

Taking Care of Children in Alarming Times

by Dr. Gordon Neufeld

I'd like to share a few thoughts on taking care of children in alarming times. These are not new ideas by any means, more like reminders for those who are familiar with the attachment-based developmental approach. I'll try to keep it brief as alarm has a way of shortening our attention spans.

But first, some comments on the nature of the stress we are experiencing during this crisis. It is only natural that in times of stress, we seek togetherness. This is how we are wired. But in this case, togetherness – at least in the form of 'being with' – is what threatens us, thus creating a perfect emotional storm. No wonder we feel so rattled and unsettled. We are meant to come together in order to take care of each other and our loved ones. Now we are asked to keep our distance to keep each other safe. As imperative as it is in these times, it goes against the grain of our instincts and that of our children. I can't imagine what it is like for the spouses of hospitalized partners right now.

Given the conflict between what we feel like doing and what we need to do, there are two possible paths to appropriate action. For those capable of mixed feelings, the inner conflict becomes immense but also foundational to good problem-solving. For those not capable of mixed feelings – which include most young children and a disproportionate amount of adults – they are badly in need of well-spelled-out **scripts***. These scripts become the main challenge of parents – translating an alarming world into easy-to-follow scripts that each particular child is capable of executing.

We must try to avoid alarming them in order to move them to caution. Alarming children directly is counterproductive on many levels, not the least of which is that it evokes deep insecurity and strong alpha impulses, both of which interfere with being able to keep them safe. Non-alarming scripts should be our modus operandus. Remember, scripts need to be simple, positive and do-able. Do make sure you engage the child before you provide and model the script, otherwise it can backfire, producing resistance or counterwill instead. So collect your child's eyes, smiles and nods before proceeding.

Remember also, that one of the most important places of safety for children is being in the presence of a strong caring adult with a good alpha presence. No matter how scared we are and how little we know about what is happening or going to happen, we are still our child's answer – including their bubble of safety in an alarming world.

Remember as well, that children at play are insulated from the alarming world around them. Play is a sanctuary of safety. Play is also the original school, far more effective anything society could possibly invent. Rather than try to make the home a school, it would be much more important in these times to make the home a true

playground where Nature can take care of all of us. In true play, the engagement is in the activity, not the outcome. Most screen play does not qualify.

One more word of caution. Thwarted togetherness is the fountainhead of our frustration, so don't be surprised if you find more attacking energy lurking just under the surface of your interaction. My foul frustration has certainly caught me unawares, sometimes erupting at the most unexpected times. In the interests of taking care of our children, we need to find safe emotional playgrounds for our frustration. We also need to make regular play-dates with our sadness as this is probably the only way to keep truly civil in these times. If you are a painter, you will need to paint. If you are a writer, you will need to write. If you gravitate to music as an emotional playground, remember you will need it more than ever at this time. Neglecting to grieve the unfolding tragedy, including uncertainty and mortality, will only set the stage for more wounding. We owe it to our loved ones to remain soft and gentle during this time.

***Scripts** – the following excerpt on scripting is from Dr. Neufeld's book Hold On To Your Kids.

To script a child's behavior is to provide the cues for what to do and how to do it Successful scripting requires the adult to position himself as a cue-giver for the child. Again, we begin with the basics: we collect the child first in order to be able to work from within the relationship. It is very much like the mother goose with goslings; getting the offspring into line before bringing the behavior into line. Once a child is following us, we are free to take the lead. Of course, our ability to prescribe a child's behavior will be only as good as the child's attachment to us. It doesn't have to be particularly deep or vulnerable, only strong enough to evoke the instincts to emulate and to imitate.

For successful directing, the cues for what to do and how to be must be given in ways the child can follow. It doesn't work to give negative instructions because that does not actually tell the child what to do. In fact, for the immature and severely stuck, all that registers is often the action part of the command! The "don't" is often deleted from awareness, leading to the opposite behavior of what was desired. Our focus must be diverted away from the behavior that causes trouble and focus on the actions that are desirable. Modeling the behavior you want the child to follow is even more effective. Like a director working with actors or a choreographer with dancers, the end result is created first in the adult's mind.