SOCIAL IMPACT ON CHILDREN

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WHAT DOES PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE SAY ABOUT SOCIALIZING FOR CHILDREN?

Social interaction is important for everyone, but it is especially important for children to have social contact with their caregivers. Caregivers are children's primary regulator in times of stress, especially for the youngest children who have trouble regulating stress responses on their own. The way that children often cope and recover from some of the more serious forms of stress is by having a responsive parent nearby. When children are crying or upset, mothers usually hug or rock them as a form of soothing. Hugs or any form of touch can reduce stress hormones like cortisol in the body (Feldman, Singer, & Zagoory, 2010) and even lower heart rate (Ludington & Hosseini, 2005). Further, research has shown that children who receive touch therapy after having experienced post-traumatic stress are happier, less anxious, and have lower cortisol levels than children who do not get touch therapy (Field, Seligman, Scafidi, & Schanberg, 1996). The point is that physical comfort is important in reducing children's distress.

HOW DOES CHILD/CAREGIVER INTERACTIONS RELATE TO EPIDEMICS?

Epidemics likely produce stress for both parents and children, so I would suggest more social support from caregivers during this time.

HOW DOES SOCIAL DISTANCING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS?

While social distancing is exactly what we should be doing during a global pandemic, it doesn’t mean that parents who are social distancing with their children should avoid touching them. If a parent or child is sick, they should obviously refrain from physical contact temporarily; but in cases where families are healthy and social distancing together in the same household, parents should be encouraged to comfort their children physically. It can be beneficial for both the parent and the child in terms of coping with stress.

WHAT ARE THE 2-3 MOST RELEVANT FINDINGS IN YOUR FIELD THAT THE PUBLIC SHOULD KNOW AND UNDERSTAND?

1. Children under the age of 5 don’t have a complete understanding of illness and how it is transmitted. Further, research suggests that children will behave adaptively (avoid contaminated objects) when faced with the threat of getting sick only if they have a causal understanding of illness transmission (Blacker & LoBue, 2016). The practical recommendation here is not to give children rule-based information like “wash your hands” to encourage them to adopt healthy habits without explaining to them why the behavior is important. Talk to them about illness transmission and how it works, and what they can do to stay healthy.
 WHAT IS THE ONE MESSAGE PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW THAT PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE TEACHES US?

I would highlight that there is a very large literature suggesting that parents’ depression, anxiety, and stress have a negative impact on their children, starting from early in infancy. Even though this is an incredibly stressful time and parents are busy tending to the needs of their children, their families members, their co-workers, and possibly even the sick and in need, it’s important to remember to also take care of your own mental health, if not for yourself, than for your kids.

ARE THERE ANY PUBLISHED ARTICLES THAT ARE PARTICULARLY INSIGHTFUL ON THESE TOPICS?


