadness is normal. Praise them for sharing their feelings and encourage them to keep sharing them. Tell them how you feel – this helps them understand that their feelings are ok (if mommy or daddy can feel something, then they are ok to feel it too).

Establish and Maintain Routines

People thrive on consistency and predictability. While the “new normal” is new, work to establish new household routines. Because change can be scary, especially for children, involve them in setting up routines and give children, especially those that resist change, to adjust slowly (this also helps counter feelings of helplessness and anxiety). Don't expect them to adjust or accept the new routines right away – after all, no doubt you, the adult, are adjusting over time too! Put the daily routine in a place where it can be seen by your children and by you!

Help Your Children Learn New Skills

This is an ideal time to learn new things that can be learned at home. Learn along with your children. For example, learn a new language or a new game. Explore new hobbies and new interests. Do project together such as cooking, puzzles.

Keep Yourself and your Children Physically Active

We may be practicing social distancing or be on lockdown, but that doesn't mean we can't go outside. Walk, run, jump, throw a frisbee, kick a soccer ball, hike, play with family members. Play hopscotch. Get chalk and draw on the sidewalk or in the street.

Don't Forget Humor

Humor helps to make things easier to accept and cope with. Be silly. Dress funny. Find things to laugh about...especially with the restrictions and changes that come with COVID-19. For example, if you wear a facemask or if your child does, draw a funny face on it. Make a game out of guessing what someone is doing under the mask.

This Is Not a Vacation – Be A Teacher and a Learner

You are working from home and your child is schooling from home. Maintain a schedule and routine for this. Get involved in their education and learning (what a great benefit for kids to have parents more involved in this!). Make use of online resources (such as Kahn Academy) for things you're not expert in so you can help them and teach them. Be a student along with your kids and while they are learning, find something new for you to learn.

Have Realistic Expectations

When people are in close quarters for long periods of time, irritation and conflict are more likely. Expect this. Anticipate this. Help your children anticipate this. Normalize it so your children don't think something is wrong with them or with you. Create separate space for each family member as best you can even if this means a separate square of space in the family room marked off by masking tape or string...not only will this help minimize problems but the separate space can be used when conflict erupts.

Tell Your Children How Much You Love Them

This needs no real explanation...but do more than this. Tell your children what you think is exceptional about them. Since you'll be spending more time with them than ever, tell them what you're learning about them and ask them what they are learning about you!

BE A ROLE MODEL. REPEAT. BE A ROLE MODEL.