

Helping Your Child Through Uncertain Times

March 2020

Coping with a worrisome event can create feelings of worry and anxiety even in individuals who don't have an anxiety-related diagnosis or disorder. These tips are intended to provide guidance to caregivers of children.

1. Validate feelings, not fears

Worried feelings are very normal and expected right now. *Recognize and acknowledge those feelings.* This might look like:

"You feel really worried right now. You are afraid that you or someone you love might get sick. I understand, that's a scary thing to imagine."

Avoid reinforcing fear.

Instead of: "If you don't wash your hands, you might get really sick,"

Try: "I know you want to stay healthy. Washing your hands will help you and everyone else."

Avoid reassurance that you can't ensure will be true.

Instead of: "No one we know will get sick."

You can say: "Our family and friends are doing a great job of following safety recommendations. I know your cousins are singing 'Baby Shark' when they wash their hands, and Grandma and Grandpa are staying home instead of traveling. They are doing everything they can do to stay safe."

2. Give facts (but don't overshare)

Limit news. Sensationalism sells on the news, but it isn't great for any of us. You can't control the messages that children will hear on the news, and not all of what they hear may be useful or helpful. Remember that you have more context and emotion regulation skills to handle what you hear, your children have less life experience to help them make sense of this information. ****Limit news for yourself, too.** Pay attention to how often you're refreshing your browser—how is that information impacting your life right now? Consider scheduling your news check in times instead of keeping it at a steady stream. Kids pick up on the energy of the adults around them. Own it. That being said, don't hide information they are likely to hear. If you are the one sharing it, they have the opportunity to have your help in learning to cope with it. See below for sources of information about COVID-19 that are designed for kids.

3. Use good hygiene practices

Wash hands—often

Sanitize surfaces, including phones, remotes, etc.

Avoid touching your face

Follow social distancing recommendations

4. Model emotional intelligence practices—name your feelings, followed by coping strategies

This might sound like: “I feel worried about what will happen next with my work;” “I am nervous about Grandpa being healthy.” Follow that with a coping strategy: “I just had a scary thought. I am going to do some deep breathing. I’m putting my hand on my stomach to make sure I’m getting the breath all the way into my belly.”

5. What about screens?

Unless you’re using an actual coping tool on your phone, such as MindShift™ CBT, what you’re doing with a screen is distraction. Distraction does not equal coping. This does not mean that distraction isn’t useful or valid. When emotions become too overwhelming, distraction can help bring them down to a place where a coping tool or strategy might help. Avoid saying “my phone/iPad/tablet/screen is my coping tool.” You are modeling behavior for your children. Instead, name what you’re doing (“I’m distracting myself to get a little cooled off so I can use a coping tool in a few minutes.”). Then follow through with that coping strategy (name it to tame it, belly breathing, meditation, etc.).

6. Establish and stick to a routine

Nothing wrong with taking advantage of a situation like this to get the family’s biological clocks more aligned. Having a routine is tremendously helpful in communicating calm and reassurance, and giving something firm and secure to hang onto when so many other things are in flux. Things to consider including in your schedule are:

- Brush teeth, get dressed
- Breakfast and clean up
- Independent school work
- Recess (outdoor or indoor movement and exercise)
- Independent reading
- Lunch and clean up
- Recess
- Group work/project time
- Games
- Snack
- Something for someone else (write letters to family members or others who are experiencing tougher social isolation; gather food for food bank, etc.)
- Family fun time
- Individual free time
 - Screens: As much as you can, avoid filling in gaps of time with screens. Your children will probably try to get you to relax on this. Seeing what they can get is part of their job. Keeping sight of what’s best for them is yours. Children will develop self-entertainment skills when they are given the opportunity to do so. It might be tough at first, but if you stick to it, things will get easier as you go along. It is always easier to add extra than it is to “take it away” later.

7. Be present when together

Put down screens. When you are together and playing, be together—fully present. Even if it’s just for a little while, doing this will help not only your children but you.

8. Seek help when needed

Caregivers are where children can see that asking others for help and support is a sign of strength, not of weakness. Let them see you ask for help with coping emotionally, with accessing needs such as food, and other basic necessities.

If you need help because of violence at home, reach out here:

1-800-799-7233 or TTY 1-800-787-3224 or log onto thehotline.org or text LOVEIS to 22522.

Food resources

https://www.seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what_s_new/coronavirus_updated/resources

Seattle food bank maps: <http://www.seattlefoodcommittee.org/food-bank-map/>

Food lifeline finder: <https://foodlifeline.org/need-food/>

Resources for explaining the new Coronavirus to kids:

<https://parenting.nytimes.com/childrens-health/coronavirus-kids-talk>

Comic “zine” for kids to understand the Coronavirus:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

SAMSHA – Guidance on how to talk to children about infectious disease outbreaks including guidance across different age groups:

https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/pep20-01-01-006_508_0.pdf

AnxietyCanada: What to do if you’re worried about Coronavirus Covid-19

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/what-to-do-if-you-are-anxious-or-worried-about-coronavirus-covid-19/>

More information and ideas for parents:

<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/13/814615866/coronavirus-and-parenting-what-you-need-to-know-now>

Education resources: Local public school sites are listing a tremendous number of resources

Resources for counseling and crisis

Headspace meditation:

https://assets.ctfassets.net/v3n26e09qg2r/5vZzE6BQKS1G157ZttoVm2/43830f291f98616b2e45de064444fb1e/hs_for_educators-and-parents_COVID-19_final_2.pdf

MindShift™ App: Free, evidence-based app

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>

AnxietyCanada: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/learn-about-anxiety/anxiety-in-youth/>

Teen Link: <https://www.teenlink.org> 1-866-833-6546

Crisis Connections: 1-866-427-4747

King County: 2-1-1

Crisis Connections support: 206-461-3222