Guidance on Engaging in Tough Conversations with Young Children

by Marty Gravett, Director of Early Childhood Education; Ann Reavey, School Counselor; and the Sabot at Stony Point Preschool Teacher-Researchers

Every parent is in a different place in the process of thinking about and discussing school closings and/or the coronavirus pandemic with their young children. This article is meant as a guide for families in whatever time frame or direction they choose to take.

Preparing for any big conversation with children means we must first process our own emotions. This allows us to provide a safe space for the children to fully experience their own emotions. After you have processed your emotions, check to see if your child needs emotional support. Is the child ready for a conversation? Let the child lead; follow their cues on what to discuss, how to approach it (for example, through play), and how long to continue. Always, always, include assurances that you will keep them safe.

Take Care of Yourself: Find a Listening Partner

Find that place within yourself where you can embrace these changes. While routine provides the young child with a sense of predictability and even a feeling of security and safety, it is important to remember that children, like all of us, experience an unending array of change in the everyday experience. While change as a process is more difficult for some of us than for others and some particular changes are more difficult than others, humans are fully capable of adaptation. We do not have to fear it, nor do we have to fear it for our children. It is entirely possible that in the moments in which we embrace change, there is no psychological space for fear. That space is taken by some other feeling: anticipation, excitement, bravery, disequilibrium, problem solving, and/or critical thinking.

Our work in helping children embrace change starts within ourselves. The concept is to ‘put on your own oxygen mask first.’ Understandably, this is easier said than done. Just like children, more often than not, we need some help in doing this work. You might find that in a listener who can hear your fears, who can help you get to that place where you can think again and not feel overwhelmed by fears and anxiety. For some it will be a spouse, a sibling, an old friend, or a professional. Just reach out to someone.

It is important that we don’t expect children to take on our feelings or to take care of us. Try not to put them in a position of feeling like they are responsible for how you feel, or responsible for taking care of you.

This is tough work, and we do not have to be perfect. Just try to get to a place where you are not overwhelmed with emotion when supporting your child.
See if Your Child Is in Need of Support
Before you launch a conversation, check to see if your child is in need of some support. You may observe that your child needs an opportunity to deal with strong feelings that are already present. Often, you won’t know what has precipitated these feelings, but you may find a few clues that the feelings are there. For example, the child may not be thinking well. Are they climbing the cabinet they usually recognize as off-limits? Are they whiny and easily frustrated? Or balking, over clingy, needing frequent reassurance?

You actually don’t need to figure out what is wrong. You just need to help your child get back to their thinking brain from their “turtle” or limbic brain. Recognize that your child is not thinking well because feelings are flooding their brain and cutting them off from the executive functioning or the reasoning part of the brain. In this state, no one is able to make rational decisions much less have a conversation in which they can truly participate and benefit.

Helping a child return to a place where they can think, exchange information, and construct together how to move forward is a necessity before anything else. We call this “coming into connection” with the child. Some type of emotional discharge is typical in the beginning of this process: crying, a tantrum, talking incessantly, or even laughing hysterically. You will develop your own set of ways of getting back into connection with your child, but if you find ideas are eluding you, try one of these:

Set a clear limit, saying:

- “I can’t let you climb on the cabinet.” “...smack your brother.” “...spit.” (Stop the child gently but firmly.)
- “It looks like it is hard for you to remember not to________, so I am going to help you stop.” (Stop the child gently but firmly.)

Join their play and exaggerate your helplessness to elicit laughter and movement, saying in a clearly pretending voice—the more dramatic the better:

- “Let me out of this house!” (Pretend to whine or cry because they are keeping you away from what you want. Maybe even stomp your foot.)
- “Oh no! You’re gonna catch me! I’m going to run! Don’t catch me!” (Then run away but, bumbling, do let them catch you.)
- “But I can’t remember how to put on my socks.” “...wash my hands.” “...sit down.” (Something that’s very easy for you to do. Plead and whine to their delight.)
- “Don’t you kiss me!” “...squeeze me!” “...hug me!” (Pretend to run away, then squeal while they cover you with kisses or squeezes or hugs.)

Find something special to your child that will make them laugh, then go with it.

Set up some Special Time with your child. Arrange for no interruptions, one-on-one, and let them lead you in play, saying:

- “I’m going to set the timer, you and I can play whatever you want for ___ minutes.”
“Let’s play together. I have ___ minutes. What would you like to do?”

During this process of helping your child come back into connection, you may learn something about your child’s thinking. If a conversation about school or the pandemic starts spontaneously, don’t be afraid to go with it. The only thing off-limits during Special Time is safety concerns. Play the game your child wants, especially if it is something you are normally reluctant to play.

**Decide Whether to Have the Conversation with Your Preschooler**

Most children before the age of two are not ready for any real conversations of this type. Even at two, a child is not likely to get much from a conversation unless they use language extensively for communication. But a child of any age is likely to understand that there are changes around them and that these are affecting the adults in their sphere.

For older preschoolers, whether you realize it or not, you probably have already begun a non-verbal conversation with your children on the topics of the pandemic and school closure. They can hardly fail to notice that they are no longer attending school. By moving through the day in a new way, you have already shared the day-to-day details of the new family routine, so there is a tacit acknowledgement on their part about the experience. Having a candid talk with your child about the virus and new school experience may bring clarity around your child’s understanding. That is, once they reflect on school and the pandemic, there is the possibility that the child will learn (become cognitively aware) that they can negotiate change, accept disappointment, handle hard things, contribute in their own way, and turn to others for support.

When you come into connection with your child, a conversation may be a part of the flow of play. Think about whether you have any clues to their thinking from your time with your child. Often, upon reflection, we remember we have heard children say something or have seen them act out or draw something that is a clue to their thinking.

**Listen to the Child Before You Begin a Conversation**

Is the conversation one the child is ready to have? Is the child showing any interest, awareness, emotional response to the topic? To find out, step back and listen to your child.

“Listening” is a word teacher-researchers use to mean observing closely by opening our eyes and ears to all the manifestations of children’s expressions: facial cues, body movement, vocalizations (both words and other sounds), timing, play, representations, etc. And more than this, opening our heart to these very same things. This means accepting what we see without judgement but with a goal of understanding what this tells us about the life of the child’s mind.

Don’t get us wrong, this is not a call to *laissez-faire* parenting. Please, if the rule is “no climbing on the china shelf,” don’t revoke it. Just be aware that the child’s impetus or intention gives you a clue about the child’s mind. What we discover any time we listen to children with our hearts and minds is fodder for good conversations with a child.
Let the Child Lead the Conversation

When a conversation starts, be sure to let the child lead it with their ideas and understanding. When a child is leading the conversation, you’ll discover what the child already knows and is thinking. If you start from where the child is, you will be able to help them adapt and build new understandings based on the ideas they have already formulated. (We call this co-construction.) Without starting with the child’s thinking, your explanations or questions could confuse the child or even create misunderstandings you (and they) won’t discover for a while.

Respond by noticing and wondering:

- “I heard you mention not seeing your friends [or teachers].”
- “I would like to know more about what is happening in this picture you drew.”
- “I heard you say your doll has a virus; can you tell me about that?”
- “I notice it can be hard for you when we talk to your friends [teachers] on the computer. I wonder what feelings you have when you see them and hear their voices.”
- “What are you thinking about ____?” “...wondering, have ideas or questions about ____?”

Respond by reflecting their thinking:

Respond to the child by reflecting back what they say to you. This shows you are interested and that you understand them. It most often leads to the child continuing the conversation by sharing more of their understanding. You might say:

- “It sounds like you have been feeling scared [lonely, sad, longing, frustrated, etc.] and wondering why we are not going to school [the museum, Grandpa’s, etc.].”
- “Oh, so you heard Jonas say his grandmother is sick.”
- “You are telling me this picture is showing the bad guys outside.”

Respond with questions to help them clarify and expand:

Respond with clarifying questions or open-ended questions if you don’t understand something or if you want the child to think further about what they have said.

- “I wonder what you mean by that? Can you explain it to me with different words?”
- “What do you think ‘sick’ means?” “What makes them ‘bad guys’?”

The fact that open-ended questions don’t have specific answers gives the child lots of room for response.

- “So what does that feel like?”
- “What does that make you think?”
- “Tell me more.”

Respond by acknowledging their feelings:

- “I hear you are really wanting to see your friends. It’s hard when we miss people. I miss my friends too.”
- “It is confusing, isn’t it!”
**How to Start If Your Child Has Shown No Interest**

If you are ready and your child has shown no particular interest, awareness, or emotional response, here are a few ideas on how to launch or provoke a conversation. You might say:

- “I’m wondering if you’ve heard the words ‘coronavirus’ or ‘virus’. What have you heard?”
- “Have you heard the news that this school year we won’t go back to the school building?”
- “What do you know already about you not going back to your school?”
- “What ideas or questions do you have about the coronavirus?”

**Be Direct About Coronavirus, But Not Alarmist**

Since adults and children are in close quarters now, we need to be even more aware than usual of our adult conversations, phone calls, and TV/radio/podcasts. We know that children often absorb more than they are demonstrating, even if they only hear small bits. When the child is not the intended audience, often the information is not child sensitive. Be conscientious about the information you expose your child to.

**Give correct information, but only as much as the child needs:**

- “There is a virus that is making people sick. So we are staying safe and keeping others safe by following what scientists have learned we should do. These are called guidelines. Everyone is supposed to follow the guidelines.”
- “We stay six feet apart.” (Show them the distance.) “We wash our hands.” (Help them learn how to do this properly.)
- “Do you remember when you had the flu? It makes some people feel like that. Do you remember that you got better from the flu?”
- “People are working very hard on coming up with a vaccine to help everyone.”

**Share values:**

Since this experience is global, share your values about humanity with your child. Let the child know this is an experience that affects everyone. It also can be a time to gently introduce the understanding that theirs might be a place of privilege and how, together, you can be helpful to others.

**Expect questions, like:**

- “But how does the virus get someone sick?”
- “Will I get sick? Will you get sick?”
- “If I get sick, will it hurt me?”
- “Am I going to die? Are you [siblings, grandparents, etc.] going to die?”

**Respond:**

- “We might get sick, but we are lucky because I know how to take care of us if we are sick.”
- “People do die, but that is not going to happen to us for a long time.”
- “Do you remember when you had the flu and how you felt? And that you got better?”
**Be Direct About Not Returning to School, but Not Dramatic**

If you haven’t discussed it yet, and you and your child are both in a place where you can think well— if your emotions are not right on the edge of spilling over—then be straightforward and share information about school closing.

*Give information, such as:*
- “This year, we won’t be going back to the school building.”
- “We will see our friends on the computer, but we won’t see them each day in your classroom like we used to.”
- “This is the way school is happening these days. This is the way we will see our friends.”
- “This is very different for us. What have you noticed about the difference?”

You can be ready to share your noticing, too:
- “I don’t get in our car and drive you every morning.” “We eat lunch together every day now.”

*Expect questions about not returning to school, like:*
- “Are we ever going back to school?”
- “When do we get to go back?”
- “When can I play with my friends?”

*Respond:*
- “We don’t know when we will go back to school, but when I learn I will let you know. It will be a while.”
- “I hear you are really wanting to see your friends. It’s hard when we miss people. I miss my friends too.”
- “Pippin is doing work at school and taking care of school for us. There is no one else there right now.”
- “It is confusing, isn’t it?”
- “We will go back to Sabot when it is safe to be together. But until then, we will have lots of time together, playing and learning at home while staying healthy. You will be a little older and might be in another classroom or building. You might have some of your friends in the same room but some might be in another room or in another school.”
- For children heading on to other schools: “We can find ways to stay in connection with your friends. When it is safe to come together again, we can have playdates.” “...mail letters.” “…still have digital hangouts.”

**Slow Down and Let the Conversation Emerge**

The conversation doesn’t have to happen all at once; let it unfold at the child’s pace. It can happen in small bites. It can also be a time for children to learn new words or new concepts. Let those emerge naturally and then respond with empathizing, new clarifying questions, open-ended questions, and/or more information.
Leave Time and Space for Emotional Responses
Remember that you may see anxiety, sadness, joy, more questions, and even disinterest during these conversations. If so, just go back to See if Your Child Needs Support and/or just Listen again.

If you feel overwhelmed or lost in the conversation yourself, let the child know you will need to end the conversation but that you would like to come back to it again. Then get the support you need to relaunch the conversation at a later time.

Gauge How Much Information Your Child Can Absorb
You don’t need to give more information than the child is ready for or needs. They will show you by their level of interest and engagement what is important to them. If they move away from you or show disinterest in the conversation, try going back to a place where they showed you some interest. Return to Listening, Wondering, or Noticing. Or let it go and let it reemerge again with a different nuance at a later time.

Resist the Feeling that You Need to Have All the Answers
Recognize that it is okay if you don’t have all the answers.

Figure out answers along with your child:
● “Let’s think about that together.”
● “I like that question. What do you think?”
● “I wonder who we can ask about that?”

Answer honestly:
This stance invites the child into the real life of research: living with unanswered questions and being open to looking for answers.
● “What an interesting question. That is something I don’t know. But I can try to figure it out.”
● “I have to think about that. I can get back to you.”

Relaunch a Conversation You Want to Continue
If you had to cut off a conversation or you think there is more conversation to be had and you would like to restart or come back to a conversation, there are several possibilities for relaunching. During a moment of connection—over a meal or in a quiet moment—you can remind the child of something from before. It can be something they mentioned, a question they asked, or something they drew or represented in some way:

Remind the child what they have done before:
● “Remember when you asked me ________? I have been thinking about that and wondering....”
● “Can you tell me more about ________?”
● “What is happening in this building you built [or drawing, or other representation]?”
Support the Conversation with Your Best Guess
Sometimes a child may not have all the words to describe things, so try filling in the blanks with a guess or a proposal. You might say:
- “You just said ‘Pop-Pop.’ Are you wondering why we can’t see your grandfather every week like we used to?”
- “You have drawn that big monster again. I am wondering if you are thinking something feels scary.”

Don’t Interview Your Child for Pain
It is possible your child will take the information you have given without any worry or anxiety and with complete confidence. If strong feelings of worry or anxiety come up for you, return to getting support for yourself. Be careful not to assume these are also your child’s feelings.

It is important not to ask the child the same questions, repeatedly checking with them that they are feeling okay. This is counterproductive because it continues to lay out the possibility of things not being okay and indicates that the child should be worried.

Let Your Child Know You Have Feelings
It is okay to share your own feelings, but share as calmly as you can, describing feelings and how you manage them. This can be powerful learning for the child. Avoid sharing in a way that asks the child to take care of your feelings. If you find a lot of strong feelings emerging, then arrange to get some support for yourself. (See the “Take Care of Yourself” section at the beginning.)

Assure Your Child that You Will Keep Them Safe
Assurances of help and safety should go along with every conversation, emphasizing your confidence in your ability to take care of your child. This can be a time to talk about all the many ways we know about staying safe and to underscore the positive aspects of this time together as a family. You might say:
- “I will keep you safe. I have big arms to hold you even when you are scared.”
- “We have lots of ways of being safe—staying at home, washing hands, wearing a mask—and I will help you learn them.”
- “Remember how I showed you how to wash your hands and count slowly to twenty? Let’s practice together.”
- “When we stay at home, we are staying safe and keeping others from getting sick.”
- “I really like having all of our family at home together.”
- “When people get sick, there are all kinds of people to help them: EMTs, doctors, nurses.”
- “Scientists are working hard on creating a vaccine to help everyone”
- “Do you remember that you got better from the flu?”

One More Thought
As with most difficult things, when you’ve prepped a little, don’t worry about being perfect, and remember that you are doing the best you can, you may well find that you will truly enjoy these
conversations with your child. And if not, follow a few of the ideas in the section on Taking Care of Yourself or explore the Resources for Further Focus.

Parenting is never easy, but you can assure yourself and your child that all will be well.

**Resources for Further Focus**

**Sabot Blog**
Ann Reavey, Sabot at Stony Point School Counselor, writes about handling our grief and starting supportive conversations with our children, among other pandemic-related topics.

**Hand in Hand Parenting**
Resources on parenting in the pandemic, support tools, and support conversations with Hand in Hand trained parenting specialists.

**How the Coronavirus Is Influencing Children’s Play**
A pertinent article from *The Atlantic* on the value and quality of children’s play in hard times.

**The World Health Organization: Parenting in the time of COVID-19**
"To help parents interact constructively with their children during this time of confinement, these six one-page tips for parents cover planning one-on-one time, staying positive, creating a daily routine, avoiding bad behaviour, managing stress, and talking about COVID-19."