

## **Helping Your Child Conquer Anxiety During COVID-19: A Virtual Panel**

### **Panelists:**

Ann Dolin (moderator), from Educational Connections: Tutoring and Test Prep

Maria Zimmitti, PhD, from Georgetown Psychology

Allison Sibley, PhD, from The Sibley Group therapy

Steve Harner, PsyD, from Child and Family Associates of Greater Washington

Sara Weiser, OTR/L, from Good Beginnings Therapy

### **Adults and anxiety**

Contrary to what people may believe to be the case, most mental health practitioners are working more with parents/adults than with kids.

This is not to say that kids are not experiencing an impact due to the pandemic, but rather that adults are experiencing a greater impact and in greater numbers.

The advice is to recognize that you, as an adult, are under stress. Being able to acknowledge this is the first step to managing it.

Find a way to manage some of your stress so that it is not projected onto your child.

Recognize that it is okay to not be okay and that you, too, can ask for help.

### **Kids and anxiety**

Overall kids are doing better than one would expect both related to the pandemic specifically and in terms of general functioning.

One explanation is that many kids are now generally less scheduled and have more time to relax. They are spending more time with their parents, have less activities to manage, spend less time in the care, and are better able to manage their school work on a flexible schedule.

But some kids are anxious and experiencing an uptick in stress levels.

For some kids, their anxiety comes from seeing how anxious and stressed their parents are so creating a calm, safe, stable environment is key.

For some kids, their stress is manifesting not towards a fear of the virus or getting sick but rather in other areas. Suddenly they are having trouble sleeping or they are fearful of dogs when outside, etc..

For older kids there is some of a sense of hopelessness over the situation and there they are having trouble managing their disappointment.

### **Ideas for managing anxiety**

- Preserve the relationship
  - In times of great stress, the primary rule of thumb is focus on preserving the relationship as parent and child.

- How does one do this?
  - Deescalate conflict by being the person to walk away or “drop the rope” in the struggle
  - Pick your battles
  - Engage in your own self-care—get outside, have some time alone
  - Give thought to how each day is beginning and ending and how family members are starting and finishing their days
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- Routines and schedules
  - Create a structure to the day, but realize that it needs to be flexible.
  - You might need to act in the moment to change it.
  - Where there is crisis there is opportunity so look for opportunities to create rituals and routines that are new, fresh, and fun
- Movement
  - This is essential for regulating emotions and energy—and this is true for adults too!
  - This can be as small as getting up from the couch, desk, chair a few times a day
  - This can be as large as everyone completing their own exercise routine each day
  - There is a lot of in between space here as well
  - What about push back from your kids?
    - Be proactive about them pushing back by putting it into their schedule
    - Making it playful or more like a game or activity
    - Go on a “city walk” where no one has to do anything or talk to anyone just put on headphones and go
    - Compromise around this (and you can use this for chores too): “I will allow more screen time as you’ve asked if you agree to two chores and one time outside each day.”

### **Managing disappointment**

Our kids are missing out on many events, occasions, and experiences. They are having to manage a lot of disappointment.

- Sit with it—just acknowledge how they feel and listen
- Reflect it and empathize with it—“I hear your disappointment. It sounds like you are actually kind of mad. I understand. I have been looking forward to that too. It is sad to miss it.”
- Resist giving advice or “fixing” it. Instead try, “Let’s think about what you are missing and see if there is something we can do about it even though we know we can’t really fix it or change it.”

### **Last thoughts**

Kids social energy is being compressed to the home so you will be getting the good and the bad of that (as will their siblings) since they do not have school/teachers/peers to spread that out.

You can stretch or change your limits/boundaries while still having limits/boundaries. “You get more screen time, but we are still respecting the limits about no bad language or graphic content.”

Contact the NPS Counselors

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