What Kids Need During the Pandemic

Susan David: There is no impulse more natural than the desire of parents to protect their children. Woe to the unlucky hiker who gets between a grizzly and its cub, or even the duck and its duckling. We humans possess those same instincts, and they often manifest in efforts to make things right for our kids. But in our current circumstances, parents are grappling with the fact that they can't make things right. No matter how much we want, we can't resume the play dates, reopen the schools, or un-cancel the missed milestones, the birthday parties, the proms, the graduation ceremonies. The coronavirus pandemic is the scariest situation many children have had to face. Heck, it's the scariest situation many parents have had to face, so what can we do to help our children navigate our uncertain, unprecedented new reality? This is Checking In with Susan David. No matter how hard you try to ensure that your kids are successful, happy, and safe though, you can be sure that the temptations will arise, and that change is inevitable. You can't predict, and neither can they—a fender bender, a botched math test, the party at which everyone is guzzling beer, or the honor student buddy who suddenly develops an interest in shoplifting, and you could not, and cannot predict a pandemic today or one in the future.

In our increasingly competitive and unpredictable age, one of the best things that parents can do to help their children thrive is to teach them emotional skills. Emotional agility is like a vaccine that helps to inoculate kids against being overwhelmed by the moments of unpleasantness that life, no doubt, has in store for them, and that they're experiencing right now. It won't give kids complete immunity, but it will help them to develop the flexibility and resilience they need to flourish, even during hard times.

The summer my son Noah was five years old, he and I were steady customers at the town pool. Invariably, he would run into friends there, and they would spend the afternoon splashing and playing and engaging in all the usual hot weather fun that makes the time fly by, but there was one activity that, at least for Noah, made time stands still. Whenever he considered jumping off the high diving board, he froze. All his pals were doing it, and he desperately wanted to join in, but he was too scared to try. He would watch them and remain rooted to the spot, overwhelmed by fear that was greater than his desire to participate in something he could clearly see was really fun. We all have those moments in which we think we might want to try something new but just can't get past the fear, or right now for children, when they're experiencing loneliness or sadness or anger and struggling to get past those. For kids, however, facing these experiences can be especially challenging because they have a limited history of making such leaps. In Noah's case, this was both figuratively and literally. They haven't had the time to build up a store of reinforcing outcomes, "I've done this kind of thing before, and it hasn't killed me." So they become easily

hooked by the autopilot response that holds them back, and they can get stuck. Life right now is full of diving boards and precipices, but one thing that we know is that helping our children to be agile in this changing world is not about ignoring, fixing, fighting, or trying to control their fear or anything else that they might be experiencing. Rather it's about helping them to notice and accept their thoughts, viewing even the most powerful of them with compassion and curiosity, and then choosing courage over comfort in order to do what they've determined is most important. Courage, as I've mentioned previously on this podcast, is not the absence of fear or difficult emotions. Courage is fear walking, or in Noah's case, it was fear diving.

Of course, a child's difficult emotions, like fear often stir up our own difficult emotions, our own fear of fear. We become afraid of what our children's reluctance to embrace an experience will mean for their development or what their loneliness might mean longer term for them, or God forbid, we might think that it reflects on our own parenting skills. We worry about what these kinds of emotions might cost our sons and daughters. We want our children to thrive, and since we can so often see the way forward for them, we try to push them in that direction, assuming that by doing so, our children will realize that whatever they were reluctant to do really wasn't so bad, whether that's reach out to a friend for a Zoom call game of chess or something else.

But as we know, the most helpful way to be with our emotional experiences, is not to do something because you feel you should or punishing yourself if you haven't, but rather it's about being able to make intentional choices about how you want to be, how you want to behave. The same goes for our kids. When Noah was stuck literally and metaphorically on the edge of that diving board, I could have imposed my will on him, telling him what I already knew, if he went ahead and jumped, he'd be fine and happier for it. Or I could have tried to minimize his genuine worries by telling him, "don't be silly. Everything will be okay. Look at how much fun your friends are having. Do you want to miss out on that? It's okay. It's okay. Just do it." Instead, I was able to start a conversation with him that we continued later at home. After he acknowledged that he was scared, we talked about how he might feel if he did jump, thrilled and proud, how he might feel, if he didn't jump, relieved on some level, but also disappointed in himself, and critically how he could do what was important to him, despite his fear and jump anyway because it was important. That is, I first encouraged him to show up to his fear. Evolution has made us wary of heights for a reason, and there's no shame in needing time to adjust to the counterintuitive notion that a one meter leap into a four meter chlorinated body of water is a reasonable thing to do. Simply acknowledging what he was feeling changed his reaction to that fear, allowing him to step out, to create a dispassionate distance from the emotion and what he wanted to accomplish. From there, we examined his why, or the reasons that he genuinely wanted to dive off the high dive, fun, thrills, comradery. Along the way, I tried to encourage him that the choice to jump was his choice entirely. In spite of any peer pressure he might've felt, the high dive, jumping off it, was certainly not a have-to, but it could be a want-to. Next, we tried to focus away from the outcome and helped him to generate small steps, tiny tweaks, towards the place that he most wanted to be. When we guide our children through these basic steps, whether in normal times, or in times of a pandemic, showing up to their difficult emotions, helping them to label them and understand them, helping them to recognize who they want to be in the situation. Do they want to be a friend, and what does that mean in reaching

out to another person? Are they experiencing loneliness, and what does that loneliness indicate about their needs? When we do this, we help to build their character and their sense of values and also help them to generate steps that allow them to develop a sense of self-efficacy around their emotions over time.

Many of the studies that document the value of helping kids to learn the skills of showing up to their own emotions, stepping out, deciding on what their why is, and then moving on, have been carried out over long enough periods of time to trace the development of resilience, morality, willpower, health, psychological stability, and relationship success well into adulthood. For parents, the most effective way to teach your child emotional skills, particularly in difficult times, is by practicing them yourself. This can be hard to pull off when your daughter is shrieking, "I hate you" at the top of her lungs in front of the Zoom call with her online school teacher, or when your son comes into the room sobbing after a bad day or feeling lonely, but these times actually offer you an even more valuable opportunity to model emotional agility. You model critical skills, when you step out of your own emotions and respond calmly and compassionately to understanding why your child feels the way he or she does, instead of rushing it and to respond to your own feelings. Children have an emotional life that is as rich and varied as that of adults, and their responses to the pandemic will run the gamut. There may be fear that they or someone they love will take sick, anger over canceled plans, depression brought on by an uncertain future, and resentment towards disrupted routines, just to name a few possibilities. When a child feels seen, it soothes them in the moment, and promotes a sense of trust that psychologists call secure attachment. This is the kind of attachment that helps our kids to handle new or even scary situations while trusting that their caregivers will be there when they need them. So giving our kids the license to feel how they feel is one of the greatest gifts that a parent can bestow. A child who feels free to experience the full range of emotions, learns some really important lessons.

They learn, firstly, that emotions pass. That they're transient, and that there's nothing in mental experience that demands action in the here and now. Second, when children are allowed to feel what they feel, they learn that emotions are not scary. No matter how big or bad a feeling seems in the moment, your child learns that they are bigger and stronger. And they learn too that emotions are teachers, that emotions can contain important information that can help your child to figure out what matters to them and to others. None of this is to say that raising emotionally agile children requires you to tolerate tantrums or irrational behavior. Parents don't need to appease scream demands to visit a shuttered Chucky Cheese or to indulge teenage rebellion against social distancing. Just like I can show up to my son's frustration with his baby sister, I can empathize with it and connect with it, it doesn't mean that I'm endorsing his idea to give her away to the first stranger that he sees in a shopping mall. By showing up to our children's emotions and helping them to label them and discern values, what we are demonstrating is that we own our emotions. They don't own us. We get to be with our emotions with compassion, curiosity, and courage, but ultimately we as human beings get to take the next step. So rather than giving into a child's unacceptable actions, you can let your children know that their feelings are real and important without suggesting that every feeling should be acted upon. By helping your child to learn to label their emotions, gain perspective, and put distance between impulse and action, you can reinforce

the idea that while they don't need to restrain their feelings, they do sometimes need to restrain and redirect their behavior. Such an outlet will help them to manage during the pandemic and beyond. So, what does this look like in practice? When you're child is showing signs of stress, there are a few steps you can take to help them manage it without infringing on their autonomy. First, try to show up to their emotions. Instead of rushing into help your kid avoid the problem, or even immediately providing them with a possible solution, listen to their anxieties and validate their experiences. They need to know that you're on their team. Their issues are not just boxes to check before you move on to the next thing. For them, their emotions are real and all consuming Honor that.

If your son or daughter tells you they miss their friends, for example, you might feel a temptation to quickly suggest a Zoom call, or in your more irritable moments, to scold them for whining, both reactions are understandable. Your stressed too, but a more productive approach might be to give them the time and encouragement to talk through their emotions. Who do they miss? What do they miss doing? This conveys the message that their feelings are valid and that you're in their corner. Try to empathize with them and find connections with what they're going through. This doesn't mean pretending that you have all the same fears, but draw on your own experience to let them know that they're not alone.

Perhaps you found yourself cooped up with a lovesick teenager who hasn't seen their significant other face-to-face in two months, an eternity to a 15 year old. If you manage to catch them between door slams and trips to the fridge, you could confide in them how hard it was for you when your boy or girlfriend did a semester abroad in college without you, or when your spouse had to spend a few months out of state for a work project. Just knowing that their parents sometimes feel vulnerable too can help to reassure kids.

Second, help your child to label their emotions. We know that from a young age, from around 3, 4, 5 years old, children start developing the skill to discern the difference in emotions, the difference for instance, between being sad or mad, and that this difference has a lifelong impact on their wellbeing and their capacity to manage their emotions effectively. So, say your child has suddenly gotten clingy, anytime you sit down to answer client emails or head off to your essential job at the hospital or supermarket, you feel a tiny hand tugging at your sleeve. What was cute at first has become a problem, and your patients is wearing thin. Rather than snap at them, brush them off, or instructing them to be a big girl or big boy, consider having a discussion with them about what's driving this new behavior. Are they bored? Have the shattered routines left them dependent on you for stability? Do they miss mommy? Are they afraid you'll get sick and never return home? Once you've figured out what's really worrying them, you can brainstorm together about steps you can take as a family to navigate their situation. Ask open-ended questions. It doesn't matter if your child is two or 22, we can do this with our children. Help them to take the lead in finding solutions. For a young child, this might mean asking them questions like, "what would help you right now? Do you need a bit of time to be by yourself, or do you want to listen to a favorite piece of music, or should I just be with you and read you a story?" Helping your child to identify their own solutions, helps them to develop self-efficacy and confidence around their emotions. And of course, we can

have the same conversation with our teen. If they're feeling lonely, we can help them to be in the space of generating solutions of how they might want to navigate the situation. I know this advice, which is advice to show up to our children's difficult experiences, to help them to step out of them, to connect with their why and who they want to be, and to make small choices so that they can move forward effectively, is difficult. It's difficult when we ourselves are tired and exhausted and struggling with all that we are trying to do.

And I'd love then, to leave with a short story of something that I experienced many years ago, and that I think demonstrates some of these core ideas.

When Noah was an infant, I took him to the doctor for his first round of vaccinations. There he was in his calm cocoon of existence and at peace with the world, but the moment the first needle struck him, he went from calm-gaga goo goo into outrage. He started screaming. To me, a new mother, exhausted and hormonal, his outrage seemed to say, "I trusted you. How could you do this to me?" I wanted to comfort him. My instinct was to pick him up, which is exactly what I did. I rushed in and I said, "it's okay. It's okay. It's okay." Noah continued to wail, and the nurse continued to do her job, but as she did, she looked at me calmly and with compassion, and said something, I will never forget. She said, "You're saying to your child, 'it's okay. It's okay,' but it's not okay. It will be okay." She was absolutely right, of course. How foolish of me to tell a person, even a baby, who had just been brought into a cold room and handed over to a strange woman who was now poking him with needles and terrifying him, that this was all okay. I was dismissing Noah's very clear and immediate, albeit pre-verbal feelings, denying the very painful reality of his experience. In essence, I was telling him to bottle it. Of course, I went home, and I started to brood myself. "How foolish of me, how foolish of me, I've got a flipping Ph.D. in this stuff, and I did the one thing that they say invalidates and ruins your child for life."

By the time my husband, Anthony, came home, Noah was well beyond his anti-vax protest. I, on the other hand, had been trashing myself for hours. I'd spent years studying emotions. I should have known better. As soon as Anthony stepped through the door, I told him the whole story, "Can you believe it? Noah was crying. And I said, it's okay. It's okay. It's okay. I completely invalidated him." Anthony remained completely silent, but then smile amused small came across his face, and he responded, "it's okay, Sue, it's okay." The reason I tell you this story is because yes, we can all hear what it is we need to do when our children are experiencing difficulty or frustration, and we can all have the inclination to rush in, and the knowledge cognitively that this may not be the best response, but we need to recognize that all of us, all of us are trying the best we can, with who we are, with what we've got, and with the resources that we have right now. It's both okay, and it will be okay. That's all for today. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.