HELPING YOUNG KIDS THROUGH THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) CRISIS

Information from Dr. Katherine Rosenblum, Co-Director, Zero to Thrive

As adults, we may tend to overlook or minimize how even very young children are affected by current events. However, even very young children are watching and listening to what is happening, including how we respond emotionally. This means we need to think about how to help even very young children make sense of current realities, and it also means that our own self care is essential. In moments of stress, remember to breathe, connect with others, take a walk, or do some other thing that helps you feel better. Then think about how you can help your child feel safer and more secure. None of us will be perfect, these are hard times. But we can strive to care for ourselves so we can care for our children.

Following are some suggestions about how you might think about helping your young child make sense of current events.

First, be curious. What has your child heard, and what does she think? Little kids can have all sorts of ideas about what is happening, and why? Sometimes when young children are trying to make sense of things they will come up with explanations that are not only wrong, but may make them feel even worse. For example, does your child think that everyone who gets COVID-19 will die? (Note: this is not correct. In fact, the risk of serious illness or death among in the general population is still low, and the risk for children is particularly low). Or do they perhaps think that they are no longer going to school because they did something wrong? (Note: this may seem very illogical, but this kind of "magical thinking" is very common among young children.)

Correct misperceptions, and offer honest and realistic reassurance.

Here are some realistic, honest, and reassuring things you might choose to share:

There are very smart people whose job it is to take care of the public health. They are figuring out what we all need to do to keep people safe. They are finding ways for us to take care that will help keep people healthy.

Most people who have this illness are ok. Most people only get a little bit sick and then they get better. You could remind your child of a time she or he was sick with a cold, took care, and got better.

You might be curious or hearing a lot about a virus called coronavirus. Do you know what a virus is? Viruses are like germs – different kinds of germs can cause lots of illnesses like regular colds, including colds that people in our family have had. Even though it was not fun to have a cold or be sick, we got better. Viruses do not happen to people because they did something wrong- no one is to blame, and our whole community is working together to try to keep people healthy and safe.

There are a lot of helpers! Doctors, nurses, first responders, grocery workers, garbage truck drivers, mail deliverers, teachers, religious leaders, community leaders, and more, are all working together to figure out how to help people through this hard time.

We can share our gratitude with our kids, and that helps us all keep a more balanced perspective.

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Explain the "rules" and follow them.

To help keep most people safe and healthy, we are following the rules that scientists and doctors tell us will help. These rules include:

WASHING OUR HANDS OFTEN

TRYING NOT TO TOUCH OUR FACE WITH OUR HANDS

SNEEZING INTO A TISSUE OR OUR ELBOW

We can explain that we do this because it helps stop the virus from spreading. Children learn by observing, so it is important that we model these behaviors consistently ourselves.

Find your "family purpose". Helping others helps ourselves.

Look for opportunities to 'do good'—for example, leaving groceries on doorsteps of neighbors who can't get out, or drawing pictures for loved ones, neighbors, or people who cannot have visitors at present such as residents of nursing homes. You could work together to make "thank you" cards and pictures to people in your community who are working hard to help others. Finding ways to "do something" helps move away from just worry to feeling more purposeful and helpful and helps strengthen our community response.

Create and keep new routines. Kids thrive on predictability—and school closures, work changes, and other things happening right now can really undermine that sense of predictability and routine that keeps kids (and honestly, adults, too!) feeling secure. Plan a daily routine and make a calendar. Include play time with you. If possible, include time in the outdoors. Make a list of fun activities, like "dance party time" "read a book time" or "time to draw thank you pictures". Dancing and playing and other fun activities can help everyone de-stress together.

Limit exposure to TV, news, and conversations among adults that might increase fear and anxiety.

We are all in this together, and parents and caregivers are understandably worried and wanting information, too. That makes sense but be aware that "small pitchers have big ears"—even very young children (infants and toddlers) are aware of our emotions, tone of voice, or the urgency and fear coming through the tv or radio. Do your best to minimize children's exposure to these things and be mindful of #1 above—care for yourself, too.

These are unprecedented times. But these times also create tremendous opportunities for us to practice our values- to care for others, connect with those we love, to find community and purpose wherever we can. This reminds us all of how connected we are to one another—and ultimately, we get through this together.

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