



Lourdes M. Valdes, Ph.D.
Licensed Clinical Psychologist

535 E. Fernhurst Drive
Suite #116
Katy, TX 77450-1431

Office: 832-437-6260
Fax: 888-972-6230
lourdes@drvaldes.net
drvaldes.net

Coping with the Coronavirus Pandemic: Helping Our Children

With the coronavirus pandemic, we are living through a situation unlike anything that any of us have ever experienced. Families are feeling stressed and on edge—and with good reason. Many parents are wondering how to support their children through this period in a way that will be effective, reassuring, and not increase anxiety. Here are some ideas that may be helpful.

- **Although not always easy, it is important that we grownups remain calm.** Children are extremely tuned into our own reactions and they will model their own behavior based on their observations. This does not mean that we should not show any negative emotions or stress. It means that we should be able to model for our children how to communicate and manage negative emotions in a healthy way. We also need to remember to prioritize our ability to remain regulated and well over our ability to provide our child with academic instruction. Academics don't protect our kids from challenging or traumatic experiences. Our relationship does.
- **Children need know that they will be safe and protected and, depending on how they are doing, they may need to hear this more than once!** Explaining the situation in simple terms and making it clear that we are open to answering any questions opens channels of communication and allows children to openly share worries and concerns. Reflecting our children's feelings and normalizing them without trying to change, minimize, or deny them will go a long way to helping them move forward.
- **Institute some predictable routines like standard bed times, self-care expectations, and eating times.** Predictability and structure will give our children a sense of control as well as something consistent to hold on during unpredictable and chaotic times.
- **Focus on things we have control over.** We don't have a lot of control over the actions of others, predicting what will happen, or the amount of toilet paper at the store. But there are many things we do have control of and it's helpful to focus on those. We have control of our own kindness and grace. Of turning off the news. Of finding fun things to do at home. Of washing our hands and taking our vitamins. Of going outside and doing a relaxation exercise if we are feeling tense.
- **Get outside in nature (while avoiding crowds).** There is a lot of research on the relationship between experiencing nature and reductions in anxiety and depression. We can walk our dog, ride a bike, or play ball in the backyard. We can plant a garden. Getting some sun and breathing some fresh air will go a long way to add balance to our lives.

- **Limit children's exposure to the news and adult conversations.** Our children are listening and interpreting, even when they appear to be otherwise occupied. Further, their limited tools for understanding or self-expressing may leave them with a lot of emotion but few ways to express it.
- **If they do watch some news, point out the helpers and the heroes (doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, police officers, church volunteers sewing masks, etc.) who are doing good and helping others.** The effects of the virus are devastating; but we are also seeing our neighbors and communities rise to their best selves in helping one another.
- **Helping others is a great way to feel better and recover; feeling useful heals us.** Empower children by giving them manageable, age-appropriate tasks they can control (bake, clean, facetime with grandparents, drawing art work for healthcare workers, etc.).
- **Take time to play—and laugh.** Break out the board games, build a house of cards, bake, take a family hike. We need to remember that there's an upside to these cancellations!
- **Remain connected with others by calling/using social media in a limited way.** Check in on friends, even if it's to see how they are doing or what they made for lunch today. If you need to vent or reality test, talk with trusted friends about how you are feeling.
- **Call a spade, a spade.** Acknowledge to yourself and your child that what is happening is hard. Labeling an event or a reaction for what it is, validates the difficult and confusing feelings we are experiencing and allows us to grieve and move forward.

How do I know if my child needs additional help?

- If you notice symptoms (anxiety, clinginess and comfort seeking, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, fear of being alone, irritability and mood swings, sadness, difficulty concentrating, etc.) or changes in behavior that interfere with usual activities or persist for more than 2 weeks, parents may wish to consult a mental health professional for an evaluation.
- If your child becomes obsessive about the virus/quarantine or exhibits distress, agitation, unsafe behavior, or detachment it is recommended that you consult a therapist.

Psychologists and other mental health providers can make a plan for moving forward and provide evidence-based treatment. **Most are currently working thru secure videoconferencing.**

This pandemic is challenging as well as devastating. However, as we move forward, it is also an opportunity to come together as a family and (virtually) as a community and to practice compassion towards others. In the end, compassion for ourselves and others is what will turn a disaster into an exercise in resiliency.