



COVID-19: Game activities that help us handle stress reactions in children

The situation we are currently living obviously has an impact also on our children, because they feel our worries and anxieties, and even if we try our best not to make them feel our worries, kids are very perceptive, they understand a lot more than what we think. Has it ever occurred to you that you were in the same room with your kid, playing with him, but in the mean time you were thinking about some work issues or something else, and your son would suddenly ask you “mom/dad why are you sad/mad?” or “mom/dad play with me”, while you were actually there, playing with them? This happens because they have perceived an *absent* presence.

Let's have a look at the phases of the indirect consequences of coronavirus and the possible impact it may have on your child.

In the *first phase*, the news of school closure, might have been lived as an unexpected holiday, they didn't go to school, but lived their everyday life. They might have experienced some of your agitation, due to the fact that you had to find a new arrangement, practical and economical. They might have perceived some of your fear related to the news given by the media. You might have witnessed an **increase in their temper tantrums**, and this, besides when they want a new toy or something material, underlines an untold request from your child, which is the one of being seen and reassured. You might have also witnessed a **gradual increase of hyperarousal before bed time** (when kids are anxious they want to stay with their parents, they don't want to separate). You might have witnessed **an increase in their “noisy” behaviors**, which are a signal that can indicate either the fact that they need to be seen, or the fact that they might have seen you a little upset, and they know that making noise, usually activates you and makes you angry. Rather than sad, kids prefer seeing you mad. With the closure of sport and recreational activities, older kids might have experienced an increased irritability, due to the ending of one of their favorite activities, as for example soccer.

But up until that phase you might not have potentially witnessed any particularly extreme behavior. Many of the behaviors previously told might be normal routine in your everyday life. That also because, with all due precautions, at that time kids could still meet with their friends, they could still go to the park and free their need of movement.

In the *second phase*, which in fact is the one we are currently living, school closure has been extended, you can exit home only for serious reasons, which has compromised the possibility of meeting with friends, family, going to the park, shop's closure and smart working for employees. Such a hard situation, isolation, can have put you parents under a lot of pressure for all the things you have to deal with,

for a possible economical worry and also for finding and creating a space at home where to work. In addition to this also the information about COVID getting more and more worrying everyday, with the fear of not knowing when we'll be able to get back to normality. So, on one hand there is you, with your worries, anxieties, irritability and on the other hand your children. Schools have organized to try and give continuity for the older ones, but also preschools have managed to send videos of things you might do at home with your kids. But kids can start to feel the weight, just like us adults, of not being allowed to go out and see their friends. For this reason it is suggested to make video phone calls among adults and kids, in order to maintain at least visual social contact, which can help to lower the feeling of isolation. Children, as we said before, feel our tension, our anxieties, because parents are in first hand people. Some of you, despite the difficulties, might be using this period to fully enjoy spending time together, playing with your children, others might feel more tense, irritable and anxious, others again might alternate moments of calm, to moments where they can find their self more tense or anxious. The first advise for the ones that are feeling more tense, anxious, down, is to take a moment for yourself to find an inner peace and calm. There are some techniques that can be used to achieve this step (please ask if you need them).

What can you notice in your children in this phase? The behaviors previously described can enhance in frequency and intensity. Some regressive behaviors might show up, such as being asked for help in things they already know how to do, like eating, dressing up, or they can manifest through noises not in line with their specific age. Those regressive behaviors might show up in many stages of development. It usually occurs that when certain evolutionary tasks are too demanding kids tend to manifest those regressive behaviors in order to obtain comfort for the difficulties they are going through. In these cases it's recommended to maintain a behavior of acceptance, transforming the difficulties from implicit to explicit, in example: "Mom/dad knows that it's a hard time for you, everything looks so difficult". Comfort and cuddles are reassuring if there's a difficulty. Same thing if they are **feeling down, whining, whimpering**. Also in this case is important to accept and welcome their vulnerability, don't be harsh on them inviting them not to cry because they are old enough. It happens often that also we, as adults, feel the need to cry when we are feeling low, stressed or anguished, and in these cases we tend to seek for someone we rely on and feel affectionate to, so why shouldn't our children do the same? Another behavior we could see in our children is an **increased hyperactivity**, since they are not allowed to go out, and we know that children need to let go their energy, otherwise they might become **more irritable, have a hard time falling asleep, night awakenings or early awakenings, hard time focusing on one activity at the time, becoming more frantic**. Inner activation increases their need of movement in order to better handle the anxiety they might be feeling. They might feel as trapped as we do.

A summary list of possible behaviors you might have noticed in your children:

- Increased temper tantrums in general and before bed time
- Noisy behaviors
- Regressive behaviors: behaving like younger children, enuresis, encopresis, requests of being helped in dressing or eating even though they already know how to do it
- Mood change: from being calm to feeling low or particularly whining
- Hyperactivity with rapid movements
- Hyperactivity with irritability
- Sleep disorders: having trouble falling asleep, night awakenings and or early awakenings
- Having a hard time focusing: jumping from one activity to the other

What to do?

Accept and legitimize

“It looks like you are angry, sad, etc., is it so?”

Show yourself open to dialogue

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Validate

“I’m sorry you are feeling like this, it’s a really hard situation”

Identify the triggers

Triggers can be an event, a sound, anything that alarms us. Nothing happens all of a sudden, observe if there is something that is alarming for your child, ask yourself if you are feeling worried and your son is reacting to your own anxiety/sadness, or if you have argued with your partner about something, or if the TV is playing the news. Try to understand what might have triggered your child.

Game activities

The game activities proposed are based on traditional games and on exercises of emotion regulation turned into games for kids. The password is game, so any activity we propose has to be introduced as a game.

STEP 1: *Orientation*

When someone feels anxious, nervous, but in fact there's nothing going on, the nervous system is alerted (an internal threat) and it feels like you are not where you are, as if you feel you are somewhere else. Re-establishing our orientation allows us to tell our nervous system that we are located where we are and that there's nothing going on and helps us re-establish our calm.

If you notice that your child looks a little disoriented, very nervous, this is a game you can do with him.

In the room you are, propose to make a sort of scavenger hunt and do it with him.

Let's tickle our visual system

- In the room you are, find 3 red objects, 3 yellow objects, 3 blue objects.

If the age allows you to, do it also with letters and numbers.

- 3 things written with letter A, 3 things written with letter B, 3 things written with letter C

Or look for number.

- 3 number 1, 3 number 2, 3 number 3..

Of course colors, numbers and letters can be changed. Usually having a canvas ready when we are a little nervous can help us, rather than thinking each time at what color to pick.

Let's tickle our tactile system

- find 3 heavy objects, 3 soft objects, 3 smooth objects, 3 rough objects.

Let's tickle our olfactory system

- play with the fragrances in the room, something that smells good and something that smells bad.

In order to play these games you and your children need to be present. It helps you and them to find inner peace, lowering the internal anxiety and spending a good time together.

STEP 2: Grounding

Grounding on the floor helps us perceive the support that originates from the sensation of being “with your feet on the floor” and encourages a greater presence and calm.

Game 1

Now you are going to be a tree. Feel your feet on the floor, be aware of your whole foot touching the floor. Try to imagine that instead of touching the floor you are touching the ground, think about how much food the ground gives to plants, trees and flowers. Try to imagine being an oak tree (you can show your child an image of an oak tree), try to take the position of an oak tree (show your child how). You need to know that while the oak tree is growing, their roots slowly start to find their way in the depth of the ground that is nurturing it. Try to make your roots grow in order to feel yourself connected to the ground and to find balance. Feel the strength that comes from the ground that nurtures you, just like the trees do.

Game 2

Now you’ll be a frog. Try to imagine how it would be to have frog legs (show an image). You need to know that frog legs have a special power which is that they are able to ground to the floor in a balanced way. Focus on how your frog legs feel the ground. How they feel connected to the soil and the earth. Feel your legs stiff and at the same time flexible, just like frogs do, which is what allows them to jump and land in a perfect synchrony and alignment.

STEP 3: Breathing

Also breathing has an important role in emotion regulation. There are many breathing exercises for kids, here I’ll introduce you to the *happy thoughts breathing* and the *breathing buddy*.

Game 3

Stand up with your child, feet grounded to the floor, take three deep breaths in while counting.. one..two...three and breathe out while counting 1,2,3.

Now breath in and say something like “I’m breathing the sun in...” and while you breathe out “I’m breathing the clouds out”.

You need to breathe in something happy and positive, and breathe out what makes you sad. You can also make a list with your child about positive things to breathe in and negative things to breathe out.

Examples you may use are:

- Breathe in friendship... breathe out loneliness
- Breathe in happiness... breathe out sadness
- Breathe in bravery... breathe out fear
- Breathe in the joy of spending time together... breathe out the regret of not being able to go out

Game 4

Here are some relaxation games that can be proposed also to kids 2 to 6 years old:

- “piggy nose”: while seated, you need to lift the tip of your nose and breathe in and then breathe out from your mouth blowing on your second finger.
- “the cloud factory”: you need to stand up, keep your arms close to your body, while you start breathing in you have to slowly lift at the same time your arms and head to the ceiling, pretending to create a cloud.

Game 5

This breathing game is called the breathing buddy. You and your child have to lay down, put a teddy bear on your tummy and slowly breathe in and out, making the bear move up and down but without making him fall.

STEP 4: *Understanding how we are feeling*

Game 6

In this game we are going to use the metaphor of the weather forecast in order to encourage the child to identify the weather that better represents their feelings and emotions. The adult starts by saying for example “today I feel cloudy” and tries to slowly mime cloudy weather. Then he asks the child to slowly mime the weather he decided, for example “you are rainy. Try and show me how you would represent the rain”; “you are sunny; how would you represent the sun”. Parents and kids can work together in miming the weather that better represents their feeling and in working on trying to change it from cloudy to sunny.

You can also create a code, for example “dark” when you feel tired, “orange light” when you feel anxious, “red light” when you feel irritated. You can then use it for yourself “I think I feel a little” orange light” today, how are you feeling?” or “You seem a little red light today, is it so?”.

STEP 5: *Reduce hyperactivation*

Our nervous system responds to stress and danger following a hierarchic organization that follows our evolutionary stages: immobilization, mobilization, social engagement.

It's easy that our kids in this period are more hyperactive rather than hypotonic, and for this reason there are going to be more exercises on hyperactivity. You need to remember that if they are hyperactive, they need to lower their tension and body movement and if they are hypoactive they will need to increase it.

The potential activation that we might see in our kids and that could manifest in motor activation, can be an outcome of two reasons. It can be linked to the fact that they are not allowed to go outside, run in the parks, play sports, but they can have different outcomes: an anxiety outcome can be a “flee” answer from our nervous system, whereas an irritability outcome can be a “fight” answer from our nervous system.

Kids do need movement so the activities you propose them should contemplate it. If you have a place where they can play with the ball or jump on the sofa it would be great. The aim of the games is not to stop the activation in your children but to canalize it and slow it down in order to regulate it.

Game 7

In this game you need to squeeze your shoulders, feel the tension, breathe in counting until 3 and then let go as if you had to surrender to gravity and breathe out counting until 5, then start again.

Game 8

This game is the “let go” game. Take an object that won't break, hold it in your hands, squeeze it counting until 3, then let it fall, breathing out, counting until 5, then start again.

Game 9

This game is the “push” game. Make your child put his palms against yours then push, breathing in counting until 3, then slow down a bit and breath out counting until 5, then start again.

Game 10

This game is the “pull” game. Grab a rope and pull alternatively one side and the other. The adult pulls the rope towards himself, pause, and then asks the child to do the same, to pull the rope on his side and so on.

Game 11

This game is the “grab” game. Identify something soft like a pillow or a teddy bear, name it and make your child run to grab it and squeeze it.

Game 12

Picture in your mind an empty bag and a full bag. Together with your child mime the empty bag while breathing in and then breathing out full the bag. Play with the mimic, kids love when we make funny faces.

Game 13

Play “*Grandmother’s footsteps*” (un, due, tre, stella) to help them stop.

Game 14

In this game movement, take some steps forward, then backwards, then from one side to the other, slowly and make your child follow you, then follow him.

Game 15

Inflate the balloons, breath in and blow out again in the balloon.

STEP 6: *Increase the activation*

Another way our nervous system responds to threats is through immobilization. It can be an immediate response or it can manifest when the immediate fight or flight responses do not appear. In these cases we will notice an extreme tiredness and slowness. The following game activities will higher the tone muscle and switch from a hypoactive state of our parasympathetic nervous system to a healthy activation of our sympathetic nervous system.

Game 17

This is the push game, similar to game 9, but in this case you breathe in counting until 5 and then you quickly breathe out counting until 3, then start again.

Game 18

Like in game 10 take a rope and pull alternatively one side then the other. Your child pulls towards him, no pause, you pull towards yourself, then take a quick pause.

STEP 7: *Regulate a mixed activation*

Game 19

What do you need? Imagination and something that sounds like a drum.

- Imagine to spread a magic glue on your feet in order for them to stick to the ground. Mime with your child this operation of spreading the glue on your feet and press them on the ground.
- Move your knees as you were walking but without lifting your feet from the ground.
- The adult plays the drum and he and the child start moving always without lifting the feet from the ground.
- The adult plays a little faster and you both need to follow the rhythm.
- Then the adult plays a little softer and also the movement of the knees needs to slow down.
- The adult keeps playing the drum then says “stop” and everybody stops.

This game is used to move the body after you’ve been seated for a long time.

STEP 8: *Find boundaries*

Being in the same house all together can be really nice, but we are not living a vacation. Spaces can be tight, you can’t go out and this can lead to a feeling of suffocation and the need of finding your own space sometimes. Of course you can go to your bedroom, bathroom or kitchen. But it can also be useful to find a space in the same room and allow yourself to say “in this moment I need my space”. This works for adults and for your children. When you feel this need it is important that you speak it out loud “now mom/dad needs a little time on her own. I’ll go to my room/kitchen and then I’ll be back”.

Legitimizing yourself to feel that way allows your child to also feel that he might need some space on his own.

Game 20

This game is for those situation where we are together and we feel like we are too close to each other and feel the need of space. Adult starts first. Take a rope or some objects and create a circle around yourself. Move inside this circle adjusting the rope

or objects closer or further from you until you think it fits. That will be your space. Then make your child do the same with other objects while you remain in your circle. Ask your kid how he feels being with you but having his own space. “We can still be close but each of us in their own space”.

STEP 9: Reinforce the resources

The animals we find in books and tales can be very strong resources for our children. Ask your kid their favorite animal and the qualities the animal has that your child finds attractive, then tell your favorite animal. If you have memories of experiences with the animal, like seeing a lion at the zoo, that can be a stronger experience for your child. Once you’ve identified the animal and its qualities, focus on the sensations that you feel in your body and how the body communicates this positive sensations.

The kid does not need to have experienced a bad or traumatic situation linked to this specific animal. He needs to be encouraged to imagine how he would feel if he had the strength, playfulness, calm, or the other qualities he found in his favorite animal. It’s important to outline the good qualities of the animals used in a good way, not to hurt or harm others. For example if your kid’s favorite animal is a lion, focus on the strength of the lion, not on how aggressive it is. Then try to mime the animal. For example “I’m a lion”, roar and then say how your body feels, while miming the lion, “I feel my legs and arms very strong”. You can pick more than one animal to help your kid feel in his body the resources he might need in various difficult situations.