



## Some Thoughts for IOWA-PCIT Therapists on Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear IOWA-PCIT therapists:

During the past week I have been bombarded with e-mails full of advice about how to cope with the stress of COVID-19, how to cope if you're a parent, and how to help children cope. While I don't want to contribute to the massive amount of information everyone is being besieged with right now, I did want to share some thoughts with all of you about this crisis. I have found this crisis both a profoundly disorganizing event and an opportunity to connect in new and different ways. This letter is a way of connecting with all of you.

A very wise friend of mine, whom I do not talk with often enough, said to me that what we're doing right now isn't really social distancing, it is physical distancing. This has really resonated with me as I find myself connecting more, rather than less, with people during this time of the COVID-19 virus and the need to flatten the curve.

I have been revisiting parts of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's 1943 book *War and Children* as I think about what would be most helpful to young children in dealing with all the changes that have been happening in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who don't know Anna Freud's story, she moved to England from Germany to escape the Nazis. Her response to this significant upheaval in her own life has always struck me as especially heroic. She started the Hampstead nurseries with her close friend, Dorothy Burlingham, in order to care for children who were being moved out of London to the countryside to protect them from the bombings. *War and Children* documents the experiences of the young children who had lived through these traumatic experiences.

Anna and Dorothy note that the children were often less traumatized than expected by their exposure to air raids because they were with their parents in the bomb shelters. In writing about what they called "air raid anxiety", they said that, as might be expected, the response of the parents and other adults in the bomb shelters also had an impact on how the children coped

and whether they had subsequent trauma symptoms. For example, they describe a mother of eight who, when asked about whether they had been affected by the bombings, said, “Oh no, we had only a blast and my husband fixed the window frames again.” This mother’s apparent calmness when describing what was clearly a harrowing experience during the bombing showed, according to Anna Freud, an example of someone presenting a calm presence that was transmitted to her children: “We can be certain that for the children of this mother the occurrence of the blast was not a very alarming incident.” We, as therapists helping parents deal with their own and their children’s anxiety during this time, can model this behavior ourselves. This can be difficult when we ourselves are feeling anxious and disorganized, but as with recognizing secure attachment, it helps to know what we’re aiming for. In addition to reading *War and Children* again, I have tried to do this by looking at the cover of my to do notebook every day – which says “Keep Calm and Carry On”. And, of course, by dancing.

We can also suggest to parents that what they’re doing is “good enough”—that them just being with their kids is what their kids need right now. For young children, their families are their world. If they are with their families, they have the ability to adapt to changes that are more difficult for us to adapt to as we become older. We can reassure parents during this time that their connections with their children are the most important thing they can offer them.

What the experiences written about by Anna Freud taught us is the importance of routine, consistency, and relationships, even (or especially) in the face of tremendous upheaval. With schools and many workplaces closed, this has meant establishing new routines.

One of my favorite new routines is the daily dance party for parents and children hosted by my friend Tracy Vozar at University of Denver. If you’re interested in joining our daily virtual dance party, go to: <http://dughost.imodules.com/dailydanceparty> (the daily dance party is at 9:30 Iowa time; 8:30 Denver time). And, I have replaced my frequent walks to Java House with walks to the kitchen to make coffee and chat with my new “co-workers” (my husband and our two dogs). It turns out there are some pretty nasty office politics I was not aware of until I worked at home. This morning, one of the dogs sat in front of the dog door and refused to let the other dog come in the house. Next week, I hope to add another new routine – a Sing.Play.Love virtual movement, reading, and singing party for University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics employees. My friends Anne Meeker Watson and Kelly Pelzel are working on this project and I have been involved in piloting and offering my opinion. Many of you have heard me sing the praises of Sing.Play.Love before and my admiration for Anne’s work has increased this week as I had the opportunity to see this project unfold from an idea to implementation in a week. If you’re interested in seeing the video Anne made for our first virtual Sing.Play.Love party go to: <https://vimeo.com/singplaylove/party1>. I am also looking at how to add BeMoved® dance classes back into my new routine. In August, I was trained as a BeMoved dance instructor and plan to offer a virtual BeMoved dance classes soon.

As I’m reading *War and Children*, I’m reflecting on how, as in World War II, parents are having to make tough choices now for themselves, their children, and others they do not know. Many families have children at home from school now and are having to balance their economic needs, their family’s needs, and broader society needs. What these families most need from us

is our connection with them as they balance these responsibilities. As we know from delivering PCIT, technology can be extremely helpful in delivering effective services and I know some of you have already moved to telehealth. But, however we are delivering our services now, what is most important is the relationship – our relationship with parents and their relationship with their child.

As we know from attachment theory, loss and trauma are disorganizing. And we are experiencing disorganization on a global scale right now. We also know that individuals and families typically respond to loss and trauma by relying on their “go to” behaviors. That is, we are likely to do more of what we have always done in order to cope with the changes in our lives and the increased stress about our livelihood and health. So, those of us who tend to respond to stress by being controlling and bossy, become more controlling and bossy. Let’s all remember to show ourselves compassion in the moments when our own “go to” behaviors come up.

Please take care of yourselves and your families as you continue your work helping parents and children. Remember: On the airplane they tell you to put on your own oxygen mask first before you help someone else put on theirs.

Warmly,

Beth

Beth Troutman, PhD, ABPP