Helping children cope with distress during the pandemic
Session 2

David J Schonfeld, MD, FAAP
February 9, 2021
Previous Sessions

• How children come to understand illness and how to explain COVID-19 to them -- January 26, 2021
Helping children cope with distress during the pandemic

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Overview of Tonight's Session

• Common adjustment reactions you may see during the pandemic
• Suggestions for supporting children
• Strategies you can share for dealing with distress
# Common Adjustment Reactions to Crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fears &amp; Anxiety; School Avoidance</th>
<th>Sleep Problems; Change in Appetite</th>
<th>Difficulties with Concentration &amp; Academic Performance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadness &amp; Depression</td>
<td>Anger &amp; Irritability; Distrust &amp; Suspiciousness</td>
<td>Alcohol &amp; Other Substance Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Symptoms</td>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
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Challenges for children with intellectual and neurodevelopmental disabilities

- Often express distress in non-verbal ways
  - Aggressive or disruptive behavior
  - Changes in sleep, eating, or toileting behaviors
  - Increase in self-stimulating behaviors
  - More intolerant of changes in routines
- Re-establish routines quickly
- After death of caregiver or forced relocation establish new and consistent routines
- Explanations should be geared to developmental level and unique concerns and stressors
Watch your media consumption

• Make sure it is a healthy diet; don’t consume too much
• Keep informed through focused/periodic attention to trusted sources of information
• If you aren’t getting reassured or learning practical actions to take, then disconnect from media
• Limit amount of media exposure – this is a good time to unplug and connect instead with children and family
Talking with and supporting children

- Don’t pretend everything is OK – children pick up when parents/adults are not genuine and honest
- But this doesn’t mean adults should share all their concerns
- Find out individual child’s fears, concerns, skepticism
- Don’t tell children that they shouldn’t be worried; help them learn to deal with their uncertainty and fear
- Include positive information; present a hopeful perspective
Avoid fear-based approaches

• Excess fear can lead to:
  • Sense of fatalism
  • Conclusion that risks are false or exaggerated
  • Intentionally taking a risk to prove they can survive
Strategies for dealing with distress

• Reading or hobbies that promote healthy distraction
• Talking to others, journaling, blogging, art, music to promote expressions of feelings
• Exercise, yoga
• Appropriate use of respectful humor
• Relaxation techniques, mindfulness
• Help children identify steps they can take personally to protect their own health and to help others
Some children may need more assistance

• The pandemic and discussion about the impact on families may remind children of other difficulties – events in the past, ongoing challenges, or concerns about future losses or crises

• Children who were anxious or depressed before the pandemic will likely need more support
Stress can make people act more self-centered

- Children may need to focus first on their own needs before they are able to think of needs of others; try not to make them feel guilty for thinking about how this crisis impacts them personally.
- While crisis can bring out the best in people, it also brings out their stress – we likely won’t be at our best all the time.
- Be patient with your children, other adults, and yourself.
What you are doing is of value

• Just because we don’t know everything, doesn’t mean we know nothing of value
• You know your children best and strategies that have helped in the past to decrease your children’s distress – try them now
• May require more tolerance for self-calming behaviors you generally try to decrease
What you are doing is of value (continued)

• Contact your pediatric healthcare provider; reach out to resources in school/community when needed
• Celebrate positive contributions you make
• Set reasonable expectations
• The curriculum has changed – teaching children how to cope → helping them learn life skills that will make them more resilient
Next sessions

- Explaining death to children – why we should have the conversation and what they need to understand
- Coping strategies for families of children with special needs – even more of a need now
- Taking care of yourself during the pandemic
Key Takeaways

• Children may show a range of reactions to a crisis, but many reactions will be hidden (especially when children have trouble communicating verbally)

• You need to identify children’s unique fears or concerns before you can give reassurance

• Avoid fear as a way to motivate behavior

• Remember to take care of yourself

• Recognize and celebrate the positive contributions you make
Next Session

• Explaining death to children – why we should have the conversation and what they need to understand

• The session will discuss how to help children – including children with intellectual, neurodevelopmental, socioemotional and other disabilities – both understand and cope with death. Some of the unique challenges of supporting children during the current pandemic will be presented. Parents and other caregivers will be given practical advice and an opportunity to ask questions.

• January 26, 2021 7:30 pm ET

• Upcoming Sessions and Registration

https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/special-education/family-resources/beyond-access-series
Questions and Resources

• Email SpecialEducation@schools.nyc.gov for information or assistance.
• Visit the NYC DOE's website for learn at home resources https://www.schools.nyc.gov/learning/learn-at-home/activities-and-supports/special-education-supports