

PARENTING through PANDEMIC

A conversation guide for parents with Preschoolers and Elementary Kids

This month has led us into an unexplored territory that the vast majority of us have never experienced before. Some of us are now shifting to being work-from-home employees, homeschool teachers, full-time caretakers, online church viewers, and sanitation experts. All at the same time. So what does this time look like for our kids?

Well, for one they might be experiencing the chaos and change at a rapid pace right there with us. This kind of change and uncertainty can sometimes lead kids to all sorts of emotions and reactions. Normal emotions during this time might include being scared about the future, sad because they are missing out, confused at what is happening, or angry because they have lost the little control they had in their lives. These emotions can lead to reactions like frustrated outbursts, irritability, tantrums, regressing to younger behaviors, fighting, wanting to be closer to you more than normal, or even unusual quietness.

It's a lot to deal with as a parent, especially because no two kids will feel and react the same way. Below, in support of our parents, we've put together eight tips on how to work through this time with your kids.

#1 ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

This saying is true for good reason. Your kids may learn more about this new situation from watching you rather than from what you tell them. Kids can sometimes pick up on your emotions, especially anxiety, stress, and frustration, and might internalize those emotions as their own. So if you are feeling any of these things, try to take a step back and remind yourself of your trust in God. Pause and take a deep breath, pray, go for a walk, or take a quick nap to help yourself cope so you are able to see the situation clearly and calmly.

Another thing to keep in mind is what you are watching on TV. It's easy to forget about your kids while you are trying to stay updated on the latest news, but they can sometimes pick up on emotional cues from TV as well, which might increase their anxiety and worry. Keeping your kids in the most stress-free environment possible will create a better experience for your whole family.

#2 LET THEM LEAD

If you feel your kids are at the maturity level where discussing the present situation would be appropriate for them and helpful, consider talking with them about it. Kids usually have an idea that something is up if things are changing around them. So, if you decide to have that conversation, here are some tips: open the conversation by asking them what they've heard and how it makes them feel. Let them ask you the questions they want and answer only what they ask and if you deem it appropriate. This helps keep the conversation on their level and gives them what they need.

#3 KEEP IT SIMPLE

If you are answering their questions about the situation, keep it simple. Using words like 'sickness' instead of 'coronavirus' or 'COVID 19', and 'staying at home' instead of 'quarantine' or 'social isolation' will help younger kids understand the situation in an age-appropriate way. When answering the questions, we encourage you not to try to fill the silence with details, which could be unhelpful or even stressful like statistics on death versus recovery or what might happen to the global economy. Even if an older kid is mature, it's not always necessary to bring them into an adult space.

#4 BE REAL BUT REASSURING

While you answer questions from your kids, remember to adapt for their maturity level and emotional capacity to handle difficult information. If they ask a straightforward question, discern the best way to answer for their age and emotional capacity, and then give them a gentle answer. We also encourage you to correct potential misinformation that they might have heard. And if you don't know the answer, that's okay. Admit it and let them know you'll look into it. Your honesty may give an opportunity to reinforce that they have a safe space to be real. Always remember to reassure them that you will keep them safe and that God is in control.

#5 SET A NEW NORMAL

When kids don't know what to expect, they will sometimes mirror the chaos they feel internally by acting wild, out of control, playing out scenarios with their toys, or outside of their normal behavior. During this time, it might be helpful for you to set up a new routine for your child and family. Wake up, eat meals, and go to bed at a similar time each day. You may want to give them free-play time, quiet time, school time, and family time blocks. These certainly don't have to be exact and down to the minute or perfectly planned out with endless enrichment activities, they just need to be reliable and consistent. SandalsKids.tv is a great and kid-friendly resource that can help in supporting and filling these times.

#6 ACKNOWLEDGE ANXIETY

Even after good conversations and setting a new normal, emotions like anxiety and fear can still happen. Dismissing or minimizing emotions or trying to rid them of anxiety might help temporarily, but you might lose the opportunity to teach them what it looks like to cope and work through these emotions. If this happens, we encourage you to respond to your kids in these moments by acknowledging how they are feeling and helping them work through it.

#7 TEACH THEM TOOLS

PSALM 56:3

JEREMIAH 29:11

2 TIMOTHY 1:7

ISAIAH 26:3

Offer to teach them some things to do when they feel anxious. You might want to start with prayer and have them tell God how they feel. Ask questions like: **“What are you worried about?”** and **“What do we know is the truth?”** and **“What does God say about it?”** Dig into the truth by reading and repeating Bible verses about fear and worry, God being in control, or peace. You may want to do a breathing exercise with them by focusing completely on taking big, deep breaths and exhaling slowly. Move your bodies by taking a walk, stretching, or even dancing. Give them a tight hug, cuddle for a few minutes, (or if you need your hands) have them snuggle with a pet or stuffed animal. Or try playing soft music and drawing, coloring, or painting.

#8 POINT OUT THE POSITIVES

Lastly, help your kids focus on the good and what they can do to help others during this time. You can help give them back some sense of control by giving them a chance to rise to the occasion and help where it's needed.

Empower them by giving them special responsibilities depending on their age, such as

- washing their hands once every few hours
- wiping down counters or other surfaces
- helping keep other kids entertained
- making an easy meal
- delivering groceries to grandparents
- or coloring pictures to send to family and friends to cheer them up.

You can also keep connecting with God at the front of your kids' minds by asking them to pray for one specific person or group each day. Other ways to practice positivity can be choosing 3 things to be grateful for each day, and making routine or boring things like cleaning into a game.

While this time may be tough and trying for our families, we can make the choice to use it as an opportunity to help our kids grow in dealing with difficult circumstances, trusting God, and loving others. And if and when we get it wrong, there is unfailing grace to lean back on.

“WE CAN REJOICE, TOO, WHEN WE RUN INTO PROBLEMS AND TRIALS, FOR WE KNOW THAT THEY HELP US DEVELOP ENDURANCE. AND ENDURANCE DEVELOPS STRENGTH OF CHARACTER, AND CHARACTER STRENGTHENS OUR CONFIDENT HOPE OF SALVATION. AND THIS HOPE WILL NOT LEAD TO DISAPPOINTMENT. FOR WE KNOW HOW DEARLY GOD LOVES US, BECAUSE HE HAS GIVEN US THE HOLY SPIRIT TO FILL OUR HEARTS WITH HIS LOVE.” ROMANS 5:3-5

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