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Traumatic Stress Network

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Supporting Young Children Isolated Due to CoronaVirus (Covid-19)

Although the coronavirus is a major epidemic, relatively few young children have been directly affected and, if they are, cases have tended to be mild. However, young children are highly impacted. Adults may think that their young age protects them or that they will not notice the changes or stress. Here are some of the ways young children may be affected & ways you can help.

Common Behaviors of Young Children Exposed to Trauma

1. Behavior and Emotion Dysregulation: Crying, difficulty being still, disorganized and repetitive play, sleep disruptions, regressive behaviors such as increased clinging, crying (e.g., children may repeat over and over again what they have heard and may show it in their play, for example, taking care of dolls, animals, toys; covering and keeping their toys, dolls, stuffed animals safe)
2. Other common symptoms: Aggression, withdrawal, regression in toileting, language, sleeping.
3. Young children experience the stress experienced by parents and other caregivers. It may affect their ability to regulate their behaviors and emotions.
4. Remember: Young children may not be able to verbalize their fears and distress. Adults can buffer young children from absorbing some of the stress that is happening around them. However, young children will still be impacted and adults need to tune in to understand how they are feeling.

Interventions for Young Children Impacted & Isolated

1. Routines are very important for young children. Disasters, forced isolation, and other traumatic situations often disrupt routines. Creating new routines or re-establishing routines can help children feel safe. This could be keeping mealtimes, bedtimes, or setting a daily time to play a game together.
2. Support from parents or caregivers is very important during periods following disasters and times of isolation. Parents may be physically present but emotionally unavailable due to increases in stress. Remember to make time to reassure young children and spend time with them.
3. Explain why things are different. Young children may not fully understand why things have changed (like why they cannot go outside or be with other children) but talking with them will help them feel supported by you.
4. Take care of yourself. Even if young children are not directly exposed to a trauma, they will recognize stress and worry in older children and adults.
5. Do your best to support children in a way that is appropriate for their age. Keeping explanations and instructions simple can help keep children at ease.