

-SOCIAL BEINGS AT A TIME OF SOCIAL DISTANCE-

Our shared experience while we manage Covid19 in our community and the world prompts me to consider the impact on our children, even as we adults make sense of it. As social beings, our relationships to the Earth and those with whom we share it are hard wired into our bodies, making up a basis for learning and development throughout life. All of our experiences in life are shaped by relationships and our perception of those relationships. As a parent and professional, I'd like to share some of my thinking about what our situation is like through our children's eyes, and how we might help them thrive within these relationships during this period of uncertainty. I hope the following words could be useful to you and your family, even if they just confirm your own instincts and intuition.

In the recent days, a new reality has set in, much like moving to a new country with a new language, customs, norms, expectations and schedules. In moving to a new country, we would be uncertain about how to manage at first and would need time to learn a new way, albeit temporary. We would also feel a sense of loss in missing our previous home, helplessness to manage at times and curiosity about the new possibilities. While so much has changed in the world we live in for the foreseeable future, we can help our children be aware of these feelings and adjust to new realities, just as we ourselves are adjusting to changes in work, home and our community.

With the losses and transitions children are facing now (i.e. close and regular contact with teachers and classmates, predictable routines, general certainty about the future), it is ordinary to expect them to respond with their behaviors as a way of showing what they can't say. You may see them regress, revert to previous ways they have dealt with stress, withdrawal from family life, cling more to parents, fight more amongst siblings, and many other forms of showing what they are feeling. They may also experience some pleasure at being home and spending more time with family and a wish to learn new things. These are all to be expected and useful in our effort to see the world through their eyes, helping them make sense of it. Being able to think with our children is a primary tool they can use to develop their own thinking capacity, and adapt to times like this.

Understandably, many children (and parents) feel a degree of helplessness right now. They may have had some measure of autonomy in school, in the neighborhood and at home that they have presently lost. Parents are necessarily setting new and firmer guidelines about physical contact, general hygiene and hand washing. This can cause more tension between parents that want the best for their children on the one hand, and children that want to preserve their sense of agency on the other. Below are some suggestions to help address this tension and the current sense of loss and transition, as we make the effort to help our children acclimate.

I expect that families are finding their own new ways to be right now, and that it will take some time to settle into these new ways. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you'd like to think on your family's adjustment together and talk more about these suggestions.

1. **Talk honestly about the situation.** Children need to know that we are uncertain about how long the Corona virus will last, but we can at least know it's not forever. They need to know that while we are taking steps to avoid getting sick by keeping social distance, we are also *connected and participating* with the whole world in keeping vulnerable people healthy.
2. **Make a bridge through this transition** by preserving as much from your previous schedules and lifestyle and intentionally introducing aspects of the new schedule and lifestyle. Talk with your children about what has changed and what will stay the same. Be open to the moments they may share about what they miss from before and what worries them about what is to come.

Ex. Ask them what they miss about school; have them participate in making a weekly calendar placed at their eye level; provide a visually accessible clock, helping them feel less passively subject to transitions, and more actively engaged to mentally prepare for them; listen for ways that your home could echo their experience of their previous classroom and school environment.

3. **Create space to be together and apart.** Families are developing new ways to define time and space. Going to school, going to work, having a weekend, doing homework after dinner, etc. were easy ways to define time and space for families before the virus. Without these clear distinctions at the moment, a weekend will not feel the same and work may not end after 5pm. Finding new rhythms throughout the day and week will help the whole family feel more oriented.

Ex. Meals at expected times; designating a quiet time in a quiet corner of the house; having daily family walks; reading or listening to an audio story over the course of many nights.

4. **Connect with the outside world.** In keeping social distance, children do not have to remain isolated. Helping them find ways to express a connection to the outside world is stabilizing.

Ex. Take a hike; Read poetry and respond with art; make a garden and plant seeds they can water; write and send physical letters to friends and family via postal service.

5. **Allow for your children to make contributions.** While they have actually lost agency in some ways, there are other possible ways that they could begin to feel independent, useful and connected to the family, their home, community, etc.

Ex. New household chores; caring for the family pet; making a meal for the family; reading aloud to a younger sibling.

A poetry and art exercise with young children

Poems conjure images and feelings with words that children can relate to. Shel Silverstein is playful with his words, speaking to children about their experiences and perceptions that are also appealing to adults. The following poem may prompt a conversation with you and your child about how they feel and lead them to make a drawing about it:

COLORS, by Shel Silverstein

*My skin is kind of sort of brownish
Pinkish yellowish white
My eyes are greyish blueish green
But I'm told they look orange in the night
My hair is reddish blondish brown
But it's silver when it's wet
And all the colors I am inside
Have not been invented yet*

If your child draws or makes something in response to this poem (you could join them in this), they would feel pleased to hear you describe characteristics of what they've made (i.e. straight lines, curves, light and dark colors, the space used on the page) and it might prompt them to elaborate.

A poetry and art exercise for older children to adults

In his collection of poems entitled "Odes to Common Things", Pablo Neruda illustrates the ways in which our deepest feelings and most profound relationships are represented in the most ordinary objects:

Excerpt from Neruda's "Ode to the Chair"

*...all I ask for the foreigner, for the despairing scout
is a seat in the sitting tree, a throne of unkempt velvet
the plush of an overstuffed chair torn up by the snaking vines
for the man who goes on foot, a chair that embraces everything
the sound ground and supreme dignity of repose...*

1. What images stick out to you?
2. Who are the characters you are hearing about?
3. Create something about what you heard and felt (i.e. drawing or other project)