

Attachment and Experiential Therapy

Tips for challenging times

What Children Need

Developmental Needs Must be Considered



Parents need to remember whether something is age-appropriate for children. It is common for parents to be confused by children who are curious and bright. This can lead parents to believe that these children are more capable developmentally than they really are. It can lead parents to inadvertently expect that their children can handle complex information and even emotionally charged information.

The reality is that children from birth to about 12 years old are mostly limbic brain thinkers. This means that their “logic center” (the prefrontal cortex) is not mature yet and thus not as robust as it will be in later human developmental stages. A limbic brain thinker largely processes felt experiences which are driven by emotions. Limbic brain thinkers can “connect the dots” in private (i.e. unbeknownst to the parent) and non-rational ways. For example, children may feel that pain of being quarantined with cranky parents and associate this feeling with a fear that they are unlovable. This may never be detected by others; however, it could be something that if repeated enough could lead to feelings of being “less than” or unlovable. However, it is important to note that the more emotionally charged an event is, the more it will be remembered and interpreted by the limbic brain.

It is best to give young children simple explanations that do not require mature reasoning. It is also best for parents to deliver such explanations in kind and engaging ways. Children will benefit when parents use active listening skills (see [Active Listening](#) document) because it helps to create an emotionally safe environment.

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Emotionally Safe Environment



Parents need to remember that no one thrives (adults or children) under criticism. Children need predictable rules, and kind, approachable guidance from adults to learn good behaviors. Children are born wanting to please their parents and be in good relationship with them. When children are not well-behaved, it is not because they are “just bad kids”, rather, it is due to a combination of their immature nervous system (which means that it is hard from them to tolerate stress), not getting sufficient predictable, loving guidance for behaviors and/or not having developmental needs met. It is beyond the scope of this tip sheet to discuss the developmental needs of children. It is good to know that there are many good [books](#) out there.

Rules need to be age-appropriate and predictable. Predictable rules are not “pulled out of thin air” at the whim of a disgruntled parents. The rules and consequences are set prior to needing them. It is best when they are collaboratively made with children. The consequences always need to be fair and just enough of a “thorn” to motivate children to not do the undesirable behaviors. For example, it is not fair to ground a young child for a week. It is too long of a period for a child, it feels debilitating to the child, it leads to feeling “splat” and unmotivated and it contributes to power struggle dynamics (very dysfunctional and ineffective parenting). Consequences need to be delivered in a firm and non-scary way. You will find much more detail about how to set up rules and consequences that work in [The Good Parent Workbook](#).

Feeling Valued and Connected



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Feeling valued and connected to others is what all human beings want. Anything that leads to shame is very painful to humans; it is especially toxic to children because they do not have the maturity and personal resources to know how to make sense of it. It is important for parents to use kindness even while being strict (strict simply means “I do as I say...I enforce the rules”, it does not mean that you must be harsh; harsh is harmful to children). When a parent inadvertently does something that leads to a child feeling shame, it is very important for the parent to make a repair and reconnect with the child. Do not let them suffer shame experiences alone.

When parents practice [active listening](#), they will find that emotional intimacy increases and people feel much more connected, valuable and loved. This happens even when people do not agree. Parents do not have to agree with their children; they do need to hear them and demonstrate acceptance, understanding and validation of their concerns. Parents can best guide children this way because children will better be able to respect parents who demonstrate respectable behaviors.

Play



All people need to remember how to play. Play helps people tap into creativity, figure out problems, access and identify emotions and more. Play is good for creating positive felt-sense. Play creates healthy internal resources for building resiliency, gratitude and courage. Play is good for peoples' immune systems.

When feeling very stressed (as during times of uncertainty), it is important to move your body as this will release pent up energy that is generated by the brains fight/flight/freeze circuit. Walking, yoga, dance, sports, charades, cuddling and engaging with pets are examples of things that may seem like luxuries during stressful times, but they are necessities for well-being. It is important to find ways to include these activities in daily life.

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Competent Problem-Solving



Parents can relax when they realize that they do not have to be perfect to raise healthy, well-adjusted children. As it was pointed out many years ago by parenting expert, Donald Winnicott, you just need to be “good enough”. Psychology research shows that it is quite challenging to live with a person who has perfectionistic tendencies.

Parents who demonstrate that it is okay to make mistakes and demonstrate to children how repairs are made are giving wonderful life-long gifts to their children. These parents are modeling competent problem-solving. They are providing enormous experiences of safety to their children because their children will feel that their parents can be relied on to engage with life’s problems. This is very important during times of crisis. Parents don’t have to be robots about their feelings; they need to share them appropriately and not be “over the top”. Parents need to model reflective thinking and problem-solving about the things that are in their control to influence. They need to model that we always have the capacity to choose (even when quarantined; we can choose to be grumpy or kind; creative or bored etc.).

Other



Of course, healthy diets and daily schedules and behaviors that promote good sleep hygiene are important as these will influence people’s capacities and moods. Children do not do well with junk food and it is beneficial for all to restrict it.

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[68 Page Guide for Awakened Mind and Relaxed Body](#)

[The Good Parent Workbook – proven parenting tips to prevent and address anxiety in children](#)