

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS ABOUT COVID-19 FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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As a parent, grandfather, practicing child clinical psychologist, school consultant, and medical school faculty member for over 35 years, I have been reading and reflecting on this matter for the past couple of weeks and want to pass on some guidelines that represent best practices. I am sure some of these have been reiterated by others, but are worth restating.

INFORMATION PROVIDED TO CHILDREN SHOULD COME FROM A TRUSTED SOURCE, PREFERABLY A PARENT OR PRIMARY TEACHER SO THAT ACCURATE AND CONSISTENT THEMES ARE PRESENTED;

START THE CONVERSATION WITH A CALM MIND AND CONFIDENT VOICE, PERHAPS NOT AFTER YOU HAVE JUST HEARD SOMETHING ALARMING ON THE NEWS;

PLEASE BE BRIEF AND KEEP THE CONVERSATION AT A DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL CONSISTENT WITH YOUR CHILD OR STUDENT. FOR EXAMPLE, A FIVE YEAR OLD'S BRAIN THINKS AND PROCESSES EMOTIONS AT A CONCRETE OR BASIC LEVEL (even if he or she is bright), WHEREAS A TYPICAL FIFTEEN YEAR OLD CAN MANAGE MORE AND THINK CONCEPTUALLY;

BE HONEST, BUT DON'T SHARE WORST CASE SCENARIOS. CHILDREN NEED TO KNOW THAT THEY WILL BE OK, THAT MOST PEOPLE, IF THEY WERE TO CONTRACT THE VIRUS WILL EXPERIENCE MILD TO MODERATE SYMPTOMS, AND THAT THE ADULTS ARE MAKING DECISIONS TOGETHER TO KEEP EVERYONE SAFER;

CREATE AN ONGOING DIALOGUE AND RESPOND TO QUESTIONS AS THEY ARISE. THIS DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A DAILY CONVERSATION, BUT NOT A ONE TIME CHAT EITHER;

WHEN ANSWERING QUESTIONS OR OFFERING INFORMATION USE YOUR OWN WORDS AND AVOID CLINICAL, TECHNICAL, AND MEDICAL TERMS EVEN IF YOUR CHILD IS BRIGHT AND CURIOUS;

TRY TO BE PRESENT AND AVAILABLE BECAUSE KIDS WILL NOTICE HOW MUCH TIME YOU SPEND ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEVICES;

ATTEMPT TO MINIMIZE EVERYONE'S TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND WATCHING THE NEWS. THIS IS AN EFFORT TO REDUCE THE FEAR THAT IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH OVEREXPOSURE TO THE SAME ANXIETY INDUCING THEMES. TRY TO LIMIT OR KEEP CHILDREN AWAY FROM ADULT DISCUSSIONS ABOUT FINANCIAL STRAINS, EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, AND EXPLICIT DISCUSSIONS AND FEARS OF COVID-19;

REINFORCE POSITIVE EVENTS IN THE NEWS SUCH AS HOW PEOPLE ARE HELPING OTHERS;

IT'S ALSO VERY IMPORTANT TO ESTABLISH AN INTERIM ROUTINE, NOW THAT SCHOOLS ARE NOT FORMALLY IN SESSION AND REMOTE LEARNING IS TAKING PLACE. THIS MIGHT INCLUDE A VISUAL SCHEDULE FOR ONLINE ACADEMIC WORK, EXERCISE BREAKS AND AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAY. TRY TO MAKE BEDTIMES, MEAL SCHEDULES, CHORE EXPECTATIONS AND FAMILY ROUTINES AS CONSISTENT AS POSSIBLE. CHILDREN'S STRESS AND ANXIETY ARE MITIGATED BY NORMAL FAMILY ROUTINES (good for adults as well!);

IT MAY BE HELPFUL TO EMPHASIZE THAT TEMPORARILY CANCELING SCHOOL, REDUCING ACTIVITIES, AND "SOCIAL DISTANCING" ARE VERY REAL WAYS WE CAN ALL DO OUR PART TO CONTROL THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS AND STAY SAFE;

NOW THAT THE WEATHER IS GETTING WARMER, TRY TO PLAN FOR AS MUCH SOCIALLY SAFE OUTDOOR TIME AS POSSIBLE. GIVE REALISTIC EXPLANATIONS FOR WHY SOCIAL TIME WITH OTHER CHILDREN HAS NEW GUIDELINES;

EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF HANDWASHING; NOT TOUCHING THEIR FACE, AND SNEEZING INTO THEIR ARM;

REMEMBER THAT WE TELEGRAPH OUR STRESS AND ANXIETY THROUGH OUR FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, BODY LANGUAGE AND TONE OF VOICE, NOT JUST OUR WORDS;

CHILDREN WITH PRE-EXISTING EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS MAY NEED EXTRA ATTENTION SUCH AS STRATEGIES TO DISTRACT AND MANAGE ANXIETY, INCREASED STRUCTURE AND ROUTINES AND MORE ADULT TIME;

FINALLY, CHILDREN PRIMARILY PROCESS AND MANAGE EMOTIONS THROUGH A COMBINATION OF PLAY, CREATIVITY, AND FAVORITE ACTIVITIES.

