

Helping Kids Learn – Post #3 Managing Anxiety: the Brain and Learning 4/4/20

STEM: SEL – Social and Emotional Learning

Many of us went to schools where academics, phys ed, and, if we were lucky, the arts took up the entire school day – plus lunch and, hopefully, recess, of course. Now schools are paying more attention to making sure students are *available* for learning. We know that even young children bring stress and anxiety from the outside world into their classrooms. And stress limits the brain’s ability to learn.

It’s true for families who are confined to home during the COVID-19 crisis – just that word provokes anxiety. This can be adapted for all ages. See **Lift the Level** below.

Support Learning – Stress-Reducing Suggestions

Here’s a simple version of making the brain ready to learn:

- Natural chemicals are released in our brains for lots of reasons – to wake us up, to let us sleep, to make us feel happy and to make us respond to danger are a few reasons.
- Cortisol is a stress or “danger response” chemical. Cells release it and it attaches to other cells when we are upset.
- When cortisol attaches to cells, it makes it hard-to- impossible for them to take in new information; we may feel anxious, and we experience a fight-or-flight reaction.
- The effects of cortisol have to wear off before our brains are ready to learn something new.

What can we do to reduce cortisol?

- Limit the time spent watching and talking about the current crisis. Learn about COVID-19 in small chunks from trusted sources.
- Even if your children aren’t actively listening, they hear everything! They sense upset and agitation in adults.
- Talk honestly to your kids – of any age. Tell the truth – although the information is changing daily, sometimes hourly, you can state that this is what we know right now; we are learning more all the time.
- Make a list of what is upsetting you and have your kids do the same. One or two words is enough; sometimes all you can manage. Go over their lists with them. Ask them to pick out one thing that really bothers them or bothers them the most.
- Write the most bothersome thing on a separate piece of paper at least 3x3 inches big. Read it, say it out loud, then crumple it up – put a lot of energy into this – and throw it in the trash.
- Breathe. Deep, cleansing breaths actually help clear your mind and your body.
- Sleep. Easier to say than to do for many people, even naps help so don’t worry if you can’t sleep, do something quiet (avoid screens and blue light!) and try to sleep in an hour.
- Organize your time – if you’re working from home, explain your own needs to your kids and find a balance between their needs and yours, between work and family time.

- Do something with your kids that you wouldn't have time for in more normal times: make a food your mom made; draw, paint, play with modeling dough (recipe below for making it and it's great for all ages!); sing together; read aloud – read to your kids and, if they can, have them read to you – a poem a day will do.
- Make two lists: what is better about being home; what is harder about being home. Try to address or cross off at least one hard thing.
- Smile. Yes, it sounds silly but it really does improve mood. If your family likes jokes, tell some!
- If you believe in the power of prayer, use it!
- Know and tell your kids that this is not going to last forever. Make a plan for the first thing you want to do together when times get better.

Lift the Level! Kids of any age can feel anxious. They only have their years on Earth to frame their direct experience. These things can be reassuring:

1. Read about and discuss how people have overcome hardships.
2. Talk about your own family and how they have dealt with difficult times. A few examples are the 1930s Depression, oppression in their native country, the Vietnam and racial equality conflicts of the 1960s, the AIDS crisis.
3. Talk with older children when younger ones are asleep or well-occupied in another room.
4. Keep a journal. There are several famous ones about plagues, earthquakes and fires. You will decide if they are appropriate for your family.

STEM Online

Websites are suggestions and should be previewed by adults. No endorsement is implied.

Brain and learning <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/film-festival-brain-learning>
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/brain-based-learning-resources>

Poem a day <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poems/children/>
<https://poets.org/poem-a-day>

Homemade play dough <https://www.iheartnaptime.net/play-dough-recipe/#wprm-recipe-container-126418> You can make it without Cream of Tartar, a stabilizer, but it won't be as smooth and squishy; store in refrigerator.

NJ Student Learning Standards

2.1 Mental Health: Social and Emotional Wellness – Personal Growth and Development (PGD) .1, .2, .3 and .4

2.1 Mental Health: Social and Emotional Wellness – Emotional Health (EH) .3, .4, and .5