

The world is upside down and my kids are struggling.....

Covid – 19 has turned everyone’s world upside down. As adults we have made very significant changes to how we engage in our day to day lives. Many of us are now working from home. We have children who are no longer going to daycare or school. We don’t see friends or family close up. We see them from 6 feet away or virtually. We have learned how to navigate new interactive platforms such as zoom and google meet. We can no longer eat at the kitchen table because it is covered in work. We must keep the volume down as someone is in the other room on a meeting call. Our homes have become more than just the place we live. They have become our offices, schools and daycares. The world has changed and it affects us all.

As parents we try very hard to shelter our kids from things we feel will hurt them. In this case you may limit the news in the background. You may avoid discussing Covid – 19 in front of your kids. If you have lost your job you may limit when and how you discuss financial burdens so your kids won’t worry. If you are a front line worker you may downplay how this has impacted your job and the risk it poses to your health. We may choose not to tell our children that a family member or friend has been diagnosed with Covid-19. These are just some scenarios that could be playing out in your home or home of your family and friends. Even if we shelter our kids they notice all the differences. Their reactions are a direct correlation to the unsettled feelings they are experiencing.

Children have an amazing ability to sense changes. They sense small changes in our moods. They are very sensitive to changes in routines. We know that their daily routines just like ours have changed drastically. Our children are watching us and feeling the stress and strain that they observe from us. These sensitivities or reactions can be seen even in the youngest children. Babies may exhibit sleep disturbances or become more fussy. Toddlers may “melt down” more frequently or may seem like they are more sensitive to everything. Older children may reject things they typically enjoy and love. Teenagers may withdraw and become more disobedient. Currently we are all experiencing major changes to our lives and routines. Children are more reactive to these changes than we tend to understand.

Typically developing toddlers under typical circumstances are learning boundaries. They are learning about autonomy and independence. They are starting to independently act on their wants and needs. They may get their own snack. They may undress themselves. They may climb onto the play structure and slide down the slide on their own. When toddlers act out under “normal” circumstances it is because they are either struggling to attain what they want or they have an opinion about a change you have required. For example, going inside vs staying outside and playing. When you add

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developmental delays to this mix we tend to see an increase in meltdowns or protesting. These delays could be with speech and language, motor development, social emotional development, cognitive development as well as sensory processing. Whenever a delay is present it can amplify the size and length of protesting/meltdowns and also adds to the why.

When we consider what is typically happening with toddlers and those with developmental or physical delays and add the current state of the world, what we are seeing is an ever growing list of negative behaviors and larger than normal meltdowns and tantrums. We feel the pressure mounting as this continues and so do our kids. The avalanche that is Covid-19 is leaving no one behind. So where do we go from here? How do we start to reverse the behaviors and meltdowns and find some new normal?

Our normal lives have predictability. Predictability is very important for children as well as adults. Not many people enjoy last minute changes and neither do our children. We should try to give our kids “a game plan” each day. Everyday we need to explain what the day will entail. I would encourage you to start with predictable daily routines when you can. This would look like getting up and going to bed at the same time. The same routine after you wake up and leading up to bedtime. If your child naps try to keep it the same when you can. Meal times should be at approximately the same time every day. When typical daily routines that must happen every day happen at similar times it becomes part of their new daily routine. It is expected and provides a child with a sense of control and predictability.

The other activities that happen throughout a day would be the plan. For example after lunch we are going outside to play or after breakfast we are going to play together before my meeting. Kids NEED structure. This does not mean that they can not be flexible. On the contrary they should be flexible. Flexibility is an important life skill. They should however expect that the plan for the day is generally what you lay out. Take a few minutes at the beginning of the day to discuss what the day will hold.

You could consider making a picture schedule with small chunks of the day. This will give your child a roadmap to follow. They can do more on their own. Building on their need for autonomy and independence. Consider making a spot where kids can get their own snacks. You would control how much is in one snack but they could choose which snack to have. Kids thrive on purposeful and meaningful work. You can give kids chores ie wipe the table or put all the cups in the sink. I might even suggest that when you have a meeting or time that you need to be “at work” you make a picture list of tasks for your child to complete. You can even set a timer for how long they will engage with each task. Choices would be beneficial here so your kids feel like they are making decisions

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for themselves. Even if you provide all the choices and ask them to pick three, your child will feel in control. This typically decreases the protests or tantrums.

When kids do feel out of control a powerful tool is a calm down box or calm down space. This allows a child to have a place or items that help with self-regulation and calming their overly active minds and bodies. A space would be a quiet space in a corner, possibly a tent that would allow for some privacy and might block out sounds and sights. You can have items such as visual bubblers or hand fidgets in the box that a child could access on their own. Once again we are building on independence and self-awareness and empowering children. You can lead by example utilizing your own quiet space or calm down box. Children want to emulate their parents.

Some other interventions that benefit kids are using first then language to describe what comes first and what comes next. Again this plays into a child's need for control and predictability. Social stories are powerful tools when kids need help with a specific task or to help them understand that this is their new daily routine. Your providers have lists of calm down or heavy work ideas that can be accessed for additional ideas to assist with bringing your child down when they are very wound up. Timers help children to be prepared for a change. When I tell them they have 5 more minutes and the bell sounds at the end they are usually much more willing to move on (with practice of course).

Overall what we know is right now we don't know much and we have no control over that. We don't know when life will return to normal. We don't know when we will see our family and friends. We don't know when sports seasons will return or when in person school will resume. We need to do our best to make sure our kids know at minimum what today looks like to give them some control: When do I get up, when do I eat, when do I get dressed, when do I play ect... This is what we have control over. Help your kids to help themselves by providing a plan for the day which includes predictability and structure when possible.

I hope this gives you some ideas and thoughts about how to reduce your child's negative behaviors and why you might be seeing more than you typically see. You are not in this alone. We are here to help.....

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