

SPACE

Supporting Parents and Children
Emotionally

Factsheet One: Being safe



To help support you during COVID-19, we have created a series of factsheets, designed to offer some support and strategies, whatever your situation, and are based on what we know about people's responses to traumatic events and what can help.

Being safe emotionally and physically is the basic need all humans have. It is often something we take for granted.

Living with COVID-19 has forced us all into a situation previously unimaginable. The safety in our lives we had previously taken for granted has gone and for many of us already living with fear and uncertainty this pandemic has only increased the sense of vulnerability. The situation may have highlighted difficult living arrangements that were just about sustainable before, but with the enforcement of lockdown, the stress of living as a carer (to elderly parents or sick children) or being dependant on someone else (due to illness or lack of finances) will have increased the lack of personal safety. Families used to being at work and children used to being in school face huge challenges suddenly being stuck together without the normal routines of daily life. With the schools shut we are also suddenly thrust into a world where we are expected to become teachers and maybe even support our children with subjects we know nothing about. Social distancing means outside access is limited and unless we are lucky enough to have gardens our children are stuck indoors with conflicting wants and needs.

The aim of these factsheets is to give you some strategies to look after your children by looking after yourself. If you have ever flown on a plane, you may remember the air steward safety briefing – 'in the event of loss of oxygen, a mask will drop down in front of you. PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON first before helping others'. In effect if you don't you will pass out before you can help anyone else. It's the same in this crisis, to help your children you need to be able to look after your own emotional health and safety first.

What we know is - It is difficult to be the emotionally available adult when you are scared yourself.

As a first step, consider how do you feel:

Scared
Tired
Irritable
Unreal
Tearful
Panicked
Angry

Do you feel some of these emotions? All of these? Maybe lots of others – just to reassure you that these are normal and to be expected responses in such a difficult time.

After or during trauma we have a loss of a sense of safety. This may be actual (e.g. loss of job leading to fears about paying the bills) or perceived (e.g. not being able to see the virus so not knowing where you might catch it).

Once you have recognised and acknowledged your own feelings you can then support your children.

What we suggest is in the first instance is to focus on how you and your children are emotionally safe in the home environment.

One way of acknowledging your child's distress is to be open about the fears and anxieties that are around at the moment. Giving them information about what is happening and helping them feel safe is the most important thing you can do.

The link below takes you to a version of a free book by the author of the Gruffalo which explains the virus and on the back page are links to lots of other resources.

<https://nosycrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-A-Book-for-Children.pdf>

Forget the schoolwork; unless your child feels safe they will not be able to learn as the part of the brain necessary for learning and taking on new information is too busy responding to the fear.

Below is a great exercise that you can do together with your children as a good way to start to create a sense of emotional/physical safety in your home.

Ask your children to think about their special place in the home. Do they have a room of their own or a favourite space in the communal room, do they like to be in the garden if the weather's ok, or the garden shed? Get them to tell you why they like it and if it makes them feel safe, is it because its private or with people? Do they have toys there or things to cuddle, is it sunny and warm, is it where they have their snacks and feel comfortable? If they don't identify anywhere ask them if they would like to make a special safe space. You can have a conversation about why it is safe, how you can keep it safe and what it means if they go there during the day.

It can be useful for you to identify and share with your child your safe place while having this discussion. For you it might be your bedroom, the bath, the patio, anywhere where you feel you can have some peace, and time to you and it is where you feel surrounded by objects you like, comfortable furnishings, maybe photos of loved ones - talk to your child about why this space is important to each of you. How it makes you feel safe.

Whether either of you wants to be alone in your space, or is going there a sign you need

a cuddle and some reassurance. If they are not able to identify a safe space, by telling them about what yours is like and why you need it, this can help them think about where their safe space might be.

Fight, Flight, Freeze

In times where we perceive there is increased risk of threat and danger, the body activates the fight, flight or freeze response. This makes learning new information and concentrating on anything other than the risk quite hard.

When this response is triggered the body can react in ways unfamiliar to us which can feel scary and frightening. We may have been experiencing quite strange physical feelings since the lockdown started - maybe before the lockdown, as anxiety levels across the country rose. Understanding the 'fight, flight or freeze' response which is the biological response to stress can help us manage the way it makes us, and our bodies, feel.

Taking part in an activity together builds connectedness within your family group which we know is extremely important in making us feel safe and helping us build resilience to the difficult times we are in.

A great way to do this is to talk about feelings that may have triggered the fight, flight or freeze response. At the end of the factsheet is an image of a gingerbread person. You can use that if you have a printer or just copy the drawing. Have one for you, and one for however many children you have - this is an exercise the whole family can do.

- Have loads of pens and felt tips.
- Ask everyone to imagine they are in a wood and walking along a beautiful path when suddenly they go around a corner and come face to face with a big grizzly bear!
- Using the materials on the table and the gingerbread person, ask them to draw or write on the gingerbread person what they are feeling in their body when they see the bear.

Below is a list of things they might draw and the reasons why the body is responding in the way it is. Remember it thinks it is helping, this is a completely unconscious response and it happens when a part of the brain (the amygdala) thinks there is danger to you. It sets in place a series of reactions that are not within our conscious control. Our brain releases hormones (mainly cortisol and adrenaline) that are designed to give us extra strength and energy to either run away or fight or freeze.

INCREASE IN SWEATING – The body is keeping itself cool in case of exertion

PUPILS DILATE – Allows for more light to enter the eyes, leading to improved vision

HEARING IS DISTORTED OR LOST – the Cochlea (part of the inner ear) sends a message to the brain to protect the ear from potential loud noises

BREATHING GETS FASTER – breathing quickens as the heart beats faster, your lungs need to get more oxygen into the body

BLUSH or GO PALE – Blood may be rushing to your head (blush) or blood may be racing to parts of the body where it is needed more (pale) e.g. muscle groups

MUSCLES TENSE/SHAKE – your muscles are getting prepared to run or fight with a rush of blood

HEART BEATS FASTER/ BLOOD PRESSURE INCREASES – the heart is beating faster and the blood pressure increases ensuring that enough oxygen is being pumped around the body

DRY MOUTH – saliva production stops because the digestive system shuts down

HAIRS STAND ON END/GOOSEBUMPS – hair follicles are attached to our muscles so when our muscles contract the hairs stand up

BUTTERFLIES IN THE STOMACH – stomach muscles will become sensitive as blood leaves them to fuel other parts of the body e.g. muscles

BLADDER /WET OURSELVES – as with other muscles the bladder contracts making us want to urinate

BOWELS EMPTY – Evolutionary science suggests the body is making itself lighter to run, physiological theories suggest the sphincter relaxes resulting in defaecation

It really can help us all to think of the body responses as automatic and designed to help – however it can also help to have some strategies to manage them when they happen. They can feel overwhelming as though we are going mad, going to pass out, and we might behave in ways we wouldn't normally. After finishing the drawing and explaining to your family why it is happening, ask everyone to talk about how it makes them behave – do they feel like screaming, hitting out, crying and many other options.

It's good to have a conversation as a family about what you can all do to support each other when the flight or fight gets triggered. Do children want to run to their safe place, or have a hug? Does one of you want to cry and it be ok so that the rest of the family will understand and not be upset by it.

This is a link for older children on Flight/Fight and feeling anxious:
<https://youtu.be/rpolpKTWrp4>

This is a link for younger children: https://youtu.be/FfSbWc3O_5M

This link takes you to a really nice video that the whole family can watch – you can even make the 'Glitter jars' if you have the right stuff:
<https://youtu.be/RVA2N6tX2c>

Finally, one more activity to help promote feelings of safety for your children.

Some of you may be familiar with the 'worry monsters', you can buy them on the high street but don't need to. The idea is that at night your children can write down any worries they have and pop them into the worry monster. As parents we then take the pieces of paper out once the child is asleep and **magic** when the child wakes up in the morning the worry is gone!

You and the children can decorate a jar or plastic pot (depending on your creativity you could make it look like a monster!) You can just call it the worry pot and tell the children that the worry monster comes and eats them in the night. You can say that there are lots of worried children at moment which is why you have a pot rather than the actual monster as they are busy taking all the children's worries away.

You must remember to take the worries out every night, but as well as reassuring for the children it will also alert you to what they are actually worried about and then you can be working out how to support them.

So these are activities to promote safety in home and with your children.

You also need to be mindful of your own safety and over the next few weeks we will be continuing to offer ways to support you.

Remember you are not superhuman -this situation is new to us all.

Be kind to yourself!

