

A Voice from the Future (and an Echo from the Past): **Guidance for Supporting Children, Families, & Ourselves in the Midst of Covid-19**

It's Day 22 for me, how about you? Today marks the 22nd day since I voluntarily entered self-quarantine after returning from travel that took me through the same South Korean airport which [only hours after my flight's departure] was declared as a "Level 3 Zone" for Covid-19 by United States officials. In the past 22 days, I've experienced a range of sensations and emotions while readjusting to my home time zone, but more poignantly, as I've adjusted to the lack of in-person interaction. On Day 9, less than 2 weeks ago, I joined a school-based meeting of teachers and administrators via phone call, and folks in the room chuckled as I explained my noted physical absence due to my precautionary self-quarantine, apologizing that I was unable to join them in-person, but looked forward to doing so soon. Fast forward to one week later and that same school along with every other in our state was out of session, and my entire team's staff logged on for the first of our "virtual" meeting times together, sprinting up the learning curve of conference-calling in lieu of our typical in-person gatherings. It's too early to know how long we'll need to maintain this new means of connection, but as one speaking from the future (in terms of quarantine timeline) compared to most Americans, I want to share some hopeful, helpful, and key insights with you on how to support children, families, and ourselves in the midst of our current reality.

With our remarkably and extraordinarily intricate neurophysiology as human beings, one key factor to our well-being is connection with others. Not just shared interests or chance encounters, but the deep, rich, meaningful experiences that tell us in our deepest places: I am seen, I am known, and I am valued. While it's probably not our ordinary perspective during "normal" times of routine grocery shopping, the morning school-bus pickup, or a trip to the local pharmacy, the people in our lives who serve as our connection points—whether it's the cashier showing patient kindness with your particular situation (be it a family member living with a disability who needs additional support while you shop together or tired, hungry children who are accompanying you), the faithful bus driver whose careful eye notices your little one's smile or tears while he or she steps up onto the bus and takes the time to ask you if everything's okay during afternoon drop-off, or the pharmacist who shares insight about a medication that might be better suited for your needs, even though it won't yield as high a profit margin for the pharmacy—these moments, these interactions, these encounters where I *truly* see you and you *truly* see me are part of what sustains and nourishes us, not unlike meals and medicine. And in a time characterized by uncertainty, prescribed and even mandated "social distancing", and vast disruptions of routine, what are we to do? How do we continue to support children, families, and ourselves? While we find ourselves in the midst of globally-experienced adversity and trauma, *can* we find connection, resilience, and hope?

Based largely upon the work of Dr. Christina Bethell and other thought leaders on childhood adversity, resiliency, etc., not only can I honestly say "yes", but it is my aim and deepest hope to share the "how" for us all. With so many factors in flux, including jobs, schooling, access to healthcare, etc., it is easy to drift in a direction of deficits, scarcity, and limits. However, if for a few moments, you'll consider this alternative—that we can actually add positive, hopeful experiences to our lives in the midst of this very real uncertainty and

adversity—I think you may discover some of the keys to connection, resilience, and hope that will help anchor our lives and spirits during this trying time.

In a world that feels like it's flipped upside down in barely a week's time, **how do we continue to support our child(ren) and ensure the most optimal growth and development in the midst of our present circumstances?** With a seemingly ever-moving target for how to respond to the challenges and concerns of Covid-19/Coronavirus, is that even a reasonable question? Thankfully, we can turn to the work of researchers to understand what exactly *child flourishing* means to better inform our next steps and better frame our collective response as we seek to support continued child growth and development. As defined by Bethell and colleagues (Bethell et al., 2019b), child flourishing (CFI) boils down to three essential components:

- Whether a child shows interest and curiosity in learning new things
- Whether a child is able to regulate emotions and behaviors in challenging situations
- Whether a child can focus and persist to achieve goals

Naturally, we're looking for these factors in school settings—we as parents, educators, administrators, districts, states, etc. But outside the classroom, outside the school building, what does this mean? Ahead of her time, Maria Montessori, a brilliant Italian physician-turned-educator of children living in poverty with what might now be categorized as disabilities or special needs, spent much of her life's work supporting the learning of children without using a formalized classroom setting or traditional classroom supplies. In fact, because as a physician she lacked a budget for traditional classroom supplies, she made do with what she had (captured in her enduring legacy if you ever visit a Montessori classroom: miniature versions of adult tasks, including trays, household items, etc.). But what do indicators of *child flourishing* and Montessori's materials mean for us amidst the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020? **They mean that not only do you and I have permission to focus our attention on the true indicators of child flourishing (which are not dictated by change of environment), but that it's both wise and critical to do so.** Additionally, we have permission and can rejoice in the flexibility of Montessori's own successes in "making do with what we have" in terms of learning opportunities, supplies, and setting, supporting our child(ren)'s ongoing growth and development while we find ourselves at home, together, for the indefinite future.

It's a fair guess to say that it's unlikely (unless you're already a parent or other adult caregiver trained as a teacher) that you'll feel equipped to step into this new, unsought role of teacher/administrator in your child(ren)'s life, right? But here is some encouragement—"interest and curiosity in learning new things" might be just outside your doorstep as you trace the signs of spring on a flowering tree or take a family walk and discuss the arrival of pollen with the change of the season, varying cloud shapes, or the different types of lunch items you could prepare with the ingredients you currently have on hand; "regulating emotions and behaviors in challenging situations" might look less like waiting in line with our class for our turn to check out this week's library books...instead it might be practicing patience and self-regulating during understandable frustration as another sibling takes their turn choosing the next game that we'll play as a family. And though there are numerous opportunities for children to "focus and persist to achieve goals" at school, there are ample opportunities for this

to be done at home, too; perhaps it will be building a fort using only green-colored items in the home or working with other family members to see how tall a collaboratively-built tower can reach before toppling down. The beauty of these examples is that you're not only supporting your child(ren)'s likelihood of flourishing despite adversity and regardless of household income level, race, ethnicity, or special health care needs, but you're making do with what you have as you're teaching—yes, I said *teaching!*—your child(ren), supporting their continued growth and development.

Although school doors may be closed, now more than ever is the time for the lines of two-way communication between schools and families to stay open. Here in South Carolina, I have already heard remarkably encouraging stories not only of innovative and tech-savvy teachers sharing their own creative resources for staying connected to students and families, but of teachers and administrators who have gone the extra mile to use an old-fashioned (yet timelessly personal) technology – the telephone -- to ensure that students and families without the same access to the internet aren't left without a meaningful, vital means of connecting with their child's school. Not only do children need to know that they're still supported by their teachers and school staff, but perhaps more than anyone, families need to know and experience this in concrete ways. In whatever ways possible, school communities should help support family resiliency and connection (FRCI), which boils down to six key questions (Bethell et al., 2019b):

- When your family faces problems, how often are you likely to:
 - Talk together about what to do?
 - Work together to solve your problems?
 - Know that you have strengths to draw on?
 - Stay hopeful even in difficult times?
- How well can you as a parent/caregiver share ideas or talk about things that really matter with your child(ren)?
- How well do you think that you are handling the day-to-day demands of raising your child(ren)?

Childhood flourishing (CFI) and family resiliency & connection (FRCI) have a graded association, that is to say, children whose families report higher levels of family resilience and connection are also more likely to flourish compared to children whose families reported lower levels of family resiliency and connection¹. Perhaps more powerful than we would dare to believe is the parent-child connection. In fact, researchers found that of all measures, childhood flourishing was most strongly associated with the parent-child connection. For those parents who reported “very well” to the question of “How well can you and this child share ideas or talk about things that really matter?”, **these children had 12.55 times greater odds of flourishing**, and even those parents who reported “somewhat well” to the same question had children who were 3.9 times more likely to exhibit childhood flourishing (Bethell et al., 2019b) With dozens of directions in which we can focus our attention as we discern and decide how to best support our children and families during the wake of Covid-19, the parent-child connection and the components of family-resilience and connectivity are ones where we would be wisest to focus our energies and efforts. Children with highest levels of family resilience and connection had 3-4 times greater odds of flourishing, across all levels of exposure to ACEs

¹ FRCI score of 4-6 had 3.71 times greater odds of flourishing compared to children with a FRCI score of 0 or 1.

(Adverse Childhood Experiences) and at all levels of household income—this is hopeful, timely, and wonderful news that our world desperately needs!

“The especially strong association between flourishing and the parent-child connection component of the family resilience and connection component of the FRCI score is consistent with the science showing the primacy of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships to optimal child development” (Bethell et al., 2019b). Building upon family resiliency and connection research and upon flourishing research, Bethell and her colleagues (2019a) have also delved into adult outcomes and their childhood connections. When they asked adults to report on *positive childhood experiences*, adult-reported social and emotional support, and depression/poor mental health in adulthood, researchers discovered that for those adults reporting the highest levels of positive childhood experiences, they had one-fourth the rate of depression/poor mental health compared to adults reporting the lowest levels of *positive childhood experiences*. But with zoos, museums, sports, churches, community centers, and schools all closed for the foreseeable future during Covid-19, is hope deferred or lost for these critical and foundational *positive childhood experiences*? Thank goodness, it is not, for positive childhood experiences never hinged upon the place, but rather on the person. In fact, Bethell’s research (Bethell et al., 2019a) tells us that the components of measuring positive childhood experiences are comprised of whether an adult reports that as a child, they:

- Felt able to talk to their family about feelings
- Felt their family stood by them during difficult times
- Enjoyed participating in community traditions
- Felt a sense of belonging in high school (not including those who did not attend school or were homeschooled)
- Felt supported by friends
- Had at least 2 non-parent adults who took genuine interest in them
- Felt safe & protected by an adult in their home

So though we realize there is much outside of our control in the midst of life with Covid-19, although there already are and will likely continue to be additional adversities for children, families, and ourselves in the coming days, weeks, and months, **investing our resources in efforts to support family resilience and connection is of universal benefit for all children and all families, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, special medical needs status, or adverse childhood experiences**. Through establishing new routines (schedule-focused aspects of our lives) and rituals (connection-focused aspects of our lives) during this Covid-19 pandemic, we can make space in our lives to “talk to [our] family about feelings, [stand] by [our children] during difficult times,” “participate in [creative, safely-distanced] community traditions,” “provide a sense of belonging [to our high-schoolers],” “[facilitate/foster the continued] support [of our child(ren)’s] friends,” “take genuine interest in” the lives of children outside our families, and help provide “felt safe[ty] and [a sense of] protect[ion] to the child(ren) in our homes¹. We can also prioritize these for children and families in our roles as teachers, administrators, district leaders, and state officials. And from all of us at the Carolina Family Engagement Center, take care and stay well, dear neighbors. We are in this, together, for the long-haul.

-Julia Beaty, LISW-CP, Regional Family Engagement Liaison (Upper Central SC)

References

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