

Building resilience in children despite COVID-19

by Dr Ilse Ruane

The most important factor in building resilience in children and helping them process situations is to have loving adults who are there for them and who are physically, emotionally and spiritually available. Children rely on us to figure out how to interpret events. Unfortunately, we cannot protect our children from the consequences of COVID-19. However, the way we respond and the support we offer can help buffer the consequences. This can also make it easier for our children to bounce back. They listen to our words, notice our stress levels and watch what we do. Feeling secure and connected to parents, family members, teachers, friends or community is the greatest protection children have. It builds their resilience now and well into the future. With a support system in place, you will be able to keep negative beliefs to a minimum, calm fears, restore ideas around 'normal' and pull together as a family so that we all may bounce back, and even grow from the challenges we are facing.

So, what can we, as parents, do to help them?

Listen to fears and concerns

Listening shows parental love and acceptance as well as helping children figure out problems. Children react to challenges differently to adults. After physical reassurance, a good hug, ask children what they understand about what is happening and what questions/concerns they have. Listen for misunderstandings and remember it is common for children to have fears based on information given. Asking children directly what they understand or how they feel may not be enough to get them to voice their feelings.

- Young children may need your help to find the words to express what they are feeling. Offer them words to choose from by telling them it is normal to feel sad, confused or scared. Be a role model by sharing how you are feeling and explaining what you are doing to help yourself feel better. Encourage them to express feelings through play, drawing, storytelling or other creative activities.
- Older children and teens might find it easier to talk about what others think. "My friend Sarah said that she feels



afraid. Isn't she weird?" When this occurs, do not remove the mask by saying, "I'll bet you are really feeling weird too." Rather talk about what Sarah must be feeling and how it is understandable. Ask your child what Sarah's mom and dad could do to make her feel more secure.

- Try not to force your child to talk. Some children will act as if they are not bothered by the situation. If so, there is no reason to push them, but tell them you are there to listen when they are ready. Your child may have concerns but the overarching current need is a sense of normalcy. Normal at this time of lockdown is tricky to achieve. Discuss achieving "normal in lockdown" with your children; they have amazing ideas to try.
- Another way to open the discussion is to model your own way of working through something. Let your children see you talking, exercising, reading, relaxing and observe what happens. Remember little eyes are watching our moves.

What to say

More than anything else, we must be honest about what is happening. Sadly, COVID-19 is not the kind of truth that we can protect

our children from, but the truth does not need to include every gory detail. How much detail to share will depend on their ability to understand. Age appropriate information and following the rule of thumb, along with only answering the questions they ask. There is no need to give more information than what would satisfy their current question. They will come back to ask more when they are mentally, emotionally and psychologically ready to do so. Young children will need simple, concrete explanations of what is happening and how it affects them. For example, "Why can't I go and play with Peter yet?" If they have a misunderstanding of events, correct them. But if you get "It's just while we have to stay safe and not spread the virus, hey mom?" then there is no need to add more details. Their simple explanations may be exactly what they need to believe to feel safe. The goal here is to try not to take away that sense of security they are constructing for themselves.

Older children and teens will likely ask for and benefit from additional information about the situation and actions being taken in the country. Also be sure to open

conversations about what they are seeing on social media such as Instagram. There is a lot of nonsense doing the rounds that needs to be unpacked.

Saying "I do not know" is OK. Do not be concerned about saying the perfect words, there are no perfect words. It is OK to say you do not know why it is happening or how to solve it. The main goal is to reinforce that you and your children are safe. Focus on the steps you are taking to become safe. If you can, point out things like the social distancing and staying home so that doctors and nurses can work to help those affected. They may also be worried about the safety of their friends or extended family. Be honest if you really do not know, but reassure them that their friends' parents are taking care of them. You might tell them about how the doctors, nurses and government are working hard to fight against the virus; how the farmers are growing food; the grocery stores are still open to ensure we can buy goods or how rubbish removal workers are keeping our communities clean.

Limit exposure to the media

Try to monitor and limit your children's exposure to media especially the news and fake news. News coverage is often overwhelming. Ultimately, it may change the way they view the world. They may begin to see it as a scary place. There is so much fake news and conspiracy theories circulating currently on social media that we need to be extra vigilant about what teens and children are consuming. We need to try to encourage messages of hope and optimism. This helps build resilience. Even in the most difficult situation, your positive outlook on the future will help your children see good things in the world around them, helping them through challenging times not only now but in the future as well.

Controlling the controllables

Easier said than done but try... control what you have control over and try not worrying about what we cannot control.

- Get back to some routines. As soon as possible, try to follow some routines because they provide comfort and a familiarity in their structure. Follow as normal a schedule as possible. Try to maintain household rules and discipline. Rules and discipline provide children with security. It is fine to let your children be more dependent on you at this time. Things that may seem small to you, like watching television or having friends over, are important to your children and will be seen as big losses. Be patient and help children think of alternative activities if their regular activities are cancelled. Provide plenty of opportunities for play and learn.
- Children cope better and recover sooner when they help others because it creates

a sense of control and helps children feel better about themselves. Little things such as drawing granny a picture and sending it to her via WhatsApp can make a huge difference to all. Phoning a friend that may be forgotten in the usual social mix. There are many apps available that can bring us "together" at this time, so let's use them to break the disconnect.

- For the older children and teens, another way to encourage a child's sense of control is to review your own family plan together. What are we planning to do if x happens? Coming up with a family plan increases their sense of security.

In summary:

- Focus on building resilience through some structure and routine. Our mental health relies on our physical routines, all too easily lost during challenging times. No routine whatsoever is unsettling. Adults and children may be happier with a rough schedule day to day.
 - **Exercise:** Daily, or every second day, exercise will make your children happier, even if they complain. It will probably make you happier too. Exercise affects mood, energy level, learning, and more. If you cannot get outside, Yoga or Pilates are great, or seek out online exercise apps. I also know some of our coaches are offering training programs, make use of their expertise and skills at this time. It creates connection and gives you, your children (and the coach) something to fill a portion of the day.
 - **Sleep:** A consistent routine, including a consistent bedtime, encourages better sleep. Sleep heals.
 - **Nutrition:** Eat as healthy as you can. Cooking and baking are a great activity when inside all day and they build relationships.
 - **Screen time:** I cannot stress this one enough. Stay on top of screen time. Kids who spend too much time on screen get moody and edgy, especially the teens. Open-ended limits lead to problems. Set limits where possible. For adults, you may need to do the same, particularly by taking breaks from the news. There are so many conspiracy theories going around and these will escalate as time progresses. Use time on-screen wisely and concisely. Be critical of what you consume as real.
 - **Relationships:** One of the best uses for screens is in relationships with true friends and family. Let's use technology well. Support your family and your children by reaching out regularly to friends and relatives during this time.
- Stay vigilant around online schooling. This is new to all, expect your child will need supervision and guidance while working

online. Children with learning concerns will need more direct involvement and structure than same-age peers to get online work done. Ask for teacher support early. If your child is struggling to learn at home, seek out advice for what to try next.

- Stay realistic but reassuring about COVID-19. Remember, children process things differently from adults. Encourage discussion and questions but avoid flooding with facts. Children tend to need straightforward answers to their questions. Then wait and see what further questions your answer brings. Answer those questions in the same way, to the point and reassuring.

We need to change our thinking around staying home due to COVID-19. Yes, the reality is present but there is also hope. If we dare to deconstruct the dominant negative narratives and stand against these stories by breathing life into alternate stories of hope and growth, we then take a stance which is very different. We are then a community working to protect the vulnerable among us. We are then building our "community". We are then teaching our children solidarity and preparedness, as a family, as a community, and as a country. We are then redefining our values and we will find gains during this challenging time.

I leave you with a parting question: 

How often are we given the opportunity to spend 21 (or more) days with our family?



**DR ILSE
RUANE**
Psychology

- Marital, Couples & Family Therapy
- Counselling Children, Adolescents & Adults
- "Teen" Challenges
- Behavioural & Adjustment Challenges
- Stress-Related Challenges
- Adjustment to Depression & Anxiety
- Subject & Career Counselling
- Psychometric Testing

**For an appointment please call
083 376 1995**

Fees are charged according to Scale of Benefits

Practice Address: 27 Fish Eagle Street,
Silver Lakes, Pretoria

Pr. Nr. 0860000114022
Reg. No.: PS 0080543