



Webinar on TCK Live! 5/13/2020

How does stress affect children?

- Children thrive on routine, so transitions are very hard.
- Children lack verbal skills and self-awareness to be able to articulate their feelings
 - So: They somaticize their emotions – e.g. stomach ache, headache, etc
 - May regress – lose developmental milestones – e.g. begin nocturnal bedwetting after a long period of dry nights
 - May act out with aggression or become more demanding of attention
 - May cry frequently and not know why
 - May withdraw
 - May suddenly have separation anxiety or fears of dark or of being alone
- Children are very tuned into the emotional valence of adults around them (even babies):
 - You may think you are sheltering them from stress but they here bits and pieces of your conversations, and they sense your stress
 - Usually their imagination is worse than the reality
 - Very important to have age appropriate explanations of what is happening

How can we mitigate the effects of stress on children?

- The parent is the child's #1 coping resource – so take good care of yourself
 - Conflict between parents is unsettling to children, undermines their sense of security
 - Eat well, sleep, exercise, do fun things, talk with friends, fight worry/ruination
- Talk to your children about what is going on, and what plans you have made to care for them or deal with the problem. Make your explanations age-appropriate.
 - Make sure they know the problem is not their fault.
- Keep your child's daily routine as much as is possible.
- Limit your child's exposure to the news
 - Use earbuds to listen to news reports
 - If they hear news, they will hear the emotions, even if they don't understand the words
 - After watching news with your child, ask open-ended questions to find out what they understood and how they feel about it
- Maintain playfulness
 - Playfulness is the first thing lost by adults in burn-out. Playfulness is a characteristic of resilient persons
 - A sense of humor and laughter reduces stress hormone in the body
 - If you are playing with your children, they will feel calm and safe



What makes play therapeutic?

- It is relaxing
- Imagination gives a break from the real world, allows the child to feel in charge/control things that are worrying them
- Children problem solve using play
- Active play is more therapeutic than passive play
 - Active play invents imaginative experiences, allows the child to try out life experiences and make mistakes without risk
 - Passive play is observing and is adult-directed
 - e.g. In active play a child builds a train track, then pushes a train around the track. In passive play a child watches an electric train going around an elaborate track layout built by someone else.
 - e.g. Watch a virtual field trip via internet of an art museum (passive play), then get out paints and paper to have the child paint something in a similar style of what they saw.
 - Screen time is not as relaxing as active play

What are practical techniques to help children deal with stress?

- Feedback loop from body muscles and the limbic system where emotions originate. If the body relaxes, the limbic system will stand down
- Soothing activities
 - Soft music, back rubs, long bubble baths with toys
 - Cuddle and read books with blanket
 - Do progressive muscle relaxation with the child
 - Pet an animal or watch fish in an aquarium
 - Rock in a rocking chair
 - Walk in nature, smell flowers
- Control/slow down breathing
 - Deep breaths – sighs – butterfly pats
 - Blow bubbles
 - Blow out a candle from further and further away
 - Go for a run/aerobic exercise – releases endorphins
- Sensory activities
 - Play dough – squeeze and pound
 - Finger painting
 - Smash ice cubes or pop bubble wrap
 - Color with the child



- Feedback loop from the frontal lobe (analytical thought) and the limbic system (emotions). If we change what we are thinking about, we will change how we feel. If the mind is at peace, the limbic system will stand down.
- Cognitive activities
 - Do a feelings journal – draw a picture of the emotion you felt today – mad/glad/sad/afraid
 - Gratitude journal – draw something I am grateful for today
 - Talk with child and listen – open-ended questions. If a child feels heard and understood, they will feel better about the stress
 - Help others in need – more blessed to give than to receive
- Structured doll activity – use dolls or stuffed animals to tell a story in the 3rd person, previewing a new experience the child will soon have. The parent tells a detailed story explaining what the doll will be doing, and what behaviors are expected of her, modeling what behaviors the parent wants to see in the child in that experience.
- Filial Therapy – requires 20 hours of training to teach parents how to do non-directive play therapy techniques with their own children. 50 years of research shows that Filial Therapy (therapy by the child’s parents) is just as effective as play therapy by a professional play therapist. It reduces acting out behaviors, reduces the child’s anxiety, reduces parental stress, increases parental attunement/understanding of the child, increases parent/child attachment.
 - All play therapists are able to train in Filial Therapy
 - Most children’s hospitals offer Filial Therapy classes from time to time
 - I train global workers in Filial Therapy in St. Petersburg, FL