

Ideas for Supporting Mental Health and Faith Formation in Children, a Guide for Parents

As the world and this country struggle to cope with the upsetting and tragic news of the Corona virus, it seems appropriate to discuss the ways our children process these events, so we can support them.

As a Clinical Nurse Specialist I have worked in mental health with children and families for nearly 40 years, supporting and healing children through all kinds of stress and trauma. In addition, I have been involved in church life in the United Church of Christ for 18 years, taught Sunday School, aided special needs children deal with Sunday school. After Hurricane Katrina, I worked in New Orleans with displaced and frightened preschoolers on two occasions, using puppet shows to help them express their concerns. Later I wrote a book about this called *After the Storm*, illustrated by a friend from the UCC, Alexandra Parker. And I am a mother too. With this experience, I offer some guidelines to support children through these times.

Toddlers--

Children ages 2 to 4 think concretely about events in their lives. Their comfort in hard times is felt mainly through their caretakers. The current crisis will affect them through 1) changes in their day to day life, 2) anxieties shown by their families. A toddler's sense of God's love, as best we know, is experienced by the show of love by their parents, and other close persons. Parents can show their faith by noting how God is with us through good times and bad. Remember, our God does not cause pandemics, but stays with us as we struggle, affirming love and goodness, especially in the kind deeds and service provided by so many.

Try to maintain structure and routines for the toddler. Keep some patterns the same. Limit the amount of TV news they overhear, as they can't make sense of it and may pick up on the alarm shown on the programs. Give simple explanations about changes they experience. For example, "There is an illness we are fighting. It's called the Corona Virus, a tiny tiny germ that gets in our bodies. Because the virus is spread from one person to another, we are staying home and away from people for a while, so less people catch it. If a person gets the virus, they feel sick, like having a cold or the flu. Doctors know how to help the sick people. Many of our leaders are telling people what to do to keep healthy. That's why we are washing our hands more, using tissues to cover sneezes or coughs, and staying indoors more. Mom and Dad are following the advice given by doctors and other leaders. We will help keep our family safe and healthy." Perhaps adding, "we pray for strength and courage and patience".

For five to eight-year-old children--

These kids are beginning to understand the bigger picture, develop more abstract concepts. Each child is different in the capacity to understand facts and meanings. As their parent, you know the child the best. Try to gear your discussion to your child's level.

Again, patterns and structure are calming for these kids. It is a way of showing caring for them. Many families set up times for meals, study time, discussion time, reading time, play time, similar to patterns when they are in school. This reduces the anxiety caused by lack of routines (even though the kids may resist doing as you ask, routine helps). Time to run around outside is very helpful but may be difficult for urban families where safe distancing is not possible. Even running around the building or house

outside together will provide some movement. Play chase or tag. Indoor exercise and games can help. Doing a simple exercise routine, trying to find hidden objects around the house, dancing, hide and seek are all ways to keep kids moving.

When discussing recent events with these youngsters, direct your comments to meet your children's understanding. It is most important to invite your kids to talk, and then actively listen. Their worries may be different from yours. Kids don't always want answers, but they need someone to pay attention to them and listen. These children need to know what's going on, because their imaginations can be worse than the facts. Again, limit media watching about the virus. Eight-year olds may feel sad because they can't be with their friends. Single children in a family may have a harder time. Here is an example of how to talk to these kids. "Things have changed in our lives. What do you notice? We are all fighting the Corona virus. This is a germ that gets in our bodies and makes us feel sick, kind of like a cold or the flu. But this virus is much more contagious (catching) and spreads fast through touching surfaces where the virus is sitting or breathing in the germs. That's why we are all staying away from each other, to stop the spread of the virus. Certain cleaners, especially those with bleach, kill the virus, so people are cleaning houses, counters, tabletops, doorknobs so frequently. [Washing our hands](#) well also kills the virus, so we are all doing that. And most people are staying home, not going to stores or restaurants. If you see people wearing masks, it's because the mask can keep their germs away from others, just in case the people have the virus". The older kids in this group may have more questions. Ask them what they think. Correct misconceptions.

Tell kids this age that the virus will pass in time, and things will be more like normal. Also say that most people recover from the virus, but those who get sicker go to the hospital where doctors and nurses care for them. If your child brings up more about being in the hospital or dying, answer them honestly but simply; if they don't ask, don't bring it up. Kids have a way of asking questions they can handle.

It empowers kids to know what people are doing about this virus. Older kids could help clean doorknobs, surfaces. Children can check on their friends and neighbors with adult supervision, to see if they need anything, keeping at a safe distance. Kids can keep in touch with family members by phone or using SKYPE. It means a lot to let people know you are thinking of them.

For spiritual guidance, remind children that though this virus is new to us, there have been epidemics in the past, and people got through them. Remind children that God didn't bring this illness about but will comfort us and give us strength as we do our best to fight it. Children's Bible stories about God being with people during storms or rough times may help. Remind children that difficult times like this are not a punishment for wrongdoing, they just happen.

For older school age children--

These youngsters may be able to handle more detailed explanations. As a supplement to parents' information, the internet has some excellent programs for you to discuss with your child but watch them first yourself. Again you know your children best and can choose what suits them. For these older kids, participating in projects to help fight the virus may help them feel less helpless. See what your community is doing. Outdoor activities are great, so long as there is social distancing. Some communities are having things like "drive in your car scavenger hunts" in which individual cars drive to one place, then find a clue and drive to another, etc. It is an activity to do with the community, but

separately.

Remember, no one has all the answers. It is okay to not know. Growing faith here is about sitting with the unknown and sharing love for one another. Invite your kids to use humor to cope. Maybe write jokes together or think about how you will talk of this ten year from now. To avoid getting too focused on the trouble, your kids might like to talk of best memories from the past, and good things to look forward to in the future.

For our teenagers--

This is the age when the young are sorting out their identities, figuring out what kind of people to be, and what to do as they grow up. Emotions are rawer and can be overwhelming, especially in a crisis. These youngsters **need** to be in contact with peers. Find a way for them to reach friends, while keeping at a safe distance. Technology can be a big help here. Some teens withdraw a bit from parents as they try to sort things out on their own, but even so, they need the support of family. Take the time to ask how they are doing and what their concerns are. Help them find activities to keep them from worrying. Many of the items mentioned above apply here as well. These teens may have a lot more questions about what having faith means. It is common for them to question the existence of God or to search for new meanings. Support them in their searching, don't expect them to find the same answers adults did. Talk to a spiritual leader for youth about helpful references for teens.

This Corona virus presents challenges for us all. Children and families may have special concerns. Worried kids are more likely to fight, insult each other, vie for attention. Parents can use this crisis to teach patience, tolerance, and caring. Older children should not talk too much to younger ones about the news. It is better if they talk to adults or parents. Older children can help amuse younger ones or help out a little more. Be sure they get plenty of praise or extra privileges because of this, so they don't feel "overused".

As we all muddle through this time, and wonder how it will turn out, let us remember the love of God, support and encourage all people, young and old, and keep our hope growing.

These are helpful sites online for help with children on understanding the Corona virus:

[Coping Skills for Kids from a Child Therapist](#)

[Coronavirus and Parenting: What You Need to Know Now](#)

Peace and blessings to you all,

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