

March 2020

## How to respond to the Coronavirus when it impacts your family You CAN make a difference

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Now that the Coronavirus news is everywhere and families face the real possibility of 'self-isolation' how can we all best respond to support children and young people's well-being and long-term mental health? Let's go back to the basics and use the five principles based on sound research that support intervention and prevention in times of disasters and crisis.

Although these principles were first proposed in 2007 (Hobfoll, et al.) they have been taken up worldwide and used to guide individuals and services in planning and recovery. Sure, you can add to them if you wish – such as religious and spiritual practices but if you cover all of these as the basics you will be giving your families the best chance to come out of this positively.

Write them down and pin them on the fridge! What you are seeking to do is to promote:

- A sense of safety
- Calming
- Self and Community efficacy
- Social Connectedness
- Hope

### *A sense of safety*

Kids need their home comforts and security. A routine and structure are important – plan a timetable<sup>1</sup> for week days just like school and stick to meal and bed times. Predictability helps us feel safer and in control. Filter the news for your children and limit exposure to the media – news can be frightening and spark catastrophising or harmful imagining. Answer questions honestly and encourage talking (maybe whilst doing something familiar such as Lego or cooking). Say when you don't know the answers, telling them that scientists are working on it and you will keep them up to date. Tell them about what everyone is doing to stay safe and reduce confusion.

### *Calming*

Manage your own anxiety so that you can be calm with your kids. Set the emotional atmosphere and don't talk about the virus in a frantic way when the kids can overhear. Listen with understanding to their worries and 'normalise' their thoughts and feelings. Provide reassurance and develop some family positive statements together "we just have to stick it out", "we will cope". Encourage them to write about or draw their feelings. Build in relaxation and self-care to the timetable. Use music,

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<sup>1</sup> Balance the timetable with learning, creative and physical activities. If you have no guidance let the child choose a topic and then build a big project around it. Do activities that will take more than one session and provide appropriate challenge. Do something physical every day – let them teach you PE and devise circuits (YouTube has exercise videos for kids).

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stories and mindfulness activities<sup>2</sup> to ensure that they know they can do something to help calm themselves.

### *Self and Community efficacy*

It really helps when we feel some control over what is happening to us. That can be hard if we are 'directed' to do something. But we do have control over how we will manage the situation. Help children to plan the day, to communicate to others about coping strategies and to provide support to someone else if possible. Empower them by teaching them things that they can do such as washing their hands with the Birthday song. Tackle problems together.

### *Social Connectedness*

We may have to isolate but we can still stay connected to others. In the family organise group activities and games. Encourage connections with friends, joint projects and even writing letters to old friends or family. Schools should organise some way of staying connected and enabling teacher's to still give feedback. Older young people will have online communities so talk about these to check that they are helpful – they will be desperate to stay in touch with their peer group.

### *Hope*

Staying positive and promoting hope is vital. It is natural to imagine the worst but you can counteract this. Remind them of services that are helping and working on a vaccine. Share good news stories and talk about how people are helping each other. Make plans for the future and look back over good times. Choose books and films with inspiring stories of hope. Have fun and laugh. However hard it seems; try to find the benefits of the situation you are in and emphasise the community efforts to overcome the issues.

In the case of bereavement [Child Bereavement UK](#) has excellent guidance and advice for families.

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<sup>2</sup> 50 Ways to feel Happy by Vanessa King has ideas