

## The Power of Play during times of crisis

In these uncertain and difficult times, parents and carers should take comfort in the knowledge that play can help to reduce their children's levels of anxiety. Your child may be feeling a whole host of emotions from excited, nervous or even frightened by the news about Covid-19 and the changes it has brought to their lives and the adults around them.

Claire – South Hill's Play Therapist - explains how the power of play can support you and your family during this Covid-19 crisis:

Play is how your child learns to develop physically, mentally, socially and emotionally. It allows children to bring meaning to experiences in their own way and in their own time. Children often don't have the words to express how they feel. So instead, they will naturally take these confused and concerned feelings into their play, to instinctively try to make sense of them.

Therefore in this moment of stress it is really important to give them time to play – rather than relying on talking alone to allay any fears. It is known that through the safety of play, children can build great resilience, empathy and learn to manage stress.

The following 'Top Tips' was taken from a fellow Play Therapist (Ms Charleston) to help parents and carers think about how and what to play with their children:

### TOP TIPS

1. Get down to your child's level – this helps you to be in tune with them - and remove all distractions (e.g. TV, mobiles) so you can focus purely on your child.
2. Allow your child to lead the play – pretend they are the director of the play and you are the actor (although you'll always oversee safety).
3. When your child expresses their feelings, try to name those feelings. For example, "You seem really angry about that" or "You're feeling sad about that".
4. Be inspired by nature – sticks, sand, dirt, shells, rocks, pebbles and water can trigger your child's creativity. Instigate a backyard treasure hunt, create a nature collage or a rock painting.
5. Recyclable objects – Normal recyclable items such as cardboard boxes, string and plastic containers are excellent for creative building (e.g. houses, cars, trains or a rocket ship). Children love collecting 'treasure' to use in this type of play.
6. Children love nurturing and connecting activities, particularly if it involves the senses e.g. finger 'drawing' on each other's back, rubbing lotion on each other's hands, singing or dancing together to a favourite song. This connection to the senses can help children regulate and reduce anxiety.
7. Bubbles can be used for exciting play (e.g. chasing and capturing the bubbles) but they are also ideal when children need soothing or calmness (e.g. lying on the floor and letting the bubbles gently land on them).
8. Messy play is a style of play which allows children to explore their senses. An easy example of messy play is placing cornflour in a container and allowing your child to gradually add water. Your child can use their fingers to start to explore the changing texture (powdery, hard, crumbly, slimy etc.)

**9.** Arts and Crafts – If you can, provide a range of materials, natural resources and textures. Simply sitting next to your child whilst they draw, paint or create with craft or creating an artwork together can support your child to share their thoughts, feelings or what's meaningful to them.

**10.** Story time - Reading or telling a story to your child is a lovely way to connect with them whilst fostering creativity and imagination. Perhaps take turns reading each page or act out the story together to keep things interesting. There are also some great story time podcasts you can lie back and listen to together.

**11.** And finally! Children can easily pick up any anxiety from their parents. How do you stay connected and true to yourself when everything is unknown? Long deep belly breaths, taking a bath, watching your favourite TV program, dancing to music.... If you feel good, your kids will feel good.

A leading parent-child attachment practitioner, Debi Maskell-Graham, remarked "offering daily dollops of play – where there is no agenda" is the best way to be with your child. You don't need expensive toys, just use what materials you have to hand and let your child lead the way.

Processing what is happening is an important part of recovery, so whilst we as adults are 'talking this out', ensure your children have the opportunity to 'play it out'.



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