

COPING WITH COVID-19 FOR FAMILIES

At CAFCO, we are hearing from families struggling to adjust to this new reality of COVID-19 and how to best support their children.

I write this from my perspective as a child and family therapist, reflecting on children's developmental needs and how to build resilience during times of crisis. I also write this from the parent perspective, trying to navigate how to keep my children physically healthy, but also safeguard their emotional well-being. None of it is easy. It is new for all of us and we are learning together, one day a time.

I am also reflecting on how for many families, they may have already been coping with losses, grief, mental health issues or stressful events. Now, there is the added strain of this collective grief and anxiety prompted by a global crisis. Understandably, this creates a lot of worry about how children will cope.

This is a list of simple suggestions and reminders of what is within our control right now, that we can do, to support the children in our lives. Whatever the age of your children, they still look to their parents for guidance and support. I hope some of this may resonate with you.

What is interesting to observe is that kids are suddenly at home, with families, with much less peer contact compared to their usual lives. This actually has some unintended benefits, aside from minimizing the spread of COVID-19. Something that has been observed as different for this generation of families, compared to past generations, has been the tendency for children to turn to peers to meet many of their needs, rather than parents. Our generation is also exceptionally busy and scheduled. Now, there is an opportunity for families to slow down and re-connect, and for adults to assert their rightful place as the knowledgeable and dependable people to guide children through this stressful time. Here are some suggestions of what we can do to best meet the needs of the children we love.

#1 SELF CARE

This may seem like a strange place to start, since this is about how to support and guide children. Yet, we can only be fully present, caring for others, if we first ensure that we take care of ourselves. Parents are all facing different degrees of challenge and hardship. Some of you may be suddenly working from home with children to care for at the same time, or facing financial stress associated with job loss, or perhaps you are a single parent with limited supports. Self-care may be particularly difficult to fit in, depending on your personal situation.

However, try and place this goal at the top of your priority list. First of all, you deserve this nurturing and support. Furthermore, when you make time for self-care, your children benefit from your improved mood or increased energy. Remember what you need to do if there is an emergency on an airplane and the oxygen masks come down? You are supposed to put your mask on first, *then* turn to your child to help them with their mask. This recognizes that we need to ensure our own well-being, so we can be present and available to our child. So, get out for a walk on your own. Do a yoga class online while the kids watch their favourite Youtube video. Make time to connect via Facetime with a supportive friend. Nurture yourself as best as you can.



#2 BE CAUTIOUS AROUND MEDIA EXPOSURE

This week, as I re-connected with some of the children and teens I provide therapy to, it became evident how much they know about COVID-19. In some cases, they have more access to media than usual, as they are often doing schoolwork or socializing online. They may be hearing information through social media that is not accurate, or that builds a high level of fear and anxiety. Parents are working from home and it is very difficult to constantly monitor their child's exposure to the news.

Consider setting aside time regularly to talk about COVID-19 with them. Give children the ability to ask questions and answer them as best as you can. You can be honest about the unknowns, but promise them you will

continue to tell them what is important for them to know, to the best of your ability.

What should you tell them? Consider the analogy of a pitcher of water. As parents, you are the pitcher of water. Your children are the glass. We want to give enough information that it fills the glass, but not so much that it spills over. It is wise to be honest, but also protect them from some details that are overwhelming.

Be open with them about your wish for them to not be consumed by media, because it can be overwhelming. Model for them taking time for having fun, doing exercise and engaging in creative distractions, to balance the stress of the news. It is crucial to disconnect from media for periods of time every day. Also, be sure to share with them the good news, such as hopeful research or positive developments in the battle against COVID-19.



#3 ENCOURAGE EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS

One of the best ways we can support children and build emotional resilience is by helping them to express, not bottle up, feelings. Children are all experiencing this sudden change to their world in different ways. Their personalities and temperaments are unique, so they will each share their feelings in their own way. Some children are able to openly say that they feel worried about COVID-19, or sad about being away from school and friends. Others may say very little, but you might notice differences in their behaviours. With children, feelings may be displayed more through behaviours. Look out for children who seek more closeness to you. If suddenly they want to sleep in your bed, rather than their own, or if they insist on staying in the same room as you, this could be their way of

showing you they feel some anxiety. Acting out behaviours, such as picking fights with siblings or whining, or having a meltdown over a seemingly minor incident, could be their way of letting you know that they are stressed.

When we see these behaviours, or children do actually verbalize their feelings, my best advice is, do *not* jump to problem solving or finding solutions! This is a natural instinct as parents, to try to make everything right again. However, this is actually the time to just validate what they are feeling, without trying to “fix it”. We do this by simply saying things like, “That must be so hard, I’m really glad you are telling me about this,” Or, “You seem so frustrated. It’s OK, there are lots of changes. All your feelings are understandable and I am here for you.” Or, “I know how much you were looking forward to that (recital/ tournament/ trip, etc). No wonder you are upset.”



Slow down, be still and just listen and reflect. It is not the time to jump to, “Well, at least” or “Just be glad that” . We do not want to unintentionally minimize their feelings or send the message that they should somehow be feeling something else. There is nothing wrong with their feelings. It is not our job to protect them from all hurt, but to help them see that they can feel that hurt and get through it.

After your child has felt heard, and hopefully expressed their vulnerable feelings, there is room to help them consider other perspectives. However, take your time getting there.

Another key point is to remember that children tend to express feelings not just through words, but through play and creativity. When you have the energy and time, help your children to identify what activities they need to express themselves. Encourage free play with toys, doing crafts or playing music. Help them to engage in these activities that provide a healthy outlet for their full range of emotion.

4 TEACH CHILDREN TO USE BALANCED THINKING

Once children have felt heard and understood, you can also consider helping them to think in a balanced, realistic way. This helps their mood to also be more balanced.

This is different from “positive thinking”, which may miss the point that life is in fact quite difficult right now in various ways. There are currently many unknowns and concerns, so it is not necessarily realistic to say, “Don’t worry, you will be back to school with your friends soon.” However, you can say, “You are right, it is sad to not be at school with your friends right now, but I am really grateful you can use Facetime to connect with them.” If they express fear that they might get sick with COVID-19, a balanced thought to share may be, “I understand why you feel worried, this illness is scaring many people right now. The good thing is that we are staying home and keeping safe.”

If you or a family member are working on the front lines, first of all, thank you for all you are doing to support our community. For those parents, you can consider acknowledging the worry, but emphasizing the precautions you are taking. As an example, “Yes, it is hard that I am working right now, while everything seems scary, but I promise I am being very careful and I am proud that I am helping our community”. These are examples of balanced thoughts - that acknowledge what is difficult, but also consider the positive. In turn, this can help children to feel more calm, hopeful and optimistic. We need to lead by example and practice this way of thinking and share it out loud with our children.



5 REMEMBER THAT AUTHORITY CREATES SECURITY

We are seeing now that as parents, we must enforce new rules and restrictions for our children. The need to “physically distance” from one another means that children are not allowed their playdates or to participate in many of their usual activities. There are many requests from children at the moment, to which the answer has to be “no”.

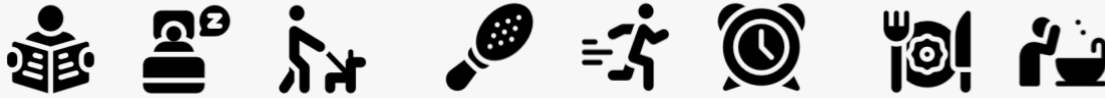
However, we can also see that for many children, they are able to accept these difficult restrictions, when they see their parents are calm and confident about these choices. This is not a time to seek the opinion of children about important decisions that impact on their safety. We can give them choices in other matters, that do not involve their safety or health. We must be clear and compassionate in letting them know about the new realities and rules. This is intended to keep them safe.

When children and teenagers feel that the adults are willing and able to take on this role of creating safety, it reinforces a feeling of security, at a time in which the world may suddenly feel less safe overall. Take comfort that when you set limits and enforce rules, you are actually reinforcing for them that they are cared for and that there is still some order and predictability during an otherwise stressful time. Communicate those messages with love and support, but with confidence. Ask the other adults in your circle, whether relatives, friends or neighbours, to do the same and be a caring and united front.

6 ROUTINE

There has been much talk since the school closures about routines. Many households are trying to find a new normal around offering some school activities and other ways to keep children occupied and busy.

From the perspective of mental health, we know that routines are very helpful for preventing or minimizing anxiety and depression. It is important to maintain good sleep routines. Your family bedtimes and wake ups may be more flexible now, but it increases resilience to still have a consistent and healthy sleep routine.



It is also very helpful for many children to have a visual, printed out routine they can follow along with. You may choose to have your children do some school-based activities for a period of time in the morning and some outdoor time then scheduled before lunch. Perhaps you will schedule in a time for chores, outdoor activities, a family game, and time to relax and enjoy screens. All of this can be very helpful, so long as we also keep in mind the next suggestion

#7 FLEXIBILITY

Children are all dealing with these changes in their own unique way. Some may surprise us and be quite content, relieved to be away from stresses they felt at school. Others may be happy to suddenly have so much time with parents, if family life is usually very hectic and rushed. Others may be really struggling to adapt and unable to perform in ways they usually do.

Remember they are children and still developing. Place their health - both physical and emotional - as the priority. If math homework is causing a meltdown (for your child or yourself!), it is fine to give yourselves a pass. There is time for that later. If your child is thrilled to explore a passion such as crafts or building Lego, give them more time in the daily schedule to do these activities, that fulfil them and give a positive focus to their day. If they need some extra time to read stories at bedtime, take a deep breath and remember that connection with you may be more valuable right now than failing to sleep right on time.

This is where I will end this list - with connection. Your connection with your child is what they most need. Take care of yourself, take care of each other. Try and carve out time to just be together. Look for opportunities to play, get outside and show them that there are still happy moments in each day. YOU are the most important thing to them. You can be everything they need right now.

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