

Keeping Your Child Calm in Uncertain Times

With so much of our focus in dealing with the COVID 19 being drawn to issues concerning work issues, financial stress, childcare worries, and the future in general, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that our children are affected by the angst of this crisis as well. Helping your child calm their fears is largely going to depend on your ability to maintain clear, supportive communication with them.

While the words, tone and message are important, being listened to and understood is often going to rely on what your child has come to expect from your relationship. Here are some suggestions to help develop that relationship and set the stage for communicating with your child.

Spend quality time with your child. Quality time only happens in the midst of quantity time. The investment of time and attention with your child (of any age) is like making an emotional deposit into your child. If there comes a time later when you need to take an emotional withdrawal by having a conversation he or she would rather not have, these investments help your child know that you value them and that you have only the best intentions for them.

Be available for your children. Plan time on a regular basis to spend time with your children. If you have more than one child, schedule some time *at least* once each month when you spend time individually with each child. Relationship building is primarily done one-on-one. Giving individual attention to each child communicates that he or she is important to you. During these individual times, you see aspects of your child's personality you will not see when they are part of a larger group. It also allows your child to see you when you are not distracted by their siblings or exasperated by the demands of parenting multiple children.

Demonstrate respect to your child. Remember that they have emotional reactions to how you treat them and you are probably their biggest influence on how they see themselves. Rather than trying to correct every behavior, target your comments to what's most important. Too much correction leads a child to feeling discouraged and that they "can never satisfy" you. A child can become overwhelmed when criticism and correction outweighs your positive reinforcement and recognition of the things they do well.

Give choices whenever possible. We all respond more favorably to being given choices rather than demands. Your child will appreciate this approach as well. Whenever possible, find a way that the child can choose to carry out responsibilities. For example, "Would you rather do your homework before or after dinner?" "Would you rather load the dishwasher or take out the trash?" This may not seem like much, but by empowering your child to have some manner of control over something they are required to do anyway, it gives them a level of buy-in to the activity. This encourages them to complete it because now they are doing it partially on their own terms.

Listen (even to things you may not be interested in). When something is important to your child, that really is all it takes for it to be worth listening to. You may not be interested in the latest movie or video game, but when your child is excited about something, it presents a great opportunity for you to share in their excitement and invest in your relationship. This not only makes your child feel important to you, but communicates that you respect them.

Give your undivided attention. Being a parent is difficult and busy work. It is easy for parents to try to listen to their children while doing something else at the same time. Even though you may be hearing the words your child is saying, you are not "being present" with your child. Actively listening to your child means that you give them your undivided attention, listen to their words, identify with their emotions and respond in ways that communicate your understanding. Good eye contact, a hand on the shoulder and appropriate facial expressions all let your child know they are important to you and that you value what they think, feel and say.

Share your experience, rather than give advice. Give guidance by sharing what you've learned. This makes you more of a real person to them and allows them to glean from your experience indirectly, rather than being told what to do. Talk about your own struggles and what you learned from them or how you felt. By sharing your own story instead of giving directions, you allow your child the freedom to learn from your lesson without feeling "preached" to.

If you have a strained relationship with your child, it will take time, effort and patience on your part to see these approaches pay off. Practicing these skills consistently will set the groundwork for your child to gradually become more willing to hear what you say and demonstrate respect back to you.



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