

Ways to Relieve Stress and Anxiety for Children

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We are living in challenging times; the global pandemic has had a significant impact on all of us and on all aspects of life. Day-to-day routines that we once took for granted have now been disrupted and we have had to adapt to a “new normal”. This change came very suddenly, creating a shift that happened overnight. As challenging as this is for adults, consider the impact this is having on our children. We all have routines and patterns that we follow most days, and when those routines are disrupted we have to make adjustments. As adults, most of us can do this with minimal stress because we have had prior experience with disruptions to our routines. For children, however, this is not the case.

The Importance of Routines

For children, a routine gives them a way to order and organize their lives (Education.com, 2013). Children like to know “what is coming next;” it lets them know what the immediate future looks like and helps reduce stress and anxiety. There is comfort and security in knowing. Without a clearly-established routine children can become confused and agitated, which can also contribute to misbehavior. The importance of clear and consistent routines cannot be overstated.

Essential Components of a Daily/Weekly Routine

Components of a daily/weekly routine should include the following:

- Scheduled breaks
- Time for moment and physical activity
- Unstructured time
- Time for connecting with significant others

With countless millions of children now learning virtually from home, students are spending significant time on screen. Ensuring frequent scheduled breaks is critically important. The frequency of the breaks will vary depending on the age of the child, but a reasonable rule of thumb is a 15-minute break for every 30 minutes of screen time. Research from *Scientific American* (2013) recommends 15 to 20 minute breaks as the ideal length for every 30-50 minutes of screen time. Again this will vary depending on the age of the person. When frequent breaks are added in, concentration goes up and individuals are more able to engage in the task at hand.

Being physically active also has countless proven health benefits (Better Health, 2020). This is not new information. In a situation where children are confined to their homes for extended periods of time and have increased hours of screen time, the importance of regular movement is paramount. Although the type of physical activity will vary by the space and equipment available, the important thing is that the physical activity should be something the child enjoys doing. The goal is to make this time something that they look forward to. The engagement in physical activity and movement will go up if the parent is engaging in the activity too.

The importance and value added of free play (unstructured time) is well documented (Habyts, 2018). Unstructured time contributes to developing a child’s imagination and creativity without adult input. Under the current conditions it can be done alone or with a sibling who lives in the home. A couple of key criteria include the following:

- there is no specific outcome
- there is no instruction, adult intervention or direction

Unstructured time should occur at multiple times during the day and throughout the week. There may be an impulse for adults to intervene if the child doesn't immediately engage in an activity. Be patient. Give them time and they will discover an activity and come up with a plan of their own.

Children have many important people in their lives. Some of these people live in the home and some are outside of the home. In times like these, it is even more important for children to have a strong support system and be able to connect with people who are important in their lives. Connecting virtually to grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins, other relatives and friends can help children stay positive and reduce their stress and anxiety. It does *take a village to raise a child* and having a network of supportive, friendly faces will benefit the child's overall wellbeing.

Parents as Role Models

Everyone needs role models and mentors regardless of their age. This is even more essential during the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. For children, parents serve as important role models. A parent's behavior, actions and attitudes will have a significant influence on how children perceive themselves and the world around them. With the current disruption of many aspects of life, it is important for parents to do the following:

- Model behavior you want the child to practice. Children are constantly watching and listening to everything we do and say. Being aware of our actions and behaviors will send clear messages to them.
- Reassure children that they are safe. Information shared and conversations that one has with a child about the pandemic will vary depending on the age of the child, but it is important to demonstrate to them that as a family, precautions are being taken to protect everyone's health and safety.
- Listen to your child. Children always have a lot going on in their minds and have many questions. Being patient and creating opportunities for them to ask questions and share their thoughts will give them a release and help reduce their stress and anxiety.

Stress and anxiety are part of life, but if not managed, they can become debilitating and have countless negative mental, emotional and physical side effects. Under the unique circumstances that the world faces now, it is important to be aware of the additional stress and anxiety that our children are under. Hopefully these ideas and suggestions can help mitigate or at least help minimize the potential increased levels of stress and anxiety our child face.

References

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