

18 Practical Tips For Parents To Support The Psychological Wellbeing Of Children During The COVID-19 Crisis

Manage Your Own Anxiety

Children observe parents' behaviours and emotions for cues on how to manage their own emotions during times of stress and crisis. Young children, in particular, look to their parents' behaviour to determine whether certain situations are threatening or not. Because they spend so much time watching parents and how they behave (it's how children learn), they are acutely aware of the subtle changes in behaviour that parents exhibit when they're anxious. As such, when parents are anxious about a certain situation, children will generally start to feel anxious about the situation as well. Therefore, in order to help children manage their anxiety about the COVID-19 crisis, parents need to first manage their own anxiety about it.

Validate Children's Worries

Children will have their own worries and concerns about the Corona Virus. Although their worries may seem trivial to us, to them they are just as concerning as our biggest worries. As adults, we have a tendency to respond to children's worries by saying to them, "Don't worry about that". However, children aren't able to control their worries and so telling them not to worry is unhelpful. It also dismisses their worries without addressing them and tells children that worrying is wrong. Instead, we need to acknowledge to children that their worries are valid (e.g., "That must feel scary"), normalise their worries (e.g., "I felt scared like that when...") and then help them process their worries (e.g., "Even though we might feel worried, these are all the reasons why we are actually very safe..."). By doing this, we teach children how to process their worries effectively. We also teach them that approaching parents with their worries can be supportive and beneficial.

Help Children Find Creative Ways To Express Difficult Emotions

Children express difficult emotions (e.g., fear, worry, sadness, etc.) in a variety of different ways (e.g., becoming withdrawn, lashing out, becoming argumentative, etc.). By encouraging children to express these emotions in creative ways, such as through drawing (e.g., "Can you draw a picture of some of things you are worried about") or writing stories (e.g., "Why don't you write a story about why someone might be worried about the Corona Virus"), we facilitate them to process these difficult emotions in more positive ways. Children feel relieved if they can express difficult emotions in ways in which they feel safe and secure, and will return to these strategies whenever they feel the same difficult emotions again.

Talk To Children About The Corona Virus Honestly And At A Level They Understand

Children are continually being bombarded with information about the Corona Virus from all kinds of sources, including social media, television and friends. This can be very frightening for children, as they may have difficulty understanding some of the information they are exposed to and overestimate the risks to themselves and their families. They may also be exposed to a lot of misinformation, particularly from peers, which can also lead them to overestimate the risks to themselves and their families. It's virtually impossible to shield children completely from information about the Corona Virus, so it's important that parents become a trusted source of accurate information for them. Parents should talk honestly to

children about the Corona Virus but at a level appropriate to their age and level of understanding. Take time to find out what they might have already heard from media and other children and correct any misconceptions they have. Also, check in with children frequently to address newly emerging fears and misconceptions.

Let Children Know That They Are Safe

Most of the news reports about the Corona Virus focus on the most negative outcomes (e.g., the number of deaths, the rate of increase in infections, graphic images of the sick and dying, etc.). This can greatly increase children's perception of everyone being in extreme danger and lead them to a general feeling of being unsafe. It is therefore important that children understand that they are safe. Explain to children that even if they do catch the Corona Virus, for them the experience won't be any different to that of having many of the normal illnesses they have had in the past and that children do not die or get very sick from the Corona Virus. It's also important to reassure children that they will receive appropriate medical care if they become unwell.

Limit Children's Exposure To Corona Virus Related Media And Discussion

At present, all news reports, social media updates and conversations are being dominated by discussions on the Corona Virus. Too much exposure to Corona Virus related media and discussion can increase worry and anxiety, as it increases the perceptions of imminent threat. Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of over-exposure to Corona Virus related media and discussion on their psychological wellbeing. Due to their still developing cognitive capacity, children are less able to make accurate judgements on levels of threat when presented with information on the potential negative outcomes of an event and are much more likely to catastrophise (i.e., view a situation as considerably worse than it actually is). As such, it is important that parents limit and closely monitor children's exposure to Corona Virus related media or discussion in order to reduce potential worry, fear and confusion. Parents should also ensure that children have significant periods of ring-fenced time where they are not exposed to any Corona Virus related media or discussion.

Use Practical Examples To Explain The Importance Of Washing Hands And Social Distancing

The underlying concepts that drive the need for regular hand washing and social distancing during the COVID-19 Crisis are somewhat abstract and can be difficult for children to understand. By using practical concrete examples, children are better able to understand why these practices are important and, as such, are much more likely to adhere to them. For example, to help explain the importance of hand washing, we can get children to dip their hand in glitter and then observe all the different places around the house that traces of glitter begin to appear until they wash the glitter off their hands. To help explain the importance of social distancing, we can spray a small amount of perfume on one member of the family and then get the children to see how far away from that family member they can still smell the perfume.

Give Children A Sense of Ownership Over Combatting The Corona Virus

The behaviour practices that everyone is encouraged to adhere to in order to reduce the spread of the Corona Virus (e.g., hand washing, social distancing, etc.) are disruptive to children's lives and adhering to them can cause children upset and frustration. However, when children believe that the practices they are being asked to adhere to have a direct

impact on solving the problem being addressed, they are much more likely to adhere to those practices and to get a sense of accomplishment from doing so. As such, it is really important to regularly highlight to children how the practices they are engaging in are keeping people out of hospital and, as such, are directly helping the doctors and the nurses in the fight against the Corona Virus.

Encourage Children To Help Others

In times of crisis, providing help and support to others gives us a sense of purpose and helps negate some of the negative effects of a crisis on our psychological wellbeing. Children also benefit psychologically from engaging in altruistic behaviour during a crisis, particularly when it's explained to them the positive impact that their behaviour will have on the other person's wellbeing. Children can be encouraged to help a younger sibling with a task they may be finding difficult or to do something special for a grandparent, like recording a special video message for them. We can also promote children's altruism by explaining to them that by them remaining homebound, they are keeping other people in the community, such as their grandparents, safe from the Corona Virus.

Maintain Children's Social Contacts Virtually

Social support is a natural psychological buffer against adversity and, as such, it's really important that children maintain social contact with friends and family throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Although social distancing obviously severely limits children's opportunities for real-world social contact, social media provides ample opportunity for virtual social contact. Parents should use social media to ensure that children maintain regular social contact with friends and extended family. This can involve contacting other parents to set up virtual play dates with their children's friends and using video calls (e.g., through Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, etc.) with multiple friends and family members at once, where virtual games can be played.

Remind Children That Being Homebound Is Temporary

Children can understandably start to feel frustrated at being homebound. Young children, in particular, have difficulty projecting themselves more than a few days into the future and so can start to believe that being homebound is something that is going to go on indefinitely. It is therefore important to explain to young children that being homebound is a temporary situation and that they will return to all the activities they previously enjoyed. To help children be more aware of this, parents should take time to plan with children all the different enjoyable activities that they will be re-engaging in, once social distancing precautions are relaxed.

Try And Keep A Predictable Structure And Routine To Your Children's Day

Children are more relaxed and calm when they have a predictable structure and routine to their day. However, with school and the usual extra-curricular activities no longer an option for most children, it can be difficult to maintain a regular structure and routine to children's days. Without a structure and routine to their day, children can become very dysregulated (i.e., have trouble managing their emotional responses to situations) and become easily upset. It is therefore important to try to ensure that you keep a predictable structure and routine to your child's day. If possible, plan out in advance with your child, what activities (e.g., school work, playtime, family activity, etc.) they will be doing at different times, and for

how long, each day. Also, try and ensure that your child continues to get up, go to bed and have their mealtimes at approximately the same times as they would on a normal day.

Maintain A Healthy Diet For Your Child

Deviating from children's normal healthy diets can have a negative impact on their mood and behaviour. Due to some of the social distancing practices that are being implemented during the current COVID-19 crisis, many families have stocked up on food. When this is combined with the reality of children spending more time being homebound, children may be more likely to overconsume food, particularly with regard to junk food. It's therefore important to try and maintain children's normal healthy diets, in terms of type of food, quantity of food and timing of meals.

Make Sure Children Get Exercise

Exercise and physical activity are vitally important for children's psychological, as well as physiological, wellbeing, as it helps them burn off excess energy, and when children are unable to engage in physical activity, they can start to become dysregulated (i.e., have trouble managing their emotional responses to situations). Most children get some physical activity on a daily basis just through their normal play and activities, both in school and out in the community. Although being homebound significantly reduces the physical activity options for children, it does not eliminate them completely. If it's not possible for children to get outside, look at creative ways that they can engage in indoor physical activities that get them moving. This can include engaging them in fun online children's exercise videos (e.g., Joe Wicks - The Body Coach TV) or even some video games that include physical activity (e.g., Just Dance, Wii Fit U, Xbox Fitness, Beat Saber, etc.).

Allow Children To Be Part Of The Decision-Making Process

The COVID-19 Crisis has resulted in significant change to children's day-to-day lives that they've had no choice in. Having sudden unexpected change like this imposed on children, can lead to feelings of helplessness, which in turn leads to an increase in anxiety and frustration. However, allowing children choice in certain aspects of the change that is being imposed on them, increases their sense of control and reduces feelings of helplessness, thus reducing the negative impact of the unexpected change on their psychological wellbeing. It is therefore important to allow children, where possible, to be part of the decision-making process in the change that is being imposed on them. For example, allow children to help plan out their schedule for the day, such as which activities they will do at different times.

Plan And Engage Children In Enjoyable Family Activities

Having to remain homebound can be a testing experience for everyone in the family and children can quickly become bored and frustrated with the situation. However, it's possible to turn being homebound into a positive experience for children by regularly engaging them in enjoyable family activities, such as playing family-centric board games or watching movies together. This also helps develop a sense of family cohesion during what can be a very stressful time for the family.

Try And Set Aside Time For Just You And Your Child

During times of high stress, it is normal for children to start to become more anxiously attached (i.e., clingier) to parents and to look for more attention from them, which can be very demanding

on parents, particularly during the current COVID-19 crisis. However, children thrive on parental attention and providing them with periods of ring-fenced one-to-one time during times of stress and crisis, greatly increases their psychological resiliency. Although most children will always look for more one-to-one with parents than parents are generally able to deliver, spending just fifteen minutes a day of one-to-one time with each child is enough to be beneficial to their psychological resiliency. During this one-to-one time, allow your child to choose the activity that you do together, let them direct completely how you will engage in that activity (i.e., allow them to change or make up the rules as you go along) and give them your undivided attention (e.g., no looking at phones, chatting with others, etc.).

Pay Attention To Your Own Self-Care

Take time to pay attention to your own self-care needs and make sure they are being met. You can only meet your children's psychological needs, if your own psychological needs are being met. This might involve taking time away from your children, identifying other adults you can discuss your own worries with and reaching out to friends and family for support.