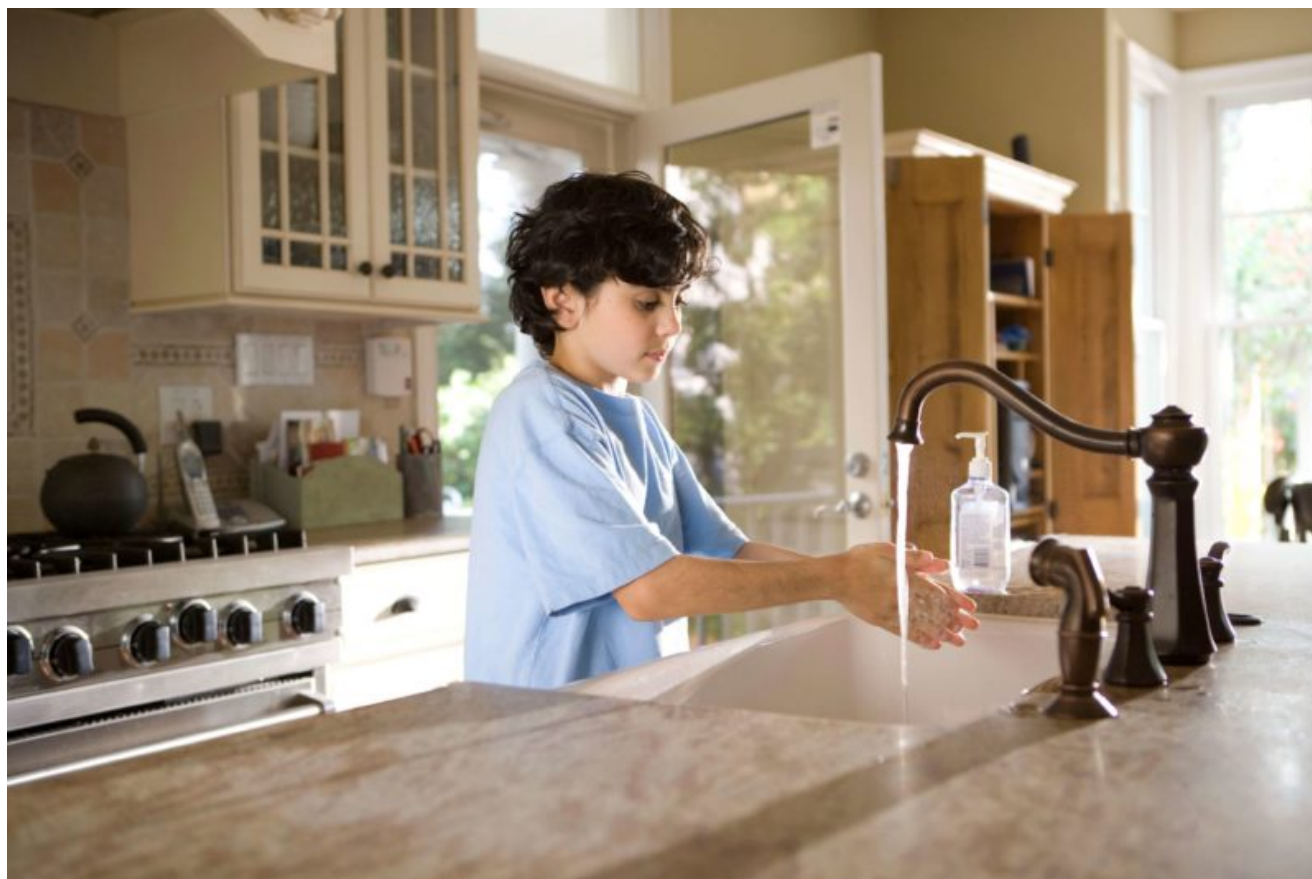




Talking to Children about COVID-19: Reducing Hysteria During a Global Emergency

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“Wash your hands!” My kids hear me say this all the time, but this week these three words have taken on a new meaning. Now washing your hands represents an important protective behavior against the coronavirus pandemic.

After getting home from school yesterday, I reminded my children, as per usual, to wash their hands, but this time I stressed, “for at least 20 seconds because we need to be extra vigilant against getting the coronavirus.” My generally cool-as-a-cucumber son immediately replied, “I don’t want to hear about *that* anymore!”

While we are all adjusting to social distancing and self-quarantining as adults, do we realize how this may be creating anxiety in our children? It was my son's abrupt response that made me pause and reflect about how other children are coping with the unpredictability of the pandemic. I realized that while I limit the amount of news my children watch, they must have been inundated with information all week as their teachers diligently shared information about the pandemic while encouraging hygienic behavior in the classroom. And now their school was closing for at least two weeks! There would be a disruption in their day and simply missing their friends that would induce anxious feelings that they may struggle to articulate.

According to a study from the Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, anxiety is a major public health concern for children and experiences filled with uncertainty can increase their vulnerability to feelings of stress and even to mental health problems. With the recent announcement of a state of emergency due to coronavirus, parents and caregivers have to figure out ways to strategically communicate reassurance to our children even when we do not know the outcomes from the health threat. This is more difficult than making sure your home has enough toilet tissue!

While chaos ensues around us, what should we do be saying and doing to help to calm our children's feelings of uncertainty? How do we keep our children relaxed when even play-dates are temporarily discouraged because of social distancing?

Besides urging them to wash their hands there are other healthy behaviors that should be encouraged as healthy habits:

1. Building and strengthening immunity by
 - Drinking a lot of water and good nutrition (especially fruits and vegetables with high Vitamin C content)
 - Getting enough sleep. Depending on their age, children still need 10-11 hours of sleep each night, but with busy schedules with extra-curricular activities, getting to bed at a reasonable time can be a difficult feat. Plus, there is a painful cycle between sleep deprivation and anxiety.
 - Playing outdoors, which allows for more social distance while having fun and reduces their screen time.
 - Practicing calming techniques — singing, praying, meditating, and laughing together.
2. Keep a schedule of activities for your children. In addition to what teachers are preparing for your children there are educational resources that are free during this period. Remember to schedule family play time and share the schedule with them so they know what they will be doing. There will be temptation to approach this moment like summer vacation, but it is imperative that children retain some form of routine so they can return to the school day with ease.

3. Stay informed.
 - Go through the CDC checklist together.
 - Watch videos from PBS or this cartoon from NPR for entertaining, while educational tools, that explain the science behind COVID-19.
 - Increase Learning about geography by looking at an interactive global map about the pandemic. (But use good judgement with this, as it could overwhelm them!)
4. Do not be wasteful. This is an opportunity for children to understand that during this period, things may be limited. Be mindful of how much toilet tissue you use; don't eat all the snacks in one day!
5. Share your feelings with each other and talk about how this experience is building our resilience. Respect their need for a mental break when they do not want to talk about the pandemic.
6. Practice gratitude and encourage patience with each other.
7. Be kind. Do not participate in scornful behaviors to those who may be ill.
8. Remind your children that staying healthy not only reduces their risk of contracting coronavirus but it can also prevent the spread of the virus, particularly to the elderly, like their grandparents, and those who have chronic illnesses.
9. Take time for yourself — self-care remains essential during this emergency — practice the healthy behavior you're teaching your kids.

This is a time for kindness and thoughtfulness for the community around us. To all the parents and caregivers, enjoy your children during this time off. Answer their questions with patience and encourage their curiosity. Above all, stay hopeful, we will get through this together.



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