Understanding the Young Child’s Response to COVID-19

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My Background

- Assistant Professor in the School of Social work at ASU
- Doctorate in Social Work & Developmental Psychology from the University of Michigan
- Focused on understanding the psychological and neurological to inform interventions
- Range of clinical experiences
- Trained in applied/evidence-based interventions with children and caregivers
- Infant Mental Health perspective
Learning Objectives

1. Understand children’s perception of the pandemic using a developmental framework
   • Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers
2. Learn to use empathy as a strategy to help children manage their emotions and the behavioral expressions of those emotions
3. Recognize approaches that help support children during the pandemic and other transitions
   • Narration, play, and art

• How can we support young children throughout the pandemic?
Emotion Regulation

• The processes by which individuals organize and manage their emotions in order to support optimal functioning

• Healthy emotion regulation strategies develop in the context of a sensitive caregiving environment

• Healthy regulatory behaviors lead to increased independence and physical and emotional well-being
Trauma & Emotion Dysregulation

- Children who have experienced trauma have poorer emotion regulation skills
- Internalizing and externalizing problems
- Emotion dysregulation is a core feature in many psychological disorders
The Amygdala and the Medial Prefrontal Cortex (mPFC)
The Amygdala and the mPFC in Childhood
Master Craftsman & Apprentice Metaphor

- [the infant] is like “an apprentice in the shop of a master craftsman. The apprentice learns the trade because the master provides protected opportunities to practice selected subtasks, monitors the growth of the apprentice’s skills, and gradually presents more difficult tasks” –Kenneth Kaye

- Emotional component of the relationship supports the intrinsic motivation to develop new skills

- ”Scaffolding”
Why is understanding the child’s perception of COVID-19 so important?

• How can we aid children in understanding COVID-19 in a way that is appropriate for their developmental level as well as the individual?
  • How can we prepare them for the future impacts of the pandemic?

• Too often we focus on children’s behavior instead of focusing on their perspective, which tells us why their behavior exists.
  • By targeting behavior, we can lose sight of larger core issues.
  • We need to think about what behavior represents.
Barriers to Understanding the Child Perspective

• Harder to understand a child’s experience of the world than an adults
• Children live in the present and cannot make links between the past and the present
• Children express their distress differently
• Many people think that shielding children from what is going on in the world will keep them from worrying.
• Why we need a developmental framework
Infant Development Overview

- 0-12 months
- Two basic developmental tasks
  - Develop the basic capacity for self-regulation
  - To become oriented to the external world
- The caregiver-infant relationship is the foundation on which all subsequent develop builds
  - From birth, infants begin to develop an understanding about themselves, their parents, and the world.
  - Those experiences also help determine the answers to questions such as “Am I loved or unloved?”, “Am I a worthwhile person?” and “Are others to be trusted or mistrusted?”
Infants’ Understanding of COVID-19

- Infants’ awareness and experience of COVID-19 will be felt through caregiver impact and changes in routine.
  - Caregivers may be experiencing emotional distress themselves, which will impact the infant
  - Parents may be able to spend more or less time with their infant due to changes in their own routine, working from home
  - Additional children may be at home also needing attention
  - Relatives or friends may be called upon to take care of the infant because of COVID related circumstances
- Infants’ lives have been influenced by COVID-19. They may not understand specifically what is happening, but they know when things are different and are attuned to the emotions of their caregivers.
Toddler Development Overview

• 12-36 months of age
• Toddle = walk in short, wobbly steps
• Increasing ability to do things on their own
• Upright posture = new and wider view of the world
  • Move more easily, cover greater distances
• Toddlers want to explore the world, but they also still need caregiver support and presence
• Growing self-awareness and awareness of others through exploration
  • Expectations of society, culture, etc.
• Egocentric
Sources of Aggression in Toddlers

- Disagreements about what is safe
- Toddler’s desire to “have it all”
- Opposition and negativism that accompany wanting things their way
- Asked to function above their developmental level
  - Will signal their readiness for various milestones
    - Letting parents know when they need to urinate or defecate
- React with refusal, protest, or tantrums
Toddlers’ Understanding of COVID-19

- Like infants, toddlers are very attuned to the moods and emotions of their caregivers
- Want to please parents and caregivers
  - Will cooperate even if they don’t understand why
  - Imitation and copying of adults
- Egocentric
- Magical thinking
Preschool Development Overview

• 3-6 years of age
• Development of play as a vehicle for exploring reality
• Increasingly logical & reality-based view of the world
• Needs frequently verbalized rather than just expressed through action
• Improving memory and sense of time = better at coping with separations
• Those who have received parental love and support over time tend to have a positive view of self
• Anxiety about being small and incompetent relative to adults
  • Still need caregivers continue to provide security under stress
Preschoolers’ Understanding of COVID-19

• Logical and reality-based view of the world
  • Greater understanding of COVID-19
  • Can have conversations about COVID-19 if you use developmentally appropriate language and terminology

• Less peer interaction
  • Increased interaction with parents and siblings, who are the most important people in their lives at this age

• Play can be an important way to understand the preschooler’s COVID-19 experience.
Scaffolding Emotion Regulation

• Supporting children in “Organizing their feelings”

• Helping them recognize their emotions so they can understand their emotions and regulate them

• Regulation moves from external to internal

• One of the major ways to do this is through play
Practice with Infants

• Healthy development is dependent on caregiver-infant interaction, so intervention needs to focus on caregiver-infant interaction

• When parents are attuned to their infant’s signals and feelings, encourage and take pleasure in communicating with the infant, and respond to the baby’s needs in a timely way, the baby’s development is supported
  • Infant mental health applies this perspective to situations where quality of interaction is at risk, i.e. factors that impair parenting ability, or prematurity or developmental delays which can pose a challenge for parents to relate to their baby

• Clinicians invite parents’ questions and sometimes “speak for the baby”
  • Helps the parents think about meanings and intentions in the infant’s nonverbal behavior
  • Frames observations in a developmental context
  • Support the parents in feeling competent as caregivers
  • Parents often worry they will be judged, need to take a respectful, curious stance and make explicit statements about collaboration
Narratives

• The self-narrative is the story we tell ourselves to make sense of our experiences
• Humans are neurologically wired to tell stories
• Children are always trying to make sense of their worlds
• Creation of emotional narratives
  • Viewing the world as safe or scary
  • Viewing oneself as valued or worthless
• Play is how we understand the internal narrative of the child
Defining Play

• “Play is an ancient, voluntary, inherently pleasurable, apparently purposeless activity or process that is undertaken for its own sake and that strengthens our muscles and our skills, fertilizes brain activity, tempers and deepens our emotions, takes us out of time, and enables a state of balance and poise.”
  –Stuart Brown

• Snowball fight example
7 Patterns of Play

1. Attunement play (peek-a-boo; baby talk; infant smiles, mother smiles back)
2. Body play and movement (jumping; dancing; chasing)
3. Object play (toys)
4. Social play
   a. Play and belonging
   b. Rough and tumble play
   c. Celebratory play
5. Imaginative and pretend play (prince and princess; tea party)
6. Storytelling-narrative play (reading to a child; child making up a story)
7. Transformative-integrative and creative play (using a pen as a spaceship)
Posttraumatic Play

- Trauma influences the structure of the brain
  - Constantly activated to perceive threat

- Traumatic stress
  - Loss of self-regulation
  - Loss of ability to play (do play but the quality of their play is influenced)
  - Loss of trust in adults/world

- Stress is restricting, protective, and confining
  - Play expands a child’s world, trauma restricts it (focus on survival)
  - After trauma play violates the priority of a child’s brain
  - Hypervigilance = depressed and isolated older child/adult

- Play needs to be part of healing for the child to reintegrate into society & regain a sense of self (*I am more than my trauma*)
Play Therapy Definition

• In her book, *Play Therapy*, Virginia Axline, a leading expert in play therapy, explains:

• “Play Therapy is based upon the fact that play is the child’s natural medium of self expression. It is an opportunity for the child to ‘play out’ his/her feelings and problems just as adults talk out their difficulties.”

• Play Therapy involves using play materials as part of a therapeutic process designed to meet the emotional, social, psychological, and developmental needs of clients.

• Children are invited to play; however, it must be remembered that play on its own will not produce change – how the therapist uses the play is the key.
Child-Centered Play Therapy (CCPT)

• Non-directive and nonjudgmental form of play therapy
• Utilizes empathy and positive regard in order to modify the child’s flawed belief systems
• More directive types of play therapy often build on principles of CCPT
• “Don’t just do something, stand there and pay attention” – Sally Provence
Using Play in a Deliberate Manner to Provide a Therapeutic Experience

• Play comes naturally to most children
• Helps develop a relationship with child
• Creates a safe space
• Takes the inner world and makes it concrete
• Allows for control/manipulate objects
• Assists with child’s overall development
Creating a Distinct Therapeutic Relationship

- The play therapy relationship is unique
- The relationship is central to the healing power of therapy
- Ensures a place of safety, predictability, consistency, and respect
- Trying to create a safe space for children to explore, and ultimately apply those lessons to the real world
- Giving the child a new “felt experience”
  - Safety & control
Relationship Building Toys

• Phones
• Balls
• Binoculars
• Camera
• Dr. Kit

• Assess ability to connect
Mastery & Expressive Toys

- Mastery Toys: Construction toys, bristle blocks, block and Legos, simple puzzles
- Expressive Toys: Crayons, markers, paper, paints and Play Doh
Thematic Fantasy Toys

- Pre-K: More apt to act out play, therapist and client assume roles, clients need concrete toys
- Older Kids
  - Prefer symbolic approaches to act out themes
  - Sand tray
  - Animal families
- Essentials: Animal families, baby things and baby dolls, young child dolls, dishes and food, hats and gloves, masks and wigs, doll house(s) and doll furniture, blocks, cars and trucks, mirror, puppets
Themes

• Power & aggressive themes
  • Good guy vs. bad guy
  • Aggressor vs. victim
  • General aggression (dumping out toys)
  • Death play
  • Strength vs. weakness

• Family & Nurturance
  • Feeding, hugging, taking care of a baby or sick person
  • Constancy (peek a boo, hide and seek)
  • Failed nurturance
Themes Cont’d

• Control & Safety themes
  • Danger play
  • Rescue play
  • Fire play
  • Burying or drowning
  • Broken play
  • Fixing play
  • Cleaning play
  • Sorting play
  • Containing play (jail, cage)
  • Protective play
  • Controlling play

• Interaction themes
  • Interaction with the therapist for its own sake
  • Relationship building
  • Positive interactions between characters

• Sexualized themes
  • Sexualized play
While the child is playing...

- Soothe, validate, confirm
- Establishment of therapy as a safe space
- Stimulate, challenge, encourage
- Provide words for a child who can’t put words to their own experiences
  - Simple reflections
- Begin to create a hypothesis about the client
Narration

• Once you have your case conception begin making more complex reflections
  • Be prepared to be wrong

• Identify feelings
  • At the developmentally appropriate level
  • Young kids simply label
  • Older kids can handle more reflection
  • Attribute child’s feelings to a toy
  • Express feelings while playing a character

• Child Centered Play Therapy example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6UuVt3kvU0

• What not to do: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJZhyEasS8A
Play Helps Us Understand the Child’s Self-Narrative

- Step 1: Gather information/look for themes
  - Hypothesize, “question” through narration
- Step 2: Understand the child’s self-narrative
  - Narrate more confidently
- Step 3: Give the child a new, corrective emotional experience
Storytelling

- Stories are one of the ways children come to understand the world
- Stories about loving parents, exploration, etc.
- We can use storytelling to influence or add to children’s understanding of an event
  - *Not the story itself but how you tell the story*
A children’s story and coloring book meant to help children understand the pandemic at the appropriate developmental level

Providing language to help organize internal confusion and distress

Plot
- Focuses on the transition from school to quarantine
  - Handwashing, working together to keep everyone safe
- Georgie knows something is wrong, attuned to his mother’s emotions
- Informing the child’s narrative

https://www.facebook.com/FamilyServiceSA/videos/2551391721791762

www.tenderpressbooks.com
- Multiple languages
Art Therapy

- Art is a tool for self-expression
- Can be used similarly to other forms of play in order to gain a greater understanding of the internal world of the child
- Can ask questions and narrate art and creation as you would play
- Giving the message to children that they’re creating their world
Squiggle Game

• Donald Winnicott
  • Child Psychiatrist
  • Developed squiggle game to communicate with children

• Why squiggles?
  • Health = variety
  • No wrong way “this game has no rules”
  • The child teaches the therapist about what they have to say, no interpretation
  • Delighting in their imagination
Other Activities

- Draw a Picture of Your Family
- Body outline
- Emotion drawing
- Draw a picture with mom, dad, caregiver, etc.
- Draw what happened, draw what you wish would have happened...
Conclusion

1. A developmental framework is extremely important when it comes to working with children.

2. Narration is a powerful and necessary tool in helping support children in organizing their emotions and development self-regulation skills.

3. Narration can be scaffolded through play, storytelling, and art.

• Questions?