

Dear Parents, Guardians and Child care-givers,

As I sit in 'self-imposed isolation' at my laptop and feel on my skin what many Americans may be feeling during this challenging time, perhaps I can be helpful, drawing from nearly thirty years of experience guiding parents when their families face difficult times.

I have always believed that in a crisis lies opportunities for strengthening families, amplifying children's coping skills and promoting resilience.

I hope that by sharing with you some strategies that have helped children and families cope with crises, acute and chronic, you may be more fortified to cope with uncertainties ahead and will gain some measure of inner peace and community perspective - both will inform our ways going forward.

First, let's remember - coping with **change** is hard for most people. Not being able to plan for next week or even next month is uniquely hard. When we are required to face the unknown, not be in control, it's normal for all of us, adults and children, to feel out of sync, hard to settle- psychological term is 'emotional dis-regulation'.

Here's what I have learned helps us and our families feel more calm, less irritable, as we learn incrementally how to **live with the change of feeling isolated and 'too together' all at once.**

- 1. Your children are actively paying attention to how you feel, talk and behave.**

Even very young children look to you first to know whether they should worry or not. They listen to your words, your tone, watch your actions, react to your moods. They eavesdrop on your communications with others and come to their own (often mistaken) conclusions.

That said, it's pretty safe to assume that this pandemic is unique to all our experiences. It's normal that as information is updated hourly, and recommendations change daily, adults may feel that our world is upside down and inside out- our anxiety is normal.

What CAN you do about it?

Talking with another caring adult about your feelings is helpful (out of the children's earshot); reminding yourself of other times in your life when you have felt anxious and uncertain about the future can be reassuring; creating a plan for your family just for today and tomorrow may be productive and doable- looking further down the road may not be possible and lead you to feel more out of control.

2. Create a routine for the day. Even a schedule, for example, when we will play together, and time to play independently. (Of course, this will depend on your child's age and capacity to play alone. A timer works well here). Time for family mealtimes, clean up, predictable bedtimes, nap times (for both kids and grown ups), some form of exercise, indoors or if possible, in your backyard. Other planned time for reading, screen time, family movie time, game time.

If children are old enough, and you have enough bandwidth, opportunities to help with meal preparation, clean up.

3. Limit your own access to media coverage.

Information, when delivered calmly and by a trustworthy source, typically helps us feel more in control. It's necessary to be informed so that we can keep up with the changes and required adjustments. That said, a steady diet of news, 24/7, creates its own layer of stress. Decide when and how often you will get your information from media sources. Choose from a host of other more soothing 'background electronic wallpapers' that may even entertain, inspire, educate. It is said that music 'calms the savage beast within' I have my music faves playing on Spotify as I write this.

4. Talk with your children about changes only as they affect your family's day-to-day living.

Children by nature are egocentric.; for instance, "How will this affect me?" Knowing the new rules of the road for this unique family experience is important. Simple explanations are best. Letting children ask questions as they arise, rather than prompting them, or assuming their feelings, is helpful. Try not to anticipate how their lives may be affected weeks or months from now. It's about today.

5. Development matters. How your child understands and reacts to new information from you will vary but their age and stage will help guide you to understand their reaction(s):

***Very young children, 3-6 years old,** require only the simplest of explanations about what's happening today as it

affects them... Remember that routines are reassuring to everyone, especially toddlers and preschoolers. “Mommy is working at home today,” is enough for many children.

***Early elementary age children** may have more questions and concerns about the pandemic than their younger siblings. Let them lead you with their questions; answer simply and clearly, always reminding them that **it’s your job to keep the family safe. Although the virus is unlikely to affect your family, you may make decisions to protect others in your community.** (great lesson)

Words like ‘contagious, social distancing, quarantines’, may be unfamiliar to them. It’s important to speak in a reassuring way that is clear and simple.; for example, “Staying home from school and work keeps the virus from spreading so we will be doing that. It just makes sense.”

Or, “I need to work from home and you have school work as well. Let’s talk about a plan for the rest of the day.”

***Late elementary/middle school children** may worry about their older and extended family members, or threatening financial situations. They may feel it’s ‘unfair’ if their friends are allowed to gather in small groups but you have said no. Remind them that *your rules* are for their health and the health of others who may be more impacted; *each family* makes their own decisions for their own family’s well being.

***Adolescents** are able to understand the unlikely but possible negative health and financial impact that the Corona virus may have on their family, their community, both local and national.

That said, cancelled school may sound terrific at first but it carries with it cancelled sport seasons, plays and concerts they have rehearsed for months, anticipated school vacation trips. Without school and after school activities, they may feel depressed and anxious, isolated from their friends and routines. We know that adolescents fantasize about their 'immortality'; be sure to concretize the risks of 'not physically distancing' and that they need to trust you to make the rules that will keep them safe from harm. Expect them to express their understandable disappointment, anger, confusion, worry, etc. (More) moodiness is pretty normal.

When you acknowledge their feelings and not attempt to minimize them, they may be able to sit with them, and even surprise you – by problem-solving ways to adapt? Isn't that what we want for our adolescents?

6. Consider the marathon, not the sprint

Drawing from my experience post-Katrina, Columbine, and 9/11, the first days and weeks of the crisis summon up enormous amounts of energy (albeit it anxious) in all of us. We listen and react to our leaders, both local and national, health care providers, educators and community helpers as they develop emergency plans, roll out procedures and problem-solve.

If history informs, I expect that very shortly, we will collectively feel as though we have hit a 'wall of exhaustion' as we sort out how to **sustain** difficult, if not, seemingly impossible changes in our families' lives, no matter how long

these changes last. We grieve our lives *before* and yearn for them.

Taking care for ourselves *now* seems prudent. Today. You know how.... practice healthy sleep hygiene, mindful breathing (five minutes a day is all it takes!), move our bodies, rest our minds, use technology to connect with others, discover ways to laugh, find meaning in sacrifice.

Maria Trozzi, M.Ed

Author, **Talking with Children About Loss**, Penguin-Putnam
Co-Founder, Good Grief Program at Boston Medical Center
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine
Program Director, Joanna's Place
Psychotherapist/Grief and Resilience Specialist