

Navigating Uncertainty with Children

By Laura Fish MS, LMFT

During a recent counseling session, an overwhelmed parent worriedly shared her approach to protecting her six-year-old son from the challenges that come with the uncertainty of the pandemic. She told me, “I try to just stay positive, tell him not to worry, and offer as many distractions as I can think of. That’s all I can do, right?”

Um, no.

Most adults strive to maintain a sense of safety and security for children by protecting them from the stress of life events. With the current pandemic, people throughout the world face illness, job loss, disconnection from loved ones, disruption of daily routines, loss of access to goods, services and even death. Adults and children alike continue to experience drastic changes to their way of life. Guidelines for how to navigate this crisis change daily as new information emerges. Adults may feel unsure of how to explain to children what is happening and how to deal with it.



The mistaken goal: protecting children

While it is natural to seek protection for children, I explained to my client that denying a child’s experience during a time of uncertainty may make matters worse for the child. When adult’s dismiss concerns by directly or indirectly offering the message there is nothing to worry about, children don’t receive the attuned guidance they need to navigate challenges.

Adults worthy, yet mistaken, goal is to provide a sense of safety and security for children by dismissing, denying or distracting.

The risks associated with this approach:

- Claiming there is nothing wrong when challenges exist may erode children’s trust. During times of uncertainty children experience changes that lead to emotional disturbance. Shifts in routine, play, and interactions impact them on multiple levels, including their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations.

They notice that you said one thing, “Everything is fine,” yet they are not experiencing ‘fine.’ Perhaps they may also notice the adults around them don’t seem fine, either. This dissonance between what children see, think, and feel and what

adults say may negatively impact children's sense of trust. Telling children there is nothing to worry about when they feel worried risks denying their reality.

The short-term result? Challenging behavior from a lack of direct guidance on how to make sense of the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations the child experiences. [Feelings of safety and security](#) arise from trust, not protection through false assurances or avoidance of the truth.

- Protecting children in this way robs them of an opportunity to learn coping strategies. Dismissing the challenge denies children the co-regulation they need, not want, to gain the physical and emotional safety provided by adults to learn the skills of resilience.

Adult's misguided efforts to protect may leave the child vulnerable in the face of future uncertainty.

Feelings of safety and security grow as children learn to [identify, understand, and express what they think and feel](#), not by distracting them.



Teach me what to do instead: *involving* the child

If protecting children from reality is not the answer, then what is? *Involve* them.

Clearly, adults need to language the reality of uncertain or challenging times with careful consideration. Children's underdeveloped brains cannot process all that is happening. They need adults to convey reality in developmentally appropriate ways.

Here's how: the ["Four A's of Navigating Uncertainty"](#)

1. **Acknowledge the challenge:** acknowledge the reality that a challenge exists before offering a solution, e.g., "You know, this is a really difficult time for all of us right now. You are not in school, we are working from home, and none of us can see our friends. You seem really sad and frustrated. Is that right?"

This is *exceedingly difficult* for most adults, especially those who are “fixers.” They either deny there is a problem or skip over acknowledging the thoughts and feelings associated with the problem to dive into a solution.

If adults rush past acknowledging the child’s experience to offer solutions, the child misses the chance to build emotional literacy skills: [to identify, understand, and express emotions](#). Being literate with emotions helps to regulate them. Such an approach seems foreign to many adults. Why focus on the child’s feelings when I have a perfect solution?

Because your job is to teach the child to eventually *self-regulate*, not rely on others to solve their problems. When adults teach children the components of emotional intelligence, both emotional literacy and regulation, children are positioned to develop the resilience to navigate life’s challenges.

2. **Attune to the child’s perspective:** as part of acknowledging the challenge, ask for and attune to the child’s verbal and non-verbal expressions of concern. This includes children’s thoughts, feelings, images (e.g., seeing snapshots of someone sick, or seeing themselves playing at school, etc.), physical sensations (stomach aches, heaviness in the body, restlessness) and behaviors (internalizing and externalizing behaviors).

An adult may attune to the child with, “Seems like these two weeks have been difficult for you...you have been angry that you have to be home so much and can’t see your friends and your body has been restless. This is a hard time,” or “It’s been difficult for you, huh? You are remembering how fun it was to play soccer with your friends. Seems like you are lonely without them and you have been having a lot of stomach aches because you miss them.”

You can start with, “How are you feeling?” yet young children might not have the *intrapersonal* attunement and/or the verbal acuity skills to describe their interior landscape aloud. Instead, engage them through *interpersonal* attunement, describing observed or imagined thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, verbal, and non-verbal behavior aloud as in the examples above.

An [attuned approach](#) to uncertainty helps the child “feel felt.” Acknowledging a challenge and offering an attuned response to the child’s experience, not rushing to change it, supports the child’s need for feeling seen, soothed, safe, satisfied, and connected.

3. **Adopt a co-regulation stance throughout the steps:** acknowledging the uncertainty and attuning to the child’s perspective begins the process of co-regulation. [Children need, not want, the adult brain to help them regulate.](#)

Adults involve children in calming down instead of telling them to calm down by acknowledging, attuning, and offering additional co-regulation strategies: adults may *summarize* the *child’s* perspective, *validate* the *child’s* perspective, and offer physical *comfort* based on the *child’s* perspective, not the adults.

For a child who expresses confusion over swim lessons, the attuned co-regulating adult listens and responds with, “Let me make sure I understand you, Jacob: you have missed six swims with Miss Angelica and you are feeling frustrated that you can’t just get into the pool with her (*summarize*). That makes sense (*validating thoughts and feelings*). You love swimming and your body always feels so calm and relaxed after (*validating beliefs and body sensations*). No wonder you miss it (*validating perspective*). Would a hug help or do you have something else in mind (*comfort with words, tone of voice, and body language*)?” From there, the adult and child can plan for what to do next.

4. **Ask for collaboration to formulate a plan of resilience:** after going through the previous steps, *involve* children in imagining ways they might navigate through the challenges including their ideas for adjusting, coping, and even thriving. Don’t just tell them how to fix the problem. Listen to understand, not reply, then revisit and repeat! From this connected, safe, and secure state, children are primed to develop the trait of resilience they will use across the lifespan to face life’s uncertainties.



My client shared her skepticism about this framework. It didn’t feel “natural,” she emailed me after the first week trying it out with her child. I validated her perspective and affirmed that it wasn’t meant to feel natural. Instead, the elements of the framework help adults teach or parent based on science, not habit. After three weeks of implementation, she reported it was feeling far more effective than her former approach of just staying positive. In fact, she reported, each one of the four “A’s” proved useful in her daily interactions with her child, not just for discussing challenges. Indeed!

We are a meaning making species. Since we cannot know with certainty how this pandemic will play out, be sure to involve children in finding the meaning with you. Transform crisis into opportunity by teaching children how to skillfully navigate through uncertainty instead of shielding them.

The 2-Minute Action Plan: getting started

For our quick contemplation questions today, let’s try these:

- What am I afraid might happen if I acknowledge the challenge with my child? What do I envision happening if I don’t have answers to questions that arise?

- Was I taught to identify, understand, express, and then manage my feelings or was I told to manage my feelings without guidance on how to skillfully do so? What strategies do I use for myself as an adult when I am feeling emotionally imbalanced?
- What do I think children need when they are faced with challenges or uncertainty? How did this article change and/or strengthen my views? Am I open to updating any of my current beliefs?
- Imagine how conversations might be different for you and your child if you use “The 4 A’s of Navigating Uncertainty” framework...you might consider what could be challenging about engaging this way, but make sure you also explore how it might be beneficial for you and your child as well.

The Ongoing Action Plan

Over the next week try this:

- Plan ahead: Write out the four steps of navigating uncertainty and take time to really understand each step. Imagine how you would carry out the 4 A’s with your child. It is different for every person. Make it your own, while staying true to the guidelines. Consider creating a visual reminder of the framework for yourself to display somewhere as a reminder and reference.
- Reflect: What do I need to help me feel resourced enough to guide my child through the four A’s? What are the things that help me feel confident and competent as a parent? Do those things and/or notice when you feel this way.
- Click on the links within the article to help you begin using this approach with your child. See if you can find a trusted adult to reflect with to help you plan how to roll this out with your child.
- Keep in Mind: The brain is a prediction machine. It tries to make sense of what is happening with as little information as possible, comparing what “is” with what it already knows. When things in the world are not making sense for the child, you can provide the attunement, co-regulation, and collaboration they need to feel a sense of safety and security amidst the uncertainty.

You can find more about how to teach and parent with the brain in mind on my website [Laura Fish Therapy Consulting](http://LauraFishTherapyConsulting.com), Facebook at [Laura Fish Therapy](https://www.facebook.com/LauraFishTherapy), or subscribe to my [You Tube Channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...).