

Aristotle-EI Musings: Volume 27

Helping Your Child Cope During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has unfolded across the world and we have seen changes to many aspects of our lives, this week's musing will highlight how you can help support your child to manage during this challenging time with tips to help with adjusting to the changes your child is likely experiencing.

Tips for talking to your child about COVID-19

Have age appropriate conversations with your child

Your child is likely being exposed to a lot of information about COVID-19 and may be feeling confused. Listen to your child's concerns and help your child make sense of it all by having honest age appropriate conversations with them. In your discussions with your child stay positive and remain hopeful so as not to overwhelm them.

Validate your child's feelings

It is normal for children to experience a range of emotions some of which may include worry, fear uncertainty and sadness. Every emotion including helpful and unhelpful emotions have a purpose. Give your child an opportunity to express their feelings and ensure they feel heard (e.g. I can see that you are feeling very sad right now because you haven't seen your grandparents for while). Reassuring your child can also be extremely useful in alleviating some of the big emotions they are experiencing. Introducing and teaching your child to use different coping strategies can also be useful for them to draw on when needed.

Tips for helping your child

Stay connected

We are social beings and social connection is extremely important for adults and children alike. While children may be limited in their contact with peers and family due to social isolation and social distancing, think of creative ways that existing relationships can continue to be nurtured during this time. This will assist in maintaining relationships, stability and a sense of normality in your daily life.

Maintain a routine

With recent changes including self-isolation, social distancing and school closures, children are likely experiencing significant changes to their usual routine. Maintaining a level of structure and routine is useful for children as it predictable and creates a sense of stability and normality that can help reduce stress and anxiety related to recent events. Things to consider may include meal times, bedtime routine, online learning schedules, play and regular physical activity. Scheduling in time for some fun, mood-boosting activities is also a good idea.

Have Fun

When children and teens engage in exercise and enjoyable activities such as going for a walk, playing sport and playing with a pet there is an increase in "feel good" hormones that promote positive feelings and happiness and act as a natural energy booster. While there may be some limitations in what your child can do, get creative and do your best to incorporate fun activities into your child's



day. Use this as an opportunity to spend quality time together, go for a walk, sing, play a game / sport, create something, cook together, watch a movie or do other activities related to their interests.

Check in with yourself

This time of uncertainty can take its toll on adults. It is important to check in with yourself and notice your own emotions. It is normal to experience feelings of worry in response to a stressful event. We all deal with stress differently and you may want to think about what strategies work best for you during stressful situations. Use your social supports and continue engaging in hobbies where possible. Remember, you are a powerful role model for your child and how you talk about and manage your own emotions can be a good learning opportunity for your child.

Behaviours

You may notice behavioural changes in your child because of the uncertainty and changes they are experiencing in their routine and environment. You can play an important part in helping your child to identify their emotions, notice their triggers and introducing them to a range of coping strategies to manage these emotions. Knowing your child's triggers can be very useful in anticipating situations that may contribute to a meltdown or outburst. Help your child implement strategies that they may find useful to deal with big emotions such as anger, sadness, excitement and anxiety/worry. One of these strategies may include engaging in mindfulness. The Smiling Mind App can be a useful place to start as it has various tools suitable to different age groups. Other useful strategies may include talking to someone and helping your child change the way they think about a situation as this can have a powerful influence on how they feel about it. If you are concerned about changes in your child's behaviour or

unusual behaviour that is out of character contact your GP. At Aristotle EI we support schools to develop student's emotional intelligence. Emotional Intelligence involves a series of abilities relating to the way in which we identify, use and regulate emotions and the development of these skills begins in the early childhood, continuing through to adulthood. These skills have been shown to be vital for success in many areas of life including positive relationships, wellbeing, resilience, academic and occupational success. Included are a range of activities from our suite of Aristotle EI development programs that might help your child.

Things you can try with your child at home:

Calm Breathing: Calm breathing is a technique that your child can do to calm their body when they are feeling stressed, anxious or emotionally overwhelmed. Calm breathing activates areas of the brain which send out stress inhibiting neurohormones to trigger a relaxation response in the body. Chest breathing (shallow, irregular and rapid breathing) often occurs when experiencing feelings of anxiety. Engaging in deep, slow breathing can help to reduce these feelings. Calm breathing involves doing the following (Repeat 3 times):

One deep breath in from the belly for a count of two.

Slowly let the air out through the mouth for a count of four

Visualisation: Thinking of a happy thought can help calm the body and make it easier to feel more positive emotions. Our brain thinks in pictures. When we visualise something, parts of our brain can respond as if we were experiencing it in reality:

Step 1: Close your eyes

Step 2: Picture a place that is happy or calming for you (e.g. the beach, playing with a pet)

Step 3: Think about your happy place and imagine what you would be picking up with



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your senses in that place (e.g. hearing waves, smelling the salty air). As a fun activity, you might like to spend time together drawing pictures that make you feel happy. It could be a place, people or even something imaginary.

Challenge unhelpful thoughts: How we think about a situation is a powerful way to impact how we feel about it. You can help your child to manage their emotions (including worries) by helping them to assess how they think about events. Help your child challenge their unhelpful thoughts about a situation and replace them with a more realistic and helpful thought which will lead to changes in how they feel.

Connecting with Others: Feeling connected to the world around us and accepted by important people in our life is important as it helps us to feel safe, valued and needed and part of a community. Your child can consider who is in their network (e.g. family, sporting groups, school, friendship groups, church groups etc.) and continue to increase their sense of belonging and connection to people within these groups by maintaining regular contact (using phone and video calls) during periods of social distancing.

Self-care: Sleep, diet and exercise can all impact on you and your child's emotional wellbeing. Nourishing your brain and your body will better help you manage stress and stay positive during difficult times. Help your child develop healthy sleep habits by

creating a relaxing bedtime routine, eliminating electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bed and introducing relaxation exercises or mindfulness. Consuming a well-balanced diet that is low in saturated fats and refined sugars and high in unsaturated fats can promote mental health and healthy mood regulation. Regular exercise, especially a fun activity that everyone can do together, increases feel good chemicals, helps combat stress and is a natural energy booster.

Have Fun: Make time for laughter and to be silly with your child. Simple things like telling silly jokes, playing a silly game, singing and dancing or watching a funny movie together can all help to lighten the mood at home and increase your family connection.

Coping with emotions: It is important that children and teens have access to various strategies to help them self-regulate during heightened emotional states. Different strategies will work best for different people, situations and emotions your child is experiencing. Encourage your child to try a range of things so they can identify what works best for them. Some ideas include: Proactive activities such a project to make extended time at home more relaxing or fun, listening to music, keeping a journal, vent/talk to someone, helpful self-talk, play with a pet, call a friend, do something nice for someone else and focusing on positive things in life.

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit. – Aristotle

