

Talking to Children During A Pandemic: Empathy, Connection and Tolerating Uncertainty Teaches Resilience
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Its 2 a.m.

“Mommy, I can’t sleep.”

My child wakes up in the middle of the night having “bad dreams.” First night: we cuddle. Second night: we try to figure out how to make their room more comfortable. Third night: I’m exhausted. Pure exhaustion. I’m caring for another human being while also trying to keep up with the fast-changing news, trying to cook for the zillionth time, homeschooling and trying to keep up with all my other obligations. Sound familiar?

If you have kids, you are not alone trying to discern what’s best for the children in the long term and trying to anticipate how what we do now will leave deep marks in them or not.

A psychologist that worked with children in the aftermath of 9/11 told me, “[Just] because a child is going thru a traumatic experience, does *not* mean they will be traumatized.”

There are things we can do as parents alongside our community to help children. Our love, protection and guidance can help them process their emotions so they can discover healthy coping mechanisms that work for them. And who knows, in the process of calming your children you might discover that you are calming yourself too.

Why do I need to talk to my child about the virus?

Children, older children especially, are already hearing information from their peers, their teachers, social media, you name it. Younger children are perceptive, and they are sensing our non-verbal communication of uncertainty. You don’t have to have all the answers, just the willingness to listen with undivided attention. Listen to their feelings and worries.

How can we ensure that we are listening to our children effectively?

Prepare to listen by making sure you are in a safe place where the child feels relaxed. Make sure your child has eaten, that their basic needs are met, and they are able to talk. Carve out time for an uninterrupted conversation. If you have more than one child, it is preferable to do this one-on-one.

Ha! I realize all this is easier said than done. Our school teacher suggested the **3-9 method**: 3 minutes, 3 times a day. That seems more doable right?!

Try 3 minutes, 3 times a day

Here is the key: 3 minutes of undivided, child-directed, non-judgmental conversation to gather information and reassure the child. The sole goal is to empathize and connect.

If the child says, "I'm worried," "I'm scared," or shares any feeling, the first response should be "Tell me more," "What's bothering you?" "Why do you think you feel that way?" Sometimes the sheer act of listening and saying, "I can see why you feel that way," or "I feel the same way" can be powerful. It can help your child calm down and move forward to think of solutions.

If the child is very young, they tend to be concrete, ask them "When you feel X, where in your body do you feel it?" "Is your tummy rumbling?" "Is your heart beating faster?" "Let's work together to make you feel better," "Would a hug make you feel better?"

Resources for children of all ages

Sometimes we worry that talking about the virus will cause anxiety in children and teens. Research shows that to be the opposite. Rather, when we communicate with our children and teach them how to tolerate uncertainty, they are less anxious.

Janet Lansbury, author and parenting adviser has a podcast called *Unruffled*. During one episode, she gives advice for "[Parenting in Anxious Times.](#)" One practical activity she shares is using puppets and a toy ball to talk about the virus. At the beginning of the exercise, the puppets are close to each other passing the ball back and forth. At this point, it's easy for the puppets to pass the ball, but then they get farther and farther away from one another. When you throw the ball from one side of a room to the other, it is harder to catch. That's when you explain to your child "The virus is like the ball, when we are close it is easier for people to catch it, but as we get farther apart it is harder to catch the virus. This is why we are keeping distance."

Children tend to be more concrete than adults, so the image of catching a virus is helpful to them. Also, be prepared to repeat, and repeat, and repeat the information. Repetition is one of the ways a young brain is processing and learning. For older children, as they encounter new information, they repeat their questions to try to understand how the new information fits into their reality or what they've been told before. Essentially, be sure to prepare several ways to explain the same information.

For older children and teens, the [Child Mind Institute](#) has gathered resources to help parents think through the conversations and challenges of complying with health guidelines, dealing with disappointments and encouraging healthy habits.

Another tool available is the free [Covid-19 Time Capsule](#). This is a great tool to guide conversations with children when we don't know where to start. For myself, I divided this practice into multiple days of activities, so it did not feel so daunting. After about a week of activities, one of my kids told me "Mommy, taking pictures takes my mind off the grrr," that was his sweet way of saying "I found something that helps me relax!"

Children need *your* help making sense of all this information, to help put the information into context and for them to understand what the information means to your family. So, let us listen, connect, and tolerate uncertainty together.

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) shares this insight when it comes to supporting your family through traumatic events like what we are experiencing currently. "When families carry out routines, rituals, and traditions, they strengthen their connections and grow stronger together. Talking, laughing, sharing memories and feelings, as well as working together to solve problems, manage stress, and plan for each day and the future are necessary for resilience and recovery from traumatic stress."

Additional Resources

Unruffled Podcast by Janet Lansbury

[Episode: Parenting in Anxious Times](#)

[Supporting Teenagers and Young Adults During the Coronavirus Crisis](#)

[2020 COVID-19 Time Capsule](#)

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)

About Razia Spratt

Razia Spratt is a mother of two adorable twins and the co-chair for Wild Women of the West, a space to retreat, connect and grow spiritually with other women in the western U.S. She is certified with Children's Disaster Services to use play as a healing way to respond to traumatic events. A heart of service has led her to wear many hats; from vice-president of the Oregon Disciples Foundation to being the Health & Safety Coordinator at Cedar Hills Kinder and pre-school co-op school during a pandemic. Her current hat allows her to help guide people towards a future of hope, which she believes is possible with God as our refuge and strength.

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