

Addendum: Parenting in the Time of COVID19

Introduction: The current COVID19 crisis is presenting all of us with new challenges related to self-care, parenting, and anxiety management, in ourselves and our children. All of us have been faced with unexpected and rapidly changing stressors. These may include severe stressors such as the illness or loss of family members, loss of jobs or reduced wages, and economic hardship. They also include the daily challenges of social distancing (quarantining from others), of over-seeing the “distance-learning” of older siblings, and of caring for younger children 24/7. In some families, the parent or parents are working full-time remotely while also taking care of children. In others, a parent who is an essential worker or health care provider may be continuing to work outside the house. Many parents are struggling with natural and expectable feelings, including sadness, confusion, worry, and fear.

At the same time, young children and toddlers are faced with stressors of their own. Most have suddenly and unaccountably lost access to playmates, teachers, classrooms, and playgrounds. Many can no longer see their grandparents. They can no longer enter libraries or shops. Gym classes, swimming, music classes, and library story times are all on pause. While some challenges—such as drop-offs at daycare—are temporarily reduced, others are more pronounced. Young children facing this new crisis may be more clingy, fretful, irritable, or bored. They may be having more trouble sleeping or may need a parent nearby to fall asleep. The loss of practice leaving the house for preschool or daycare may have led them to be more fearful if their parents leave the house for a walk or shopping trip. Similarly, the lack of practice with interacting with strangers may make them more fearful and wary of new people they encounter on walks.

This program teaches ways for parents to teach their child to cope with and overcome unhelpful anxiety. We recognize that during the COVID19 crisis, parents will be implementing this program when faced with their own increased stress. Therefore, it is more important than ever for parents to make sure to practice helpful self-care. The first step to helping our children manage their anxiety is to make sure we are taking care of ourselves.

Section 1: Parent Self-Care

The old saying, taken from the instructions given by flight attendants prior to plane take-offs, is really applicable: “Please make sure to put on your own oxygen mask first, and then assist your child.” With so many parents facing so many challenges, it’s easy to forget that care of children during a crisis includes good self-care for parents. The following are our suggestions for maintaining well-being during the crisis:

Be kind to yourself: We may be facing super-human demands right now, but this doesn’t make us super-human. Remember that the day only has so many hours, and it is okay to let some things slide. Set priorities, and try to get the most important things done, but understand that not everything will get done.

Take a few moments to notice your own needs: These moments may occur during your child's naptime, or after they are asleep, or even while they are watching some extra screen-time. Consider what has helped you manage stress in the past? For some parents, this may include eating regular meals or getting enough sleep. For others, they may include any of the following four activities shown to maintain optimistic mood and resilience to stress: exercise, pleasurable activities, activities that give you a sense of accomplishment, and social interaction.

Exercise: Staying active could include anything from going for a walk or run (maybe while pushing a stroller), playing tag with your child, doing a 10-minute online aerobics routine, or putting on good music for a few minutes and dancing with your child. The important thing is to find activities that are enjoyable and doable.

Pleasurable activities: These could be short daily activities (e.g. guilty-pleasure TV or streaming videos) or longer ones (puzzles, games). They could also be family activities like baking together or having a special dinner. There's no one-size-fits-all, as different people enjoy different things. The benefit of planned fun activities are three-fold: You look forward to them before they happen, you enjoy them while they happen, and you remember them happily afterward.

Activities that give you a sense of accomplishment: Pay attention to the things you find meaningful or satisfying, and consider ways to continue or increase them. This activities can occur through work, parenting, volunteering, helping a neighbor, or connecting with family and friends.

Social interaction: Take the time to virtually socialize with friends and family. Set up "coffee-dates," gaming time, or calls with friends or family members on a regular basis, to stay in touch.

Aim for a daily schedule: Keeping to the basics of a daily routine helps give people a sense of well-being. But how organized the routine is depends on personal preference and your and your family members' temperamental styles and real-life demands. It is generally considered helpful to be awake during daylight and asleep during darkness, to have regular wake and sleep times, and to get dressed each day, rather than staying in pajamas, and to go outdoors each day if possible. But some families thrive on flexibility just as others thrive on routine. It's important to know what works for you, and not to judge or criticize yourself if your schedule doesn't match what others (e.g., an older child's "distant-learning" teacher) expects.

Limit exposure to the news (including news on social media) to once per day or less: Staying informed is important, but too much focus on the crisis can lead to needless distress and anxiety. Stay in the moment as much as possible.

Section 2: Parenting Your Child in the Time of COVID19

Most toddlers and preschoolers recognize the change in routine, and can sense parental stress, but do not have the understanding to grasp the full extent of the COVID19 crisis. The most important concern for them is to feel safe, and cared for.

Maintain normal routines and expectations: It is helpful, as much as possible, to keep to an expectable daily routine, including regular nap (if applicable), bedtime and wake-up times, and shifting activities through the day. These do not have to be rigid, but it can be helpful, if possible, to break up the time into activity periods, so that there is a balance of indoor and outdoor play, and of other activities (which might include crafts, snacks, reading together, etc.). It could be helpful, as much as possible, to keep the rules that were in place before the crisis (although some, including screen time limits might change).

Providing age-appropriate explanations: There is a careful balance between telling children information beyond their level of understanding that might be confusing or frightening and making them aware of new expectations and their reasons. Rules about social distancing, washing hands more carefully, and parents and older children wearing masks could be conveyed with simple explanations (e.g. “we need to clean our hands so we stay healthy and well;” or “we wear a mask in case we’re getting a cold, so other people don’t catch it;” or “there’s a new cold going around, so kids aren’t allowed in preschool for a while”). The simplest explanation that can be repeated is the place to start. Most kids will be satisfied with that, but may need it repeated several times. Only expand the explanation if and when the child asks for more information.

Find substitutions for lost activities:

Social interactions: Many preschools or daycares are having brief, virtual check-ins so that children can see their teachers and classmates. Scheduling regular brief virtual face-to-face interactions with friends or cousins could be helpful as a way of keeping up connections and social interactions. Live games that very young children could play across screens with others could include show-and-tell (showing each other toys), animal sound charades (e.g. guess what animal I am), guessing games (e.g. guessing what the child is holding behind their back), or imitation games (like the Hokey Pokey), or for older preschoolers, 20-questions, telling riddles, I-spy (if both are able to seek each other’s screen), or Simon Says (if moderated by an adult). Older relatives could read stories to children across screens. Parents could also take turns reading stories to a group of children. These interactions can be short (5-10 minutes) and supervised and can be scheduled regularly.

Outings: When allowed, children can go on walks in the neighborhood, perhaps in strollers. To make the walks interesting they could be on the lookout for something interesting (e.g. dogs, squirrels, garbage trucks, digger trucks, police car) and possibly count with their parent how many they find. Children could also go on “virtual” tours, with parents, as many zoos, museums, and aquariums have “virtual” tours or daily live animal shows for children.

Activities: If parents have the energy and resources, parents and children can play with playdoh, do crafts projects, draw, paint, read stories, act out simple stories, make pillow forts,

create things with large cartons, make socks puppets, sing songs, bake, decorate cupcakes, make pictures with stickers, play hide and seek, plant seeds, etc. If a yard is available, they can play tag, catch, blow bubbles, do water play (with squirting toys), sand play, or gardening. This can be a chance to enjoy simple activities together.

Section 3: Specific Ways to Adapt the “Being Brave” Program During the COVID19 Crisis

As you will see, an important aspect of the program is to help children practice facing and coping with situations that are anxiety-provoking for them.

Although children are not currently separating to attend daycare or preschool, and many parents are not leaving the house to work, there are still ways to practice separation:

- Practice separating from your child by having them practice being in a separate room or floor (as described in Chapter 6)
- Practice separating from your child at bedtime (as described in Chapter 6)
- Practice separating from your child when you go out on walks, runs or errands

Although children with fears of new children and adults are not currently going out and encountering unfamiliar people in social or playground settings, there are still ways to practice exposure to new people:

- Have your child say hello to your friends or your friends’ children over Zoom
- Have your child wave or speak to unfamiliar people that they encounter on a walk
- Consider signing up for Zoom group activities for children, and have your child take part in the activities.

Many other fears (of darkness, insects, loud noises, etc.) can still be practiced during social distancing.

Using the strategies presented in this program, parents will learn the techniques for working with their children on coping with and overcoming fears and will help their child practice facing some situations within the limitations of the current crisis. We recognize that this is a difficult time to learn new skills. But practicing setting small goals and practicing small exposures can lead to helpful changes. After the crisis has ended, parents will have the tools and skills to help their child practice facing other situations once the crisis has ended.