

COVID-19 CRISIS MANAGEMENT - GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS & CARETAKERS

Concrete Caretaker Actions to Reassure Children and Adolescents

This global crisis is sure to test our strengths and expose our vulnerabilities. For children and adolescents, this period will have an indelible impact on their developing brains and world view. As we shift from functioning within relative certainty to shaping our lives around a frightening new reality with an uncertain end date, we have a tremendous opportunity to promote grit, build resilience, model community responsibility and service, and attend to both the needs and wants of the self and the needs of others.



Other-care and self-care can co-exist and practicing this balance gives us an opportunity to experience ways in which other-care is self-care. We grow when we practice empathy and expand our awareness to the needs and feelings of those around us.

This national challenge presents us with an opportunity to shrink or grow; how we handle it both impacts and shapes children's brain. As we decide 'what to do with it,' we are actively charting a path for brains under construction and awaiting instruction.

TIME TO REASSURE CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

ROUTINE

Opportunity: *Routines and structured work and play offer a sense of security, productivity & predictability.*

Structure weekdays as close to your child's typical school week as possible. Create a developmentally appropriate and child-centered weekly schedule to include:

- ✓ wake time
- ✓ learning time
- ✓ mealtimes
- ✓ family or parent-child time for emotional check-in, debriefing the day and planning for tomorrow.
- ✓ brain breaks (solo activity or rest)
- ✓ unstructured active play or art time (kid-choice)
- ✓ semi-structured play time outside (adult-choice) (i.e., sport, game with movement, walking, running, biking).
- ✓ device-free and quiet transition to end the day
- ✓ set school week and weekend bedtimes



Expect routine while soliciting your child's ideas about activities within each domain. This is a time to emphasize that activities we *want to do* follows activities we *need to do*. This fosters a sense of responsibility, work ethic, self-discipline, and earning what we want by doing what we need.

EXPERT EDUCATION

Opportunity: *Practice Distinguishing Uninformed Opinions from Expert Sources of Information*

Limit and filter information to children's developmental age and within their capacity to cope with anxiety-producing situations. Local and State governments as well as CDC and NIH information sites are the best sources for status and guidance. Last month, fake news was annoying. This month, fake news is potentially lethal. Given the national and political climate, this crisis is an excellent opportunity to teach critical thinking and evaluating whether information we get is motivated by something other than the truth.

Older children and adolescents may prefer peers or social media as primary sources and need parents to provide accurate information from adult experts. However, news can be overwhelming and frightening for children.

Limit updates to an overview of risks and precautions, and a longer summary of all the ways we are adjusting and ways in which our community is working hard to help and protect us. Guide children toward an authoritative science-based source and model fact-checking. Inform briefly and move on to the present "small, safe and predictable world" of the child and family.

AVAILABILITY FOR EMOTIONAL PROCESSING

Opportunity: *My parent(s) can actively listen and understand my feelings and needs are important, too.*

Children have a unique perspective and may not share their interpretation of the world around them, or their curiosities or fears, when their adult helpers appear unavailable or disinterested. Adults too often wait for children to lean in and use them as a resource while children wait for full attention followed by a direct invitation and an atmosphere that values their emotional experience.

Current events and collective fears can be used as an opportunity to postpone advice-giving or 'teaching moments' to first listen and wait to be asked a question. The more we listen without correction, the more likely they will lean in now and in the future. Just like adults, children need to feel heard and understood so that adult guidance feels specific to them and informed by their needs and emotional experience. When we wait, they wait. When we talk before listening, they tune out and lean out.



SOCIALLY CONNECT WHILE PHYSICALLY DISTANCING

Opportunity: *We are healthier, safer, and happier when we participate in relationship.*

Distancing physically and connecting socially are concurrent priorities to protect both physical and emotional health and will buffer the impact of chronic stress. Parent-approved and monitored social media are tools that can help older children and adolescents maintain some normalcy; peer connection is an important daily routine. Just like adults, friends are supports and their world needs to remain as much the same as possible.

Face to face connections (FaceTime, video chats, etc.) can temporarily replace group gatherings. Allow as much appropriate face-to-face contact through devices as possible.

Allow as much privacy between your child and friends as you can. If they were together physically, you would not be invited to monitor the conversation. Parents are not often invited to ‘hang out’ when kids are talking with each other in school or outside the home; they will want the same privacy with peers and groups you have already approved.

SOLICIT CHILDREN’S UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

Opportunity: *I am a unique and valuable person (now); I can positively influence my community (later).*

Children are watching and listening. They are experts of their own experience. We observe and interpret but they have the information. Ultimately, they decide whether or not they are willing to trust us with their story based on our responses along the way. We must first prove we can listen without judgement and demonstrate unconditional interest and love.

Invite and then allow children and adolescents to talk freely about all the feelings they have. It can be tempting to “teach” or lecture, but your child may tune you out if he or she does not feel understood or respected as an equally impacted citizen-in-training. Start with questions about what they think, feel, perceive and then demonstrate willingness to adapt after hearing their experience and needs.

UNDERScore SELF/OTHER-CARE BALANCE

Opportunity: *I am safe, healthy, and satisfied today if I take care of myself first and last...*

I am safe, healthy, and happy tomorrow if I take care of myself first and others next.

Underscore the need for both self-care and other-care and explain ways in which these approaches to life and career can intersect. The COVID-19 crisis requires us to think as much about ourselves as about our family and our community. Children will take our cues as directions for how to interact with the world now and later; to isolate and self-preserve or take good care of self in order to better engage and contribute to the preservation of family and community.



Given what we do or don't do directly impacts the lives of those around us, today is an opportunity for children and adolescents to practice flexibility, compassion, and witness the protective influence of other-care and empathy-driven community engagement.

RESILIENCE

Opportunity: *I have the capacity to adapt, when I challenge myself or the world challenges me.*

Resilience is available and awaiting opportunities to surface and strengthen. Resilience does not mean invulnerable or immune to stress or emotional difficulty; it is the capacity to move forward courageously when vulnerable, or when stressed, or when we get up after falling and resting awhile. It's the getting up and trying again, not the surrendering in despair that defines us. This is available to us all but does not happen without encouragement and practice and, for children, does not develop without example.

Children are naturally and incredibly resilient. In the field of childhood trauma, we find this is too heavily relied upon. We tend to assume their innate capacity for adaptation under extreme stress or trauma will allow children to physically and psychologically survive. This is true, but survival is only the first step. When we act aggressively as active and resourceful allies, children can more quickly move from surviving to thriving. Resilience is the primary ingredient for adaptation and growth, but it can neither be fully tapped nor strengthened without at least one reliable, steady, and nurturing ally.

EMPATHY

Opportunity: *Boost emotional intelligence; practice managing your emotions while considering the perspective and feelings of another.*

Threats to safety and security ignite a self-preservation neurobiological response. We are hard wired to first attend to our own survival needs. Currently, prioritize "settling in" to the new normal and taking active steps to establish expectations and a routine for yourself, your home, and your children. Then, take steps to have children imagine the experience of others. It's an opportunity to teach we are more similar than we are different. Adult modeling of interest and care about another's needs is how empathy is taught to children.

Let "what do we need?" be followed by "what might others who have less or more vulnerable need from us?" In the coming days and weeks, there will be opportunities to safely serve others. Work as a family to explore the needs of your community and have your child dedicate part of their week to community health needs. Unfortunately, we are going to be flooded with opportunities to put our wants and needs aside for the sake of others. In addition to their online academics, this crisis offers us an opportunity to model how to live a healthy and fulfilling life regardless of circumstance.... physically, mentally, and psychologically.

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