

Coping in a Crisis

(adapted from a document produced by Siobhan Currie, Senior Educational Psychologist, British Psychological Society - Crisis, Disaster and Trauma Section, with thanks)

There are five principles based on sound research that support intervention and prevention in times of disasters and crisis. These principles have been taken up worldwide and are used to guide individuals and services in planning and recovery.

If you cover all of these as the basics you will be giving your families the best chance to come out of the situation positively.

Write these down and pin them on the fridge! What you are seeking to do is to promote:

- A sense of safety
- Calming
- Self and Community efficacy
- Social Connectedness
- Hope

A sense of safety

Kids need their home comforts and security. A routine and structure are important – plan a timetable¹ for weekdays just like school, and stick to meal and bed times. Predictability helps us feel safer and in control. Filter the news for your children and limit exposure to the media – news can be frightening and spark catastrophising or harmful imagining. Answer questions honestly and encourage talking (maybe whilst doing something familiar such as Lego or cooking). Say when you don't know the answers, telling them that scientists are working on it and you will keep them up to date. Tell them about what everyone is doing to stay safe and reduce confusion.

¹ Balance the timetable with learning, creative and physical activities. You can let your child choose a topic and then build a big project around it. Do activities that will take more than one session and provide appropriate challenge. Do something physical every day – let them teach you PE and devise circuits (YouTube has exercise videos for kids).

Calming

Manage your own anxiety so that you can be calm with your children. Set the emotional atmosphere and don't talk about the virus in a frantic way when the kids can overhear. Listen with understanding to their worries and 'normalise' their thoughts and feelings. Provide reassurance and develop some positive statements together, such as "we just have to stick it out", and "we will cope". Encourage children to write about or draw their feelings. Build in relaxation and self-care to the timetable. Use music and stories to ensure that children know they can do something to help calm themselves.

Self and Community efficacy

It really helps when we feel some control over what is happening to us, and it can feel difficult when we are 'directed' to do something. The important thing is to try to use our energy on the things that we can control, rather than worrying about things that we cannot. Help children to plan the day, to communicate to others about coping strategies and to provide support to someone else if possible. Empower children by teaching them things that they can do such as washing their hands with the Birthday song. Tackle problems together.

Social Connectedness

We may have to isolate but we can still stay connected to others. In the family organise group activities and games. Encourage connections with friends, joint projects and writing letters to old friends or family. Most children will be desperate to stay in touch with their peers - For younger children, find ways to support them to do this, perhaps by posting notes, calling, or even watching or doing the same things at the same time while on speakerphone. Older children will have online communities so talk about these to check that they are helpful.

Hope

Staying positive and promoting hope is vital. It is natural to imagine the worst but you can counteract this. Remind them of services that are helping and working on a vaccine. Share good news stories and talk about how people are helping each other. Make plans for the future and look back over good times. Choose books and films with inspiring stories of hope. Have fun and laugh. However hard it seems; try to find the benefits of the situation you are in and emphasise the community efforts to overcome the issues.