

Supporting your Child to Understand Social Distancing

1. "We're all working together to fight this foe."

Children respond well when we personify things that are difficult to understand. Even through nursery school, they often think of the world in terms of good guys and bad guys, superheroes and villains. If we speak about germs as if they are tiny villains we are attempting to fight, children have a mission to latch onto, a larger purpose that extends beyond just obeying their parents' instructions.

For example, you could personify the virus (and give your child a "mission") by saying, "Right now we are all working together to stop coronavirus from spreading. The good news is that germs can't jump very far! If we stay far away from people, then the germs can't jump from person to person and make us all sick."

2. "Here's what we can do."

When we speak to our kids about this new reality, it's important to be concrete and spell out the things that we cannot do in very clear terms, for example: "We have to stay far away from other people right now; we can't hug, or hold hands, or even go to each other's houses. What we *can* do is FaceTime, talk on the phone, write letters, and draw pictures we can send in the mail."

It's important to note the things we still *can* do in order to maintain strong connections with our loved ones. After all, physical distance is not the same as emotional distance, and many children can grasp that there are ways to feel very close to someone, while not being with them in the same space. Highlighting that, as well as providing opportunities for them to experience it (via FaceTime, Zoom chats and so on), will be critical.

3. "This is weird and different."

Children take comfort in knowing they are not alone in their emotional reactions. They are undoubtedly picking up on how strange things feel, how different things are now from the normal structure and routines of their daily lives. Pointing that out using simple language, and acknowledging that everyone is feeling the same will do a lot to regulate their emotional response

4. "A lot of things are still the same."

When we acknowledge how different things feel right now, we also need to draw attention to things that are the same. This helps children recognize that there are still many parts of their lives that are familiar and recognizable. They still love *Paw Patrol*, or *Frozen 2*, or video games, they still get chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast on Saturdays, they still have to brush their teeth. And they're still just as loved as ever—in fact, even more.

5. "You are safe."

Children show their stress in different ways: throwing more tantrums, being more moody, irritable or defiant, or regressing in a particular area such as language or potty training. However your kids are showing that they're worried—or even if they are not yet—there is nothing more valuable than giving them a hug and letting them know you've got them and it's all going to be okay.

6. "There are so many grown-ups working together to help."

Talk to your children about the scientists working on finding the right medicines and vaccines, the doctors and other health care workers, the police and the supermarket stockers working hard to help us all.

7. "This stinks."

Because it really does and our children will benefit if we validate that rather than trying to deny it or always paint a rainbow on it. It stinks that the school play, or the sports season, or the birthday party is cancelled. It stinks that it's about to get really nice out, and we can't all get together for a picnic. It stinks that we can't see Grandma and Grandpa. It stinks that we can't give our best friends hugs. It really, really does.

8. "But also, there's a bright side."

Reframing is not the same as invalidating. You cannot say that this spring holiday is going to be the best one ever without your kids seeing right through you. You can, however, point out the silver linings—and in fact, there are many. Look at how many crafts we can do! Look how much screen time you're getting! OMG, we get to watch a whole movie (or two, or five) on a *weekday*?

9. "We are all in this together."

Children—and grown-ups—feel more secure when they recognize that they are part of a larger community. For younger kids, it can be helpful to name everyone else who is staying home as part of social distancing: "No one is seeing anyone right now—not Grandma, not Grandpa, not Uncle Ben, not Aunt Alison, not your friends from school." For older children, talking about the different cities, states, and countries undergoing this can be comforting: "10-year-olds in so many places aren't allowed to see their friends right now."

10. "We are taking this one day—sometimes even one hour—at a time."

Children (and again, grown-ups too) will get overwhelmed if they start thinking about having to make these life adjustments for too long. Missing school, or their friends or Grandma and Grandpa, for the upcoming months can feel very overwhelming. Instead, focus on what is going to happen *today*, and on what we can do to stay in the present moment.

And remember that sometimes giving comfort isn't about having "the right words" at all—it's as simple as a really long, extra-tight cuddle.