

ASSOCIATION
FOR
INFANT
MENTAL
HEALTH

AIMH

Fact sheet for parents: coronavirus/children/mental health

Emotional survival for infants and their parents

If you are feeling worried or stressed, as many people are in the current crisis, try to get the support you need from family, friends or professionals - and find and share uplifting things (music, videos, poems etc.) to restore your sense of hope.

Your children need you to be calm and sensitive to their needs. This is not easy when we are stressed. Here are some tips on how your child may be feeling, why they might be behaving differently, and what you can do to help.

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Why children may be more ‘demanding’ at this uncertain time

1. Small children (and babies) pick up on their parents’ worries as well as things they see on television. They will understand these worries in their own way.
2. This often makes them feel insecure, especially if they observe parents being anxious or fretful, and they do not understand what is going on.
3. Being worried switches on what is known as the ‘attachment system’ in children, especially very young children. This is biologically built-in: there to keep children safe, and operates automatically.
4. When a child is anxious, the attachment system ‘tells’ them to get as close to mum or dad as possible in order to feel safe and be protected.
5. If mum or dad cannot respond appropriately and reduce the child’s worries, children will continue to seek contact in any way they can. From the parent’s point of view (not the child’s) the child may become another source of stress, felt to be ‘demanding’, and possibly will be ignored or told to go away.
6. Any sense of real or imagined distance will usually increase the strength of the attachment system’s demand; this can only be deactivated when children feel secure.

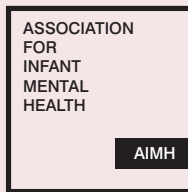
So, in these anxious times, you might see your child:

- being unable to settle to sleep
- trying to gain attention by any means possible
- losing their ability to concentrate and sit still
- having frequent tempers, tears and tantrums
- having nightmares or just bad dreams.

Ways you can help

All children need parents to:

1. Play with them: play is the normal way for children to cope with anxiety.
 2. Interact: chatting, reading and singing all interest and calm children.
 3. Be available and listen to their worries, and not contradict them while listening
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4. Give simple explanations at an age-appropriate level and not too long, using the child's own words as much as possible. It is a good idea to ask the child first about what they understand, in order to gauge the level at which to pitch your explanation.

Supporting Children With Their Feelings

Asking a child: What are you feeling? Why did you do that? This rarely works because children (like us!) often don't know why they do things.

A Quality of Wondering

What works better is to wonder aloud. We need to convey a sense that we are trying to understand. We may not get it right (and children and young people usually tell us one way or another if we haven't), but a child can feel emotionally contained by our attempts to understand.

- I'm wondering if something is troubling you? You seem sad/worried/upset/angry...
- I'm not sure, but maybe you're feeling cross at the moment? Maybe you didn't like it when I said No?
- It's hard to wait, isn't it? You want your food right now! It will be here very soon...
- You are throwing things. I think you are letting me know that you feel very upset and angry just now. It's not OK to hurt people, but I can see that something's not right. Can you tell me?

Even very young children (toddlers) can benefit from this wondering. An adult naming feelings sensitively, and with empathy, reduces the child's stress. They may not understand all your words, but they feel from your tone of voice and your body language that you are being sympathetic and seeking to understand their feelings. They may well then try to use words themselves to help you to understand.



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By wondering aloud and naming feelings, you are helping the young child to develop a language for feelings which is crucial for their developing capacity to communicate their needs and seek help when they need it.

Recommended reading

Sunderland, M: What Every Parent Needs to Know: The incredible effects of love, nurture and play on your child's development, 2016.

Margot Sunderland's well-known book provides an understanding of infant brain development and infant attachment to carers, as well as how to manage everyday parenting. It is particularly helpful with regard to helping children with their difficult feelings as they grow into toddlerhood and beyond.