

Module VI

Information Control for Children

Everyone is vulnerable to stress when they experience a problem, but a lot of stress is due to problems we don't have. We experience stress about the problems that we could have. We worry, over think, ruminate, discuss with others, and study all the information we need to deal with the problems we don't have, problems we might have at some point. That's one way to be as prepared as we can be.

During this unusually stressful period it's important that someone in the family is thinking about the difficulties they might encounter, the problems that will need solutions. However, with children out of school for an extended precautionary period due to the Coronavirus pandemic, and with everyone more confined as a family, great care should be taken to monitor and control the information that children receive.

When children are over exposed to problems that are beyond their ability to solve, they can develop increased anxiety. When children have to worry about things that are completely out of their control they can develop increased anxiety. When children have to think about things that they cannot possibly understand they can become overwhelmed by anxiety.

There are many resources that provide parents with guidance about how to talk with their children about Coronavirus, but not so many that guide parents about the related questions children will inevitably have, questions about the secondary problems that the pandemic creates, problems that the adults in the family are in a position to solve while children can only worry.

Many secondary problems that families face as a result of this pandemic involve ordinary tasks and functions that have become much more difficult, things that were not at all worrisome before the pandemic, things that children never had to concern themselves with because these things were so reliable and predictable. Here are some examples of ordinary functions that have raised concerns in families and created new worries that we want to ensure are not absorbed by children.

- Will the family run out of money?
- Is the family able to pay their bills and afford what they need?
- Will they lose the internet?
- Will the parents lose their jobs?
- Is there enough food in stores?
- Will the family be able to get enough needed supplies?
- Will the family be evicted if they can't pay the rent?
- If the car breaks down will there be a wait to get it fixed?

Try to hold conversation about adult topics away from children who could be listening. Avoid talking with children about topics that could worry them, topics about things that they are powerless to do anything about. The pandemic-related secondary problems are difficult enough for you without adding your children's anxiety on top of them.

Designate certain topics as "adult only" and talk about them when you are sure the children are occupied with activities of their own in another part of the house. This includes talking between adults in the home as well as talking on the phone or computer with adults in other locations.

Use a family gathering (e.g., during a family meal or morning planning meeting) to reassure children about any adult level problems they may have been over exposed to. Give them a chance to ask questions or share worries (what are they hearing that gives them concern, what are they thinking about or worried about regarding their own family). If they do not ask about any adult level problems they've overheard, there is no need to offer any explanations.

Observe your children's play. Often, what children cannot put into words will find its way into their play. Look for themes in their drawings and in their imaginary play. Comment on the play before asking questions ("I noticed the people in your play were breaking into the grocery store to get food"). Our questions lead children to respond to what interests us, whereas our comments lead them to tell us what interests them. Let the conversation reveal how much concern your child has before you ask questions or offer reassurance.

If children do ask about an "adult level" problem, reassure them (if you can) that it is absolutely not a problem for your family. However, if it is a realistic worry for the parents, it is best not to deny the problem, but present some form of "you don't have to worry about that, we're taking care of it," even if you are not sure what you will do or how you will do it.

Sometimes parental behavior signals to the child that there is a problem. For example, parents may put off making an expected major purchase because they are following a more cautious budget. This could signal to the children that the family is running out of money and it could validate something they overheard about money worries. Explain why some things have to be different, even when there is no problem, just to ensure that there won't be a problem. The cautious budget is a sign of good parent problem solving, not a sign of financial disaster, evidence for children that their parents are thinking ahead and know how to do sensible things in a crisis.

Limit exposure to news broadcasts. It's great to be informed, but it's also important to take breaks from information about catastrophe and disaster. Designate portions of the day as news free for the family, and If you are going to consume large quantities of news, use a computer during this time and do that in a location away from the children. Try to set up children's play areas away from where the TV is located.

As you watch or listen to the news, your children will be watching and listening to you. This is their way of determining the level of worry they should have about what is on the news. Their stress level is modulated by the stress level of the people who are taking care of them. Keep this in mind as you modulate your reactions to what you are taking in.

Module VII

Supportive Communication

Part 1

Words can trigger children and words can comfort children, they can create stress and they can reassure, they can confuse or escalate a situation and they can de-escalate a situation. Our words can show we understand just as our words can show we aren't listening. Take good care of your words and they will take good care of your children.

Identify a time when you are truly available to listen (not while you're watching TV or texting or otherwise preoccupied), instead of acting like you're listening while your attention is divided and instead of repeatedly dismissing the child who wants to talk.

"I really want to listen, but I have to do something on the computer. I will be done and I can give you my full attention in 20 minutes. I am writing the time down on the white board so you and I can both remember."

You could say it 100 times, that you don't have the time, because it's still not the right time, or you can designate the time once, put it in visual form and let your children use that (the visual) to adjust their own expectations instead of always pressing you to meet a need they have right in the moment. Long after your words have stopped echoing off the walls, long after your child has forgotten what you said, the visual keeps "talking" to them about when you are available.

Use visual communication as much as possible. Write down changes in the schedule. Write down when you will be able to do what the child asked about. Write down what is for supper, the activities to look forward to, the quiet time choices, the important routines. Children become more independent when communication is visual. They can answer some of their own questions, they can reassure themselves, and they can see that things are organized and thought out. In addition, children protest less and show increased levels of cooperation with visual communication.

"Look, let's check the schedule. See, right before lunch I have time to play that game with you. Anytime you want to do something, I'll tell you when that's possible, then you can just use the schedule to remind yourself if you forget."

Slow down and calm down. Too many words all at once, too many words spoken too quickly cannot be fully processed by children, thereby adding to their stress and leading to their misunderstanding instead of improving their comprehension. Use shorter sentences and leave space between the things you want to say, it will allow you to notice your child's comprehension. Match the pace of the communication to the comprehension of your child. Slow down and clarify or rephrase if you see confusion. Slow down and give time to process.

Take a deep breath first and speak in a calm voice (free from worry or panic). The sound of your voice can have a soothing/calming effect, even if what you have to say could be mildly upsetting.

Too many people shouting over each other and over the words coming from the TV and the noise from video games can sound chaotic and increase stress. In addition, it's difficult for children to understand what you're saying when their attention is divided and when noise interferes with hearing everything fully. In addition, you will be frustrated at having to repeat yourself.

Do not talk from too far away. Approach the child or have your children come to you before you start with what you want to tell them. Don't try to tell your children things while they are in the middle of play. Let them finish their play or ask them to take a break so you can talk with them.

Children's needs increase under stress because their insecurities increase. They need more from adults, more comfort, more immediate responses, more reassurance, more personal attention, more turns, more control. When stressed children become more demanding and more needy we want to increase our emphasis on what we are giving, even as we are setting a limit or putting a restriction on what they are demanding.

I'm going to give you some time to think that over
I'm going to give you a choice
I'm going to give you a chance
I'm going to give you some quiet time so you can relax
I'm going to give your request some thought
I'm going to give you a turn to pick the TV show
I'm going to give you time to make up your mind
I'm going to give you some space and some privacy so you can settle
I'm impressed, I give you a lot of credit for doing that

Remember, take good care of your words and they will take good care of your children.

Module VIII

Supportive Communication Part 2

Take good care of your words and they will take good care of your children. You might have a lot on your mind and you might be pretty stressed yourself with all the pressure and uncertainty the Coronavirus pandemic brings. Stress is highly contagious. We've all experienced elevated stress levels just by being in the presence of a stressed person. We can lower our children's stress by lowering or disguising our own stress. It's not easy, but it's worth the effort. It is much easier, however, to let that stress land on the person who is asking you for something more than you can give at the moment. Here's an example of what might seem like a very natural thing to say, but exchanges like this will only increase everyone's stress.

"Can we play a game now?"

"No, I already told you I can't play with you. Can't you see what I'm doing right now?"

"You should know better. Even your little brother can tell it's not the time to bother me about playing, so don't keep asking or else I'm never going to play that game with you."

We want to keep our stress from turning into verbal threats and ultimatums, and we want to be careful to avoid belittling and shaming when we are frustrated. Also, try to reduce the overuse of the word "no".

Shaming (Can't you see how busy I am, you should know better?)

Belittling (Even your little brother can tell it's not the time to bother me)

Threat (or else I'm never going to play that game with you)

"No" (No, I already told you I can't play. . .don't keep asking).

Instead, refer to the routine and the schedule, which is a response in the form of a yes.

"Let's check the schedule. Right now, it's independent play and work time and the routine is that we all do something on our own during "independent time". So, I'm going to have you follow the routine for independent time and yes, I can play with you, but it will be right after lunch."

Sometimes you can say yes in the form of a contingency when you feel like saying "no" because your child has not done what you have asked.

"Sure, we can play. First clean up your room, then we'll play. Let me know when you're ready."

You can use your words to build character as you reinforce your children for their efforts. First provide the evidence (state what specifically impressed you), then make a statement about character (a statement that says, "you are. . ."). It's even more meaningful to occasionally put this type of message into a note.

"You did a great job cleaning up the family room. Everything is put back neatly and in a way that's really easy to find. You are a great organizer."

Sometimes children can upset themselves with their own words, and in this way their words can become self-destructive.

"This is going to go on forever, everyone's going to get sick and I'll never see my friends again."

Children's words reflect their thoughts and emotions, but they can also exacerbate their emotions, thereby creating even more distressing thoughts, and this can change their perception of reality. You might feel like arguing the facts with them ("It's not going to go on forever and you will see your friends again"), but it is better to give them healthier ways of expressing what is on their mind.

What is your child really trying to say? When we provide the child with a healthier version of what they want to say we are giving them a phrase that they can use to soothe themselves the next time the feeling leads to an irrational and distressing thought.

"This is going to go on forever, everyone's going to get sick and I'll never see my friends again"

"I get it, you really miss spending time with your friends and it's so tough to go without the things you're used to, especially when you don't know how long these changes are going to go on. Everyone feels the same way. Let's figure out how we can make the best of it."

This reframing of the child's original statement validates what they had to say, instead of refuting it, offers empathy, and provides better words that more accurately reflect how the child probably feels, words that don't distort reality or sound panicked, and words that don't escalate emotions.

Remember, take good care of your words and they will take good care of your children (and help your children take good care of their own words).