



PARENTING IN THE TIME OF CORONA VIRUS: THE NEW NORMAL.

To Children's Garden Parents: A Message from Mary Ervolina

As schools close and workplaces go remote to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus, parents everywhere are struggling to keep themselves sane and their children healthy, happy, and occupied. If you're anxious about how to protect and nurture your family through this crisis — often juggling work obligations at the same time, below are a few tips to calm fears, manage stress, and keep the peace.

Temper your expectations: Remember to be reasonable and kind to yourself: Anxiety, fear, worry, and grief—these are all NORMAL reactions to abnormal circumstances. Laundry piles, dirty dishes, messy rooms—we should forgive ourselves the image of perfection that we normally aspire to as parents. You have to find a balance that works for your family. **The goal should be to stay sane and stay safe and stay connected to one another.**

Sticking to a regular schedule is key, even when you're all at home all day. Kids should get up, eat and go to bed at their normal times as consistency and structure are calming during times of stress. Kids, especially younger ones or those who are anxious, benefit from knowing what's going to happen and when. However, now is also the time for creativity, flexibility, and not being too hard on yourself. Maybe your kids don't have TV or screens on the weeknights during the school year, but now that school is cancelled or online, we can give ourselves license to relax these boundaries a bit. We can explain to our kids that this is a unique situation and re-institute boundaries once more when life returns to normal.

It's completely understandable to be anxious right now (how could we not be?) but how we manage that anxiety has a big impact on our kids. For those moments when you do catch yourself feeling anxious, try to avoid talking about your concerns within earshot of children. If you're feeling overwhelmed, step away and take a break. Take a shower or go outside or into another room. Stretch, do yoga, breath, use all of your anxiety busting tools. **Watch out for "catastrophic thinking." For example, assuming every cough is a sign you've been infected, or reading news stories that dwell on worst-case scenarios.** Take a social media hiatus or make a point of following accounts that share content that take your mind off the crisis, whether it's about nature, art, baking or crafts. Also, don't be afraid to limit conversations or "unfollow" those who are prone to sharing panic-inducing posts. **Instead of "social distancing," practice "physical distancing" while at the same time staying socially and emotionally connected to those around us.**

Accept and ask for help: If you have a partner at home, agree that you'll trade off when it comes to childcare. Especially if one or both of you are working from home and have younger children. That way everyone gets a break and some breathing room. You have to find a balance that works for your family. The goal should be to stay sane and stay safe and stay connected to one another.

Limit Exposure to News:

Infants and toddlers may not understand much of what they hear on the news, but they are very sensitive to the sights, sounds, and emotions that surround them. They can sense when we, their parents and caregivers, are worried and may react by becoming clingy, tearful or demanding. They know something is not right, but they can't make sense of it and this can result in changes in mood and behavior. Young children may be oblivious to the facts of the situation, but they may still feel unsettled by the changes in routine or pick up on the fact that people around them are worried and upset.

Preschoolers have developed a greater understanding of what they are seeing and hearing and can become fearful that they or their loved ones will be harmed. They may believe that the events that they are hearing about or witnessing on TV are happening right here and right now.

Although we may be powerless to affect the course or impact of Covid 19, we can do our part as caring adults to minimize trauma by making a conscious decision to create a “**news free zone**” around our children at home. As adults we may want to watch events as they unfold, but most children just want to be children. They may not want to think about what’s happening across the country or elsewhere in the world. They’d rather play house, climb trees, ride bikes or hang with their family. For the sake of our young children, the TV and radio news should be turned off when they are around. In the same way that you “baby proof” your home to keep young children physically safe, “news proofing” may now be necessary to emotionally protect our children from disturbing news reports. Watching TV and radio reports or discussing the news in their presence can affect our emotions and this tension can transfer to your child. Remember, your child is soaking in the tension you’re feeling as you watch the news or discuss the events with others. Nightmares, separation difficulties, and the developing belief that the world is a scary and dangerous place can result from exposure to unsettling news and conversations in the home.



Support, Listen, Clarify:

During stressful times, what children need most is you—a safe, secure relationship where they can feel safe and express their feelings and questions. Research shows that just being in the presence of a compassionate, calm adult can help children (and adults for that matter) weather even the most stressful life situations. We need to be that person for each other and our children.

Children may have already heard about the virus or seen people wearing face masks, so parents shouldn’t avoid talking about it. Not talking about something can actually make one worry *more*. Children will look to you to see how afraid they should be. Think about flying on an airplane when there is turbulence. A flight attendant that appears terrified may make you think there is something really wrong and you should worry. If a flight attendant calmly offers you a beverage with a smile, you are more apt to calm down and recognize think there’s just some windy weather that will pass soon.

Try to maintain a calm and neutral demeanor in front of your child, even as you are working on managing your anxiety. **Be aware of your facial expressions, the words you choose, and the intensity of the emotion you express, because kids are reading you. They’re little sponges and they pick up on everything.**

Give your children the **time and space** to share their fears. Take advantage of this unusual opportunity of being home together for long periods of time to show your child that s/he can come to you for support and information when they are confused or worried. (In the future you may not have the luxury of time, so now is a wonderful opportunity to set the stage). Notice when your child has questions and wants to talk. Encourage your kids to share what they already know, let them ask questions, and then offer *simple*, age-appropriate, clarifying information. Answer only the questions they ask taking care not to overload your child with too many facts or too much emotion. Avoid sharing information that they can’t understand because of their age. This a time to reassure, not give a complicated science lesson about virus transmission.

“You know what it’s like to have a cold or the flu — how sometimes you get a cough or have a fever? This is kind of like that. Most people who catch this sickness stay home, rest and get better”

Reassure: Children are very egocentric, so hearing about the coronavirus may be enough to make them seriously worry that they will catch it. *“Will I get sick? Will you get sick? Everybody gets sick sometimes. If you get sick, Mama/Daddy will take care of you until you are all better, and there are lots of doctors and nurses that can also help. I want you to know that I am taking very good care of myself ... I expect to live until I am a very old person.”*

It's important for children to know that there are adults working very hard to make sure this illness doesn't make a lot of people sick. If they express worry or concern, tell them there are really smart people working really hard on this, and schools are closed because adults made that decision in order to protect everybody. One of Mister Rogers' famous quotes: *"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"* was meant for times like this.

If you live in a community where many people are wearing masks, parents can explain: *"Sometimes people wear masks when they are sick. When they are all better, they stop wearing the mask. The mask covers up part of their face, but that doesn't mean they are scary or bad. They are wearing a mask because they are sick. That's all. When they are better, they will take the mask off"*.

Your child may want to "pretend play" wearing a mask. Pretend play is one way that children can master and make sense of their world, by "trying on" the roles and people they see around them. You might also suggest pretend play around medical roles (doctor/nurse with a teddy bear) to focus on how people take care of others when they are sick.

Recognize the emotions behind the behaviors: In time of disruption and stress and especially in younger children you might see an increase in clinging kind of behaviors, but you can also see tantrums, opposition, and complete meltdowns. When an adult understands the anxiety underlying the behavior, rather than making the assumption that the child is actively trying to make her miserable, it changes one's approach. Connecting physically and emotionally with your child before directing, is even more important now than ever. Stay firm, but stay connected. Use connection rather than separation to encourage desired behaviors. The trick is a little "attachment step" in the beginning of the interaction. Positively "collect" the child through physical touch, eye contact, and friendly words. Empathize, empathize, empathize with their feelings, and then move on to discover together what is happening and what needs to happen.



One final note: Yes, our routines are being disrupted. Yes, the news is sobering. Yes, we are going to need to respond with flexibility and agility. But let's not underestimate the bonds that can be strengthened when we face challenges together. This is a chance to take a deep breath, cherish the time we have together, and model for our children how to navigate life's uncertainties with calm, courage and compassion. The silver lining is the opportunity to slow down, be together as a family, and spend time doing things that normal schedules would never allow. By forcing us into our homes, this pandemic has made our worlds small. School, work and obligations will eventually return, but the chance to reconnect in a more intimate, thoughtful manner is now. We may never have this time again. **Carpe Diem!**