



## **COPING WITH COVID-19: GUIDELINES FOR FIRST RESPONDER FAMILIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN**

As the impact of COVID-19 grows, your children may have some information and many questions. During this time of social distancing, school closures, changes in work arrangements, and emphasis on hygiene, it is important that we help our children understand and manage as best they can.

### **1. Communicate with your children**

Communicating with your children about COVID-19 may feel challenging. The following tips may help facilitate the conversation between parents and children.

#### **a) Check your anxiety**

Children are perceptive. When children observe caregivers feeling unsafe, they can take on caregivers' stress. Process your own feelings about how the virus is impacting you in advance of conversations with your children. This may mean talking to your partner, a friend or a therapist before engaging in that conversation with your child. Draw upon coping skills you used in the past and teach adaptive coping to your children.

#### **b) Validate children's feelings**

Validate children's fears - do not dismiss them. Provide reassurance, validate feelings, and establish a sense of safety but do not mislead. Express your understanding of their fear, confusion, or stress and address their feelings as best you can with the knowledge you have. Invite them to share feelings with you verbally and also through journaling. Remember that this will be a continuous process.

#### **c) Developmentally appropriate conversations**

Conversations should be geared to the age and developmental level of each child. Media exposure should be limited and also age and developmentally appropriate. Refrain from inundating younger children with excess information or information that is difficult to comprehend. Provide all children, especially older children, with an opportunity to be heard and have questions addressed. If you don't know the answer to a question posed by your child, be honest and help them find the information.

### **2. Focus on what we can do**

Focus on teaching children what we can do rather than what is beyond our control. Teach good hygiene and social distancing. Explain their importance, practice these principles with your child so that they become automatic, and model these behaviours for your children - they're always watching.

Wash hands for a minimum of 20 seconds (or sing Happy Birthday twice), keep hands away from faces, and cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm or a tissue. Maintain appropriate distance from others and ensure that children when greeting others refrain from embraces and high fives. Get creative, such as stamping each child's hand with ink and challenging them to wash it off by days end.

### 3. Clarify the importance of precautions

Ensure children understand the importance of the precautions for their health. The delivery should be informational and rational without magnifying fear. Some children may benefit from understanding the precautions and safeguards undertaken in the workplace to protect their first responder parent(s).

### 4. Model behaviour and coping

Monitor your thoughts, mood, and outlook for the wellbeing of yourself and your children. Be watchful of negative thinking and catastrophizing. Ensure that you are reasonable and coping adaptively.

Monitor your behaviour and ensure it adheres to values of integrity and community. This is an opportunity to teach and instil strong values for your children. Uphold community precautions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, refrain from resource hoarding, and be conscientious of others. Show value and appreciation for the contributions of frontline responders.

### 5. Incorporate routine

Structure, routine, and predictability help to alleviate children's anxieties. As with school, establish a schedule that incorporates your children's interests and comprehensively addresses their needs. Ensure this is a collaborative process so that everyone feels invested in the schedule.

### 6. Provide enrichment

Incorporate within your routine, continued opportunities for growth and development. It is important that children continue to expand their horizons throughout the pandemic, which can also help to reduce behavioural issues that have the potential to arise due to boredom and lack of stimulation.

Several web-based resources offer free, helpful educational content. Many school boards are providing curriculum access online. Additional sources include the websites such as [edhelper.com](http://edhelper.com) and [scholarschoice.ca](http://scholarschoice.ca) under teacher resources. Several attractions are offering live webcam footage such as the San Diego Zoo and Ripley's Aquarium, and many sources offering online tutorials, such as ArtShine, Cosmic Yoga, and cooking lessons.

### 7. Fulfilling time together

Spending quality time together with your children will provide a sense of safety and belonging that all children need - even more so in times of crisis. It is important that children experience a sense of cohesion and enjoyment within their family unit.

There are several options that can be reasonably achieved throughout the pandemic. Outdoor activities should be commonplace and might include activities such as gardening, gathering leaves, observing nature and wildlife, as well as family walks, hikes, and bicycle rides.

Several indoor activities can also be incorporated into your daily routine, such as online family yoga, spring cleaning, starting an indoor seed garden, board games, and fostering friendships through FaceTime, Skype, and video conferencing.

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