

Tips for Foster/Kinship Parents during COVID-19 Pandemic

In these unprecedented times of health uncertainty due to the virus pandemic, the challenges of being a foster parent and/or kinship caregiver can increase tremendously. Most of your children have experienced significant trauma in their lives, which can trigger traumatic memories, thought distortions, as well as reactive emotions and/or behaviors during this time of heightened anxiety and fear about the future. Our children often rely on the safety of routines and structure to calm, which is now dramatically changing moment-to-moment and day-to-day. This unpredictability may raise their fear of harm to themselves, siblings not placed with them, and their biological parents with whom they do not know what is happening. As parenting visits are cancelled or changed to phone and/or SKYPE, their anxiety increases as to the physical safety of their parents and other siblings.

Research and experience tell us that our children who have experienced trauma often feel they are powerless to protect themselves and are unable to believe adults can keep them safe. They may worry they will get sick and potentially die from the Coronavirus because they believe only “bad” things happen to them. This victim mentality from their past trauma creates recurring internal negative self-talk, which can quickly lead to intrusive thoughts such as:

- “I know I am going to get the virus.”
- “I will infect all of my foster family.”
- “I will have to leave my foster/kinship home.”

Our children are not likely to communicate these thoughts as they are too hard to verbalize, so instead behavioral symptoms such as isolation, self-harm, and/or aggression may increase. The significant stress in this current moment, no matter our age, child or adult, pushes us to the survival part of our brain where it is difficult to think rationally and remain calm. As a result, we all are all likely to become more reactive.

As foster/kinship providers, responsible for the care and support of children, the likely consequence of this uncertain time is heightened stress for you, too. We all are human and vulnerable to the effects of stress. It is important to identify the thoughts and feelings you may be experiencing in hopes that by naming these stressors they can be tamed (Siegel, 2010). One of the primary emotions may be fear, prompted by such internal thoughts as:

- “Am I putting my own kids at risk?”
- “Will DHHS and other service providers continue to provide supportive services or will everything shut down and I will be on my own?”
- “Can I really keep providing daily care when there is no end in sight?”

Another common feeling is isolation. It can raise questions such as:

- “Who and what can I count on for help with my foster child?”
- “I feel so alone in this moment, like it is all on me.”
- “I am feeling physically and emotionally overwhelmed now, what am I going to feel in a month, or two, or three?”

With no immediate reprieve for this virus, second thoughts turn to doubts, “How long can I keep going?” This question may be compounded by increased emotional and behavioral challenges from the children because of their trauma triggering leading to thoughts of:

- “What can I do to calm my foster children, knowing they are in reactive mode because they are scared and in survival mode?”
- “What do I have available to help them calm even though I feel myself being reactive in the present moment?”

It is important in this time of crisis to verbalize feelings, thoughts and questions, as they are genuine and normal. Through honest questioning and dialoguing with one another, we can reflect together to manage the crisis and continue to care for, and support, the foster children that you have courageously committed to.

Key strategies to empower foster/kinship parents in this pandemic crisis:

- 1) **Routines build psychological safety:** Create a daily routine so there is predictability as to bedtime, wake time, eating times, schoolwork time, playtime, and electronic time. Make the routine visible for children and review the next day’s schedule prior to bedtime.
- 2) **Too much news information can emotionally overwhelm and trigger our children into fight/flight freeze responses:** Allow only a small amount of news information, depending on the age of the child/children. For older children, no more than 20 minutes of watching or reading the news per day. As you follow the changing news, ask children if they have questions about what they read or heard. “I think you may be wondering... (Am I going to get sick with the virus now? Will you keep me if I get the virus?).”
A book to explain the Coronavirus to children can be found at:
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>
- 3) **Promising children what we cannot control creates distrust:** Promises most often make the adults feel better, but not the children. Unfortunately, we can’t answer many questions now like,
 - “When we will go back to school?”
 - “How many people will get sick/die?”
 - “Will someone I love get sick?”What we can say is,
 - “I don’t know yet about school.”
 - “We don’t know yet how many people will become sick or die.”
 - “The risk to children is very low. Children are the safest people in this time.”
 - “I am here to care for you and if anyone gets sick in the house, we will make sure they have the best care to get better.”

The answers will vary by age because small pieces of information with younger children usually suffice. More information for older children will be necessary.

- 4) **During times of high stress, everyone, regardless of age, emotionally over-reacts sometimes:** Be forgiving of the children in your care. Be forgiving of yourself. Every minute is a new minute. Verbalize:

- “I know you are trying your best right now.”
- “It is hard to think and calm when we are worried or afraid.”
- “Even I am stressed now, so let’s start again.”
- “Let’s help each be calm so we can think.”

Teaching and modeling simple breathing techniques together may help significantly increase regulation. Exercise and activity help children regulate. The children in your care will likely need you to be their “external regulator” (Purvis & Cross, 2014) now more than ever.

- 5) **Communicate with the various systems:** Find out how your caseworkers are going to support you in the future. Ask your caseworker for the most current directives from MDHHS. Tell your caseworker how you are doing and what you need. Communicate that you want to stay in regular communication, even if it can only be by phone. Remind them you need to create predictability to create psychological safety for the child.
- 6) **Stay connected with other foster/kinship parents:** Sharing our fears and difficulties with other committed foster/kinships parent is therapeutic. When people are in pain, connecting with another can physiologically reduce fear and worry, and help them function effectively again (Hallowell, 1999). Call or participate with other foster parents in supportive social media.

WMU’s Children’s Trauma Assessment Center is glad to respond to your questions, as well as caseworker questions, regarding the intersection of the virus and children’s trauma. To ask questions please contact us at www.wmich.edu/traumacenter then click on “Contact us” and email your question. We will quickly respond to you. Thank you all for what you are doing. Our favorite quote is, “We are all in this together.” We are honored to be with you in this challenging time. Jim Henry PhD, Director.