Practical Parenting during a Pandemic
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In tough times children need a little extra:

C: Consistency
A: Accessibility
R: Responsiveness
E: Emotional Connectedness

They are vulnerable to negative thinking about themselves, others, and their world.

Their motor (i.e. their nervous system) can run too fast, leaving them vulnerable to anxiety and ‘problematic’ emotional and behavioural responses.

They can be unsure about whether they can rely on adults to keep them safe from harm and meet their needs.

Consistency:
- Is soothing
- Supports wellbeing and a positive outlook
- Supports new learning

Maintain existing routines. Turn a sometimes thing into an always thing.

Accessibility

Supports experiences:
- That you are there for them
- That they are a person of worth
- That they don’t have to cope with the world on their own

Check in with the child proactively, and to a regime you can implement consistently.

Responsiveness

Supports experiences:
- That their needs/experiences are understood and important
- That they are a person of worth
- That they can rely on you

If you can guess what the child is thinking or feeling, say it out loud. Use your words!
If you can anticipate a need, address it proactively.

Emotional Connectedness

Supports experiences:
- That you get it!
- That their experience is important.
- That you understand and can be relied upon

Communicate empathy in your tone of voice and facial gestures. Regulate to calm.
Consistency:

We are experiencing remarkable times. The Coronavirus (COVID 19) has brought with it a great deal of uncertainty, for all of us. Uncertainty is stressful. Certainty allows us to predict what will happen, when it will happen, and how it will happen. Predictability allows us to get on with what we are doing unhindered by uncertainty about what lies ahead. When the road ahead is difficult, predictability allows for preparation.

Consistency, such as in the routines we maintain in everyday life, supports experiences of predictability. Consistency is reassuring. It has long been accepted that children need consistency. This is, in part, because consistency is optimal for learning about how the world works and how to influence the world. This perception of influence is a powerful source of reassurance. The importance of consistency is also its effect on children’s nervous system. Consistency is calming. Consistency supports a confident approach to life and relationships. Consistency supports successful endeavour and a perception of competence.

Consistency acts as a buffer against stress and uncertainty in troubled times. This is true of all of us. We need to maintain what routines we can, for our own wellbeing. Our wellbeing will ‘rub-off’ on the children and young people in our care.
Consistency supports ‘knowing’, about what will happen, when it will happen, and how it will happen.

‘Knowing’ what will happen, when it will happen, and how it will happen is reassuring!

Consistency supports wellbeing – a state where they think, feel, act and perform best.

It’s like their temperature . . .

Too high or too low is a problem.

Consistency supports ‘knowing’, about what will happen, when it will happen, and how it will happen.

In tough times, children and young people need a little extra consistency!

Consistency is calming – it slows their ‘motor’

What routines do we already have?
• __________________________
• __________________________
• __________________________
• __________________________
• __________________________
Maintain these!

What do we do sometimes?
• __________________________
• __________________________
• __________________________
• __________________________
• __________________________
Make (at-least) one of these consistent!

How will I know it is helping?

Preschoolers:
• Cooperates
• Is easily soothed
• Sleeps well
• Explores
• Plays independently

Primary Schoolers:
• Cooperates
• Easily soothed
• Sleeps well
• Sustains attention/focus
• Try’s things
• Accepts separations

Teens:
• Cooperates
• Regulates self
• Interest in appearance
• Adult-like thinking
• Maintains interests

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Accessibility:

Children first learn that we are accessible to them during infancy when we attend to them whether they are crying or quiet.

Attending to infants whether they are crying or quiet provides experiences of their worth, of our proximity and responsiveness, and of their safety in the world. In time, these experiences support emerging beliefs about themselves, others, and their world that influence a child’s approach to life and relationships. I refer to these beliefs as attachment representations (Pearce, 2016). They are otherwise referred to in the child development and psychology literature as attachment working models or schema. Attending to infants whether they are crying or quiet is also profoundly reassuring, such that they maintain a state of wellbeing and explore their world unhindered by the debilitating and restricting effects of anxiety. Attending to infants whether they are crying or quiet supports learning that adults in a caregiving role can be relied upon to attend to them without having to control and regulate the proximity of adults to make it so.

Accessibility supports a confident approach to life and relationships, exploration, and attainment of developmental milestones. In tough times, children and young people can experience a heightened need for the profound experience of reassurance that is afforded to them by the presence of an accessible (and responsive) adult.
In tough times, children need a little extra of your **Accessibility**!

Your accessibility supports experiences:
- Of their being important
- Of their being able to depend on you
- Of the world being less overwhelming

Children learn about our accessibility when we connect with them *whether they are crying or quiet*. When do you do so?
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________

When are the times they initiate interaction with you?
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________
- ___________________

Can you anticipate any of these times?

Your accessibility is calming – it slows their ‘motor’

Your accessibility reinforces learning that you are there for them, even when you are not *with* them.

**Enrich Accessibility:**
1. Make consistent a time when you initiate a check in with them; **OR**
2. Check in proactively when you anticipate that they would otherwise seek your attention.

**Implement consistently** (only set out to do what you can maintain)

**How will I know it is helping?**

**Preschoolers:**
- Explores
- Plays independently

**Primary Schoolers:**
- Accepts separations
- Seeks help *when needed*

**Teens:**
- Shows self-reliance
- Talks about future independence

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Responsiveness Part One: Understanding

Science shows that feeling heard and understood by a trusted adult is like a psychological vaccine against mental health problems and behaviour problems. Feeling heard and understood supports wellbeing and a confident approach to life and relationships. Feeling heard and understood reassures a child or young person that they can depend on adults in a caregiving role. Feeling heard and understood supports ideas that their experiences are real, that their experience matters, and that they matter.

In tough times, we cannot always make the problem go away, but engaging with understanding offers a powerful experience of connection that supports wellbeing and resilience.
In tough times, children need a little extra understanding (Responsiveness Part One)

Children need to feel heard. Feeling heard offers experiences:

- That they matter
- That adults ‘get it’ and can be relied upon
- That adults are awesome!

Feeling heard is reassuring – it slows their motor and reduces the incidence of behaviours associated with anxiety.

Communicating understanding supports verbal expression of their experience (rather than acting it out).

What are some of the things you typically say that communicate understanding?

- ___________________________________
- ___________________________________
- ___________________________________
- ___________________________________
- ___________________________________
- ___________________________________
- ___________________________________

Examples:

- You look sleepy
- You really like that
- You look like you have had a rough day

Think of two activities a child in your care engages in each day. In ten words or less, write a simple statement that reflects their experience of the activity?

- ___________________________________________________
- ___________________________________________________
- ___________________________________________________
- ___________________________________________________
- ___________________________________________________
- ___________________________________________________

Say them when they are doing the activity!

If you think you know the answer to the question, don’t ask it. Say the answer!

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How will I know it is helping?

Preschoolers:
- Using their words
- Playing and exploring

Primary Schoolers:
- Using their words
- Giving new things a go

Teens:
- Using their words
- Joining in with family
Use your words

When children are stressed, the part of their brain that is responsible for expressive language is turned down, and the part of the brain that is responsible for instinctive, survival responding is turned up.

This instinctive, survival responding is commonly referred to as the fight-flight-freeze response. In children, it can manifest in the following ways:

- **Fight**: Controlling, aggressive, destructive behaviours
- **Flight**: Hyperactivity, running away, hiding
- **Freeze**: Reduced responsiveness

These are ‘automatic’ responses to stressful situations and feelings of anxiety. All children have this response ‘in-built’. All adults do too!

If we want to reduce a child’s proneness to exhibiting behaviours associated with high arousal levels and activation of the fight-flight-freeze response we need to ‘slow their motor’.

Offering experiences of being *heard* and *understood* slows their motor. It also supports them to express what is happening for them, as opposed to acting it out.

So, instead of asking the child to ‘use their words’ I would encourage you to ‘use your words’.

A little extra understanding: The Pick-up-Sticks Game

Children need to feel heard. Feeling heard offers experiences:
- That they matter
- That adults ‘get it’ and can be relied upon
- That adults are awesome!

Feeling heard is reassuring – it slows their motor and reduces the incidence of behaviours associated with anxiety.

Communicating understanding supports verbal expression of their experience (rather than acting it out).

If you think you know the answer to the question, don’t ask it.
Say the answer!

Step One: Familiarise self and children with the pick-up-sticks game.

Step Two: Play a game

Step Three: Play a game, but this time each person has to say something that makes them happy, sad, angry, worried when they pick up the following coloured sticks:
- Happy
- Sad
- Angry
- Worried
- Green is a free pass

(Note: if they can’t/won’t, they have to put the stick back in the pile)

Step Four: Play again, but this time each player has to say what makes the next player happy, sad, angry, or worried.

Note: Adults, try not to use the free pass (Green) yourself.
Responsiveness Part Two: Proactive Needs Provision

Proactive needs provision is so important!

When they were babies, it was how our children and young people learnt that they could rely on us to keep them safe and respond to their needs. In doing so, we provided our children with the profound reassurance that allowed them to switch their focus to exploring and learning about their world, developing their skills and experiencing mastery along the way. It was an important way in which we fostered their capacity to be resilient and self-reliant.

When children and young people become anxious they can show some signs of emotional and behavioural regression, such that they become less independent and more demanding. They may seem a little selfish. At such times they need a little extra needs provision by you to reassure them that it is OK, their needs are still important and you are here to help!
In tough times, children need a little extra needs provision
(Responsiveness Part Two)

Responsiveness supports **secure attachment**

**Responding proactively communicates:**
- I am here for you
- Your needs are understood
- You are important
- You can trust and depend on me

**Responsiveness lowers arousal.**

Disordered  Insecure  Secure

![Chart showing disordered, insecure, and secure attachment]

**What are some of needs you respond to without the child asking?**
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________

**Examples:**
- Food, Clothes, Shelter, Protection
- Activities, Play
- Love, Care, Attention, Boundaries

**What are some of the needs a child in your care asks you to respond to or addresses themselves?**
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________
- ______________________________

**Can you anticipate them asking/addressing? Would you address/allow?**

If so, address the need **proactively** (before they ask or address it themselves).

**Preschoolers:**
- Sharing
- Playing and exploring

**Primary Schoolers:**
- Sharing
- Independent play

**Teens:**
- Sharing
- Maintaining interests

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Emotional Connectedness

Emotional connectedness is a by-product of interaction. When you are interacting with a person you are likely to feel an ‘echo’ of their emotion. This is a form of empathy that is instinctive and, with few exceptions, we all have the capacity to experience this instinctive empathy.

The ‘echo’ a parent feels of their child’s emotion played an important role in supporting the child’s emotional development, including:

- the child’s emotional awareness – their own and the emotions of others
- the child’s capacity to regulate their emotions
- the child’s capacity to regulate their emotions in consideration of others.

Emotional connectedness is important!

Co-regulation refers to a form of emotional connectedness whereby you express in your tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures your ‘echo’ of an emotion that is congruent with that of the child, and return to calm. Co-regulation is instrumental in supporting children to develop the capacity to self-regulate during their formative years as they ‘follow’ the adult back to calm via the established emotional connection. As the child returns to calm, we feel calm too. Hence, the term ‘co-regulation’.

Emotional connectedness and co-regulation support experiences for the child:

- that their experience is important
- that their caregiver is accessible to them
- that their caregiver understands them
- that their caregiver can be relied upon as a source of comfort and restoration of feelings of wellbeing.

Emotional connectedness and co-regulation are reassuring.

When emotionally connecting with a child intentionally it is important to be aware of the dose. Too much can heighten the child’s emotions. Rather, match their level or, in the case of anxiety, anger and distress, briefly express a toned-down version of the emotion (thus allowing an emotional connection to be made) before returning to calm.

More generally, play and other activities done with the child support emotional connection. As referred to above, emotional connectedness is a by-product of interaction. So play with the child or children in your care, allow yourself to feel what they feel, and regularly return to calm. In doing so you are supporting them to experience emotions as part of the richness of life and not something to be avoided due to their potential to overwhelm. You are also supporting smaller emotions more generally and the child’s own capacity to regulate themselves.
In tough times, children need a little extra emotional connectedness.

Emotional Connectedness helps you regulate a child’s emotions.

When connected, we feel an ‘echo’ of what they feel.

Child is distressed

Connection

Adult is distressed

Child returns to calm via connection

Adult regulates to calm

On a typical day . . .

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<tr>
<th>Your emotions:</th>
<th>Your child’s:</th>
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You are already emotionally-connected!

Emotional Connectedness supports:

- Secure Attachment
- Trust in Accessibility to Needs Provision
- Optimal Arousal

Activities your child engages in (with you)

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<th>Activity:</th>
<th>Your child’s emotions:</th>
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Allow yourself to show your ‘echo’ of their emotion. Regulate to calm

It is working when children show:

- Natural emotions
- Consideration of others

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Emotional connectedness supports wellbeing – a state where they think, feel and act their best.
Self-Care

Caring for kids during difficult times is a tough gig. Their extraordinary needs at this time can leave you feeling like a failure. It can distort your perception of yourself and the child in your care.

It is important to consider the role and importance of your own wellbeing when caring for children in these tough times.

In a state of wellbeing you:

• think at your best
• feel at your best
• perform at your best.

In a state of distress – that is, when your nervous system is too highly activated – you are incapable of performing at your best in any task or role that you undertake; including caregiving. The consequence of not performing at your best can be shame and distress, which compounds the problem.

We need to intentionally focus on the positives; both in terms of what we are doing and the signs that we are making a difference. If we don’t think about these things, we are unlikely to ‘see’ them.
Humans are problem-solvers. We tend to notice when things are not right!

7+8=15  
6-3=3  
2x2=4  
10+3=13  
4+4=9

1+3=4  
7-6=1  
4÷2=2  
5x5=25  
20÷2=10

We also tend to ‘see’ what is in our thoughts and not notice what is not.

Such as when we play ‘spot the yellow car’ with the kids (AKA ‘Spotto’).

Our focus on problems can mean we miss the good stuff! Leaving only problems!

7+8=15 ✓  
6-3=3 ✓  
2x2=4 ✓  
10+3=13 ✓  
4+4=9 ✓

1+3=4 ✓  
7-6=1 ✓  
4÷2=2 ✓  
5x5=25 ✓  
20÷2=10 ✓

We need to focus on the things that help, & the signs that we are performing well!

What am I doing that offers CARE?  
What are the signs it is helping?

Consistency: ______________________  
Accessibility: ______________________

Responsiveness: ____________________  
Emotional Connectedness: ____________

This can feel overwhelming and make our ‘motor’ run too fast

We do not think, feel, act and perform at our best our ‘motor’ runs too fast.

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