

# HELPING CHILDREN WITH BIG FEELINGS DURING COVID-19



Young children often cannot tell us about their worries in words. Instead, you might see changes in their behavior, such as:

- Increased fussiness, crying, whining or temper tantrums
- Increased clinginess
- An increase in self-soothing behaviors such as thumb sucking, rocking or needing their pacifier
- Increased hitting, biting, spitting or scratching
- Increased acting up
- Becoming quiet or withdrawn
- Changes in eating, toileting or sleeping patterns, such as trouble falling or staying asleep

All of these behaviors may help you know that your child is feeling stressed. They will need more patience and guidance in managing their feelings, which can be so hard to offer when you are worried yourself. You may be surprised by their new reactions and it is normal to be concerned when you see changes in their behavior. However, their changes are likely to be short term if we help them through all the changes they are experiencing (and one of the changes may be that they notice you seem different than usual).

On the back, you can find some ways you can help them manage until life feels normal again.

Ribaudo, J., Safyer, P., and Stein, S. | Document last updated 4/13/2020

# S.A.F.E. COMMUNICATION

## **S** SAFETY – Emphasize your role in keeping your child safe.

- For babies, be a reliable source of soothing and comfort, through holding, rocking, singing and staying with them – even when they are inconsolable.
- Young children thrive on knowing what is going to happen, so the changes in their routine can be very upsetting. Creating a routine while at home and letting them know what's going to happen will create feelings of safety and predictability.

## **A** ACCEPTANCE – Know that you can be the best parent and yet babies and young children can still feel your stress and that of others.

- Children's "big" behaviors such as hitting or throwing more tantrums is their way of communicating their distress. Accepting their confusion, sadness and anger over missing friends, teachers and play dates may be difficult and frustrating at times, but it is what they need from you right now.
- Children may also ask why you are sad (or mad or scared). You can let them know that grown-ups can feel sad and mad too but that you are okay, and that it is okay for anyone to have big feelings.
- When little ones are anxious, they need to know that adults are strong and kind, and able to take care of them. We hope you have adults with whom you can talk so you have someone who helps you ease your worries.

## **F** FEELINGS – Put into words their feelings of fear, anger, sadness and confusion.

- You will not make a child feel worse by acknowledging their negative feelings. When we can share our feelings with another, they often lessen... it is a bit like chewing on a piece of food until it is small enough to swallow...when feelings are acknowledged they don't get stuck in our throat or body.
- Tell them repeatedly that what is happening is not their fault and that there are many adults working hard to fight the germs.
- When you see feeling such as anger or sadness saying "I know you are mad that you can't play with your friends" lets them know you understand their feelings even if you can't give them what they want.
- Sometimes our children's "big" feelings make us uncomfortable and we want to avoid them. Some of us grew up being told it wasn't okay to express strong emotions. In some cultures, we are taught not to express emotions. In times like this, when worry can be so high, acknowledging feeling can help reduce the stress.

## **E** EXPRESSION – Help your child tell stories about what they are thinking about.

- You can make up stories about other children (or animals!) who were scared of germs, or worried that they did something wrong to cause all the changes that are happening.
- You can also play games like peek-a-boo and hide-n-seek to help them manage the sudden losses and uncertainty about the future.
- Young children use play to express their feelings and try to understand what is happening, like the child who gives their doll a "shot" after a visit to the doctor. Observing how children play can also help you understand more of what is going on in their minds.
- Dance and movement can be another way to reduce stress and create opportunities for connection and relieve stress for all of you. Playing lullabies or singing their typical school day songs may induce feelings of familiarity and comfort, for them, and maybe even for you.

We hope you will reach out if you feel you are feeling alone or overwhelmed. Parenting can be challenging under the best circumstances, so be kind and gentle with yourself too.