



## Parenting tools to foster loving communication during this stressful time

By Kristin Giacco, *Director of Early Childhood Education* at Richmond Montessori School

Much has been written about handling stress and anxiety during this unprecedented time, and I wanted to share some observations of what I have seen written about young children. I also wanted to share one of the most important parenting tools you can utilize to foster loving communication.

As you know, children feel stress from the disruption of routines and schedules. Young children have been particularly affected by the stay-at-home order. Not being able to attend school and having their daily activities disrupted has caused some children to regress. This means that they may revert to behaviors they have previously outgrown. They may become more clingy, act as if they cannot do for themselves, want to climb into bed with you, have bathroom accidents, tantrums and cry more often. We may feel like we need to correct these undesirable behaviors, but it is essential that we look deeper and understand what the child might really need at this time.

### Children who are regressing may have a higher need for connection.

Children need to physically connect more during a time of stress. It is recommended that you hold your child and physically comfort them. Physical touch can actually help the nervous system calm down and bring a child out of a fight, flight, or freeze response. Both physical and emotional connection is very important during this time. To make sure that you are emotionally connecting, set aside some special time each day. Be sure to have removed any distractions while you allow yourself to be fully present with your child. Having previously decided upon a time when you hold your child and read a favorite book is one idea for this calming connection.



## Having a predictable routine also makes a child feel secure and safe.

The initial strain of the stay-at-home order for many families was having to establish a new routine. Try to offer consistent meal times, rest times, and bedtimes. Establishing a routine not only makes things easier for you as an adult, but it provides much-needed predictability for your child. I suggest creating a routine chart with your child that offers a visual schedule of the day. Children will take great comfort in knowing what is coming next. The routine chart can also help prevent a power struggle with your child over bedtime. You can simply say, “what’s next on the routine chart? The chart says it’s time for a bath and then time for bed.”

## Finally, I would like to share an important parenting tool called intentional dialog.

You may already be familiar with this since it is not only effective with children but with adults as well. This tool might not give you immediate results, but when consistently applied, you are modeling effective communication skills for your child while helping your child feel heard and important which is necessary for healthy self-esteem.

In his book *Giving the Love that Heals*, Harville Hendrix outlines the process of the intentional dialog. This may seem awkward to do at first, but I encourage you to give it a try and practice it. With practice, this method will soon feel natural and normal and it is one of the most important things you can do for your child.

When your child is upset, you may react in a number of ways. At times, we feel we must “fix” the problem, and other times we just want the crying to stop. We may say hurtful things. Please avoid statements like these:

*“Stop crying”*

*“This is not something to cry about”*

*“You are overreacting”*

These types of statements do not validate how a child feels and often will escalate the situation.

Instead, try intentional dialog.

### SETTING THE STAGE:

When using this technique with young children it is important to get down on the child’s level and make eye contact. Pay close attention to your body language since it is as important as what you say.

### CURIOSITY QUESTION:

If your child’s behavior is concerning, ask a curious question like, “Is something bothering you?” “Are you hurting?” “Can I help you with something?”

### MIRRORING:

Once your child gives voice to their concern, use the technique of mirroring. “I see, you are upset because you want to go to the playground and the playground is closed.” Then ask, “Is there more?” Then repeat back to the child what the child has said.





### **VALIDATING:**

It is important for a child to feel validated in how they are feeling. It might look like this:

*"I can understand why you are so upset. It is frustrating to not be allowed to do the things you want to do."*

If your child is calm, perhaps they can think of alternative ideas to solve the problem, and if not it is **ok to just sit with the feeling of disappointment.**

### **EMPATHY:**

It is important for a child to experience a wide range of emotions and see that you are ok with whatever they are feeling. Sitting with a child while showing compassion and empathy to them is comfort enough. You do not need to fix the problem...just being there is often what is most needed.

For toddlers, it is possible to do a modified form of intentional dialog. By simply naming what it seems the child is feeling, you are validating the feeling. Rather than asking an open-ended question, tell them what you are seeing. For example, "I see that you are very upset right now....I can tell by your tears that you might need to be close right now (or may need some space right now)." If you think you know what is upsetting, you can make a validating statement like, "Are you sad because you can't see your friends today?" You can show empathy to them without "fixing" it for them.

I know these days have been filled with challenges, and I hope that these suggestions can bring some stability to your family. None of these techniques are simple, but with practice, they will feel more natural.

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*Kristin Giacco earned her B.A. from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and completed her AMI diploma for 2.5-6 with the Montessori Institute of Atlanta. She has been a Montessori educator since 1995 and has worked at Richmond Montessori School since 2007.*