

By: Joy D. Osofsky, Ph.D. & Howard Osofsky, M.D., Ph.D.

Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center | New Orleans, LA, USA

Translation & Editorial Assistance: Maranda Sze, Ph. D., Elise Snyder, M.D., Dihao Zhou, Yale University

Distributed by the China American Psychoanalytic Alliance

The coronavirus (Covid-19) is a major epidemic. Fortunately few young children have fallen ill. Most of the sick children have had mild cases. However, young children are highly affected by the quarantine and the anxiety of their parents and other adults. Adults may think that children will not notice all the changes and the stress, but they are very sensitive to what is going on. Here are some of the ways children react to the stress and some of the things you can do to help them.

### Common Ways Children React to Trauma

Frequent crying; difficulty staying still; problems falling asleep and staying asleep; nightmares; clinging to their caregivers; fears of being alone; repetitive play (they may repeat over and over again what they have heard; they may try to take special care of their dolls or stuffed animals and hide or cover them). Some children may become very aggressive and angry. Others may withdraw from contact. Some may act like younger children, lose their toilet training, want a bottle rather than drinking from a glass, want to eat baby food or refuse to eat, talk like a much younger child.

Young children are very sensitive to the stress experienced by their caretakers. It affects their ability to act in their usual ways and affects their emotions. Most often, they cannot talk about their fears and distress. Caretakers can protect them from some of the stress the adults feel, but caretakers must be aware that the children are upset.

### Things You Can Do to Help Children

1. Routines are very important for young children. Disasters, forced isolation, and other traumatic situations often break their usual routines. Creating new routines or re-establishing usual routines can help children feel safe. Keeping regular mealtimes and bedtimes, setting a daily time to play games together, or read to them, or sing songs together all help.
2. Support from parents or caregivers is very important during periods of stress and during the time after the acute disaster is over. Parents may be physically present but not available emotionally because they are so stressed themselves. It is important to make time to reassure young children and spend time with them.
3. Explain why things are different. Young children may not understand why things have changed (like why they cannot go outside or play with other children) but talking with them will help them feel supported by you. Help the children in a way that is appropriate for their age. Keep explanations simple.
4. Take care of yourself. This is very important. Even if young children are not directly exposed to the trauma, they can recognize stress and worry in older children and adults in the house.
5. If young children have been sent to stay with family members in another city talk to them using electronic means as often as possible during the day and at bedtime. If they are at home, try to arrange for them to see other children using a cell phone.