

USING RELATIONAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC TO HELP PREVENT TOXIC STRESS IN YOUR CHILD, PATIENTS, AND CLIENTS

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TOXIC STRESS AND COVID-19

- **Are ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and the risk of toxic stress increasing?** The fear and social isolation associated with COVID-19 are likely to worsen existing chronic stressors, as well as create new ones. Mental health problems, anxiety, partner violence, substance use, depression, suicidality, and child abuse are all increasing. (1) (2) (4)
- **Are relationships and social connections decreasing?** The ability to maintain strong bonds and social networks could be disrupted by financial hardships. At the same time, people are feeling isolated and alone and have less emotional support than they did prior to the pandemic. (3) This isolation increases the likelihood that children may witness and experience ACEs. (4)
- **Who is at risk?** Although everyone is at risk of stress from the hardships of the pandemic, some people are more at risk for toxic stress than others, including children from low income families, those with few resources before COVID-19, those who have been disproportionately impacted by the virus, and racial and ethnic minority populations. (5) In addition, families who have never experienced violence before are experiencing increased rates of domestic violence and child abuse. (1)

RELATIONAL HEALTH: CONNECT, PROTECT AND GROW healthy brains and bodies!

1. **CONNECT:** Relational health can be defined simply as “Connectedness; essentially the presence of attuned caregivers, family members, mentors, teachers, and community members.” (15) Connecting with another person or group gives us a sense of identity, purpose, and self-worth. (8) It is important to connect with family, friends and neighbors, culture, community, and with ourselves. (5) (12)
2. **PROTECT:** Supportive relationships can protect us from the negative impacts of stress. A supportive person can calm us down when we are scared, decreasing our heart rate, blood pressure, stress hormone levels, and even our risk for getting the common cold. (7)
3. **GROW:** Supportive relationships can help us grow positive neural pathways, and improve our physical, cognitive and emotional health. (13)

Did you know? Social support has been shown to have an equal or greater impact on mortality than smoking, alcohol consumption, exercise, and obesity – and those are really important. (6) People who have adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival than people who don’t. (6)

Supporting Families To Create and Maintain Relationships During Physical Distancing

As a professional who works with children, you can actively support families to connect, protect and grow the social connections they have or need.

COVID-19 and physical distancing can negatively interfere with making or maintaining connections, but you can adapt your conversation to consider the impact of isolation, mask-wearing, and virtual contact on children’s connections with family members, teachers, and friends.

Assessment of Relational Health: Here are two simple questions that you can use to perform a relational health check. Apply the strategies suggested below to follow up depending on the patient’s response.

1. Do you have someone you can talk to when you are upset or scared?
2. Are you part of a group or community that supports you?

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RELATIONAL HEALTH AND PREVENT CHILD MALTREATMENT

CONNECT

1. Ask **open-ended questions** that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no”.
2. Use **reflective practice** to show that you are actively listening. For example, paraphrase responses (“It sounds like...”). Then verify whether your understanding is correct.
3. **Listen** for signs of frustration, anger or fear. (9) Acknowledge those feelings if observed.
4. Encourage **self-care**: Ask caregivers what they do to manage their own stress, and what their ideas are for helping with the stress of their children. Share with families that self-care is critical for everyone in the household, including eating healthy, exercising (especially exercising outdoors together) (10), getting enough sleep, and maintaining social connections by phone, video, email or other ways (11).
5. Take advantage of **some of the benefits of telehealth** and virtual meetings including:
 - You have an opportunity to look into the home environment;
 - You are able to see children, their play and interactions at home;
 - You may be able to “see” and speak with other family members. (9)
6. Schedule **follow-up** visits and make an extra effort to maintain contact between visits with families you’re concerned about by using electronic check-ins via email, texts, (9) or messages in electronic records.

PROTECT

1. Teach strategies for **self-regulation** that can be used by parents and children. For example, taking 3 deep belly breaths, going for a walk, or remembering a positive experience.
2. Promote and praise **family strengths**, such as having a sense of humor, being good at caring for things like pets, and maintaining family traditions. (2)
3. Implement regular **routines** since predictable (but not rigid) practices promote a sense of safety (10) and reduce stress. (4)
4. Educate parents about **normal development** that can be challenging to manage, such as
 - a. Colic (crying increases and peaks in all babies at 2-4 months)
 - b. Awakening at night (all babies wake at night and need to learn how to fall back asleep)
 - c. Separation anxiety (develops around 9 months and may last into early childhood)
 - d. Normal negativism (saying “no” is a normal part of developing a separate identity)
 - e. Toilet training resistance (the less “training” you do, the more easily your child will accept)

GROW

1. Teach **nurturing parenting** skills. For example, notice kids being good and praise them for it. Talk to them about their fears. “Time-ins” are even more important than time-outs. Stay active and engaged as a family. (1)(5) Positive childhood experiences protect against depression and anxiety, and improve relational health! (14)
2. Provide **community resources**. Encourage use of health, education and social service resources, and make sure parents know where to go to connect to them. (3) Also encourage use of community resources to develop positive parenting skills (many parenting groups are even easier to get to in the virtual world!).

RESOURCES

for Your Families on Connections Now

- [Emotional Connection During Crisis](#)
- [Coronavirus Tips & Resources for Parents, Children, Educators & Others](#)
- [How to Keep Your Relationship Healthy During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
- [Stress Relief for Children and Caregivers during COVID-19](#)
- [CDC Coping with Stress](#) - (Also in [Spanish](#))

Additional Resources

- [Talking to Children About Wearing Masks](#)
- [Supporting Young Children Isolated Due to COVID-19](#)
- [Staying Connected: Zero to Three COVID resources](#)
- [Tips to Make the Most of Video Chats](#)
- [Young Children at Home during the COVID-19 Outbreak: The Importance of Self-Care](#) (Also in [Spanish](#))
- [Building Resilience in Troubled Times: A Guide for Parents](#)

Additional Resources on Connections For Providers

- [Safe, Stable and Nurturing Relationships Framework](#)
- [Protective Factors Framework](#)
- [HOPE: Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences](#)
- [AAP Child Abuse and Neglect](#)

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