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Quarantine: Coping With Children in Conflict

Conflict between Children:

Do you hear those resounding voices of children coming from the next room, echoing to either mom or dad, “I’m bored, there’s nothing to do!” At that point, parents may experience the need to find an activity for children to engage in. Once parents have miraculously provided several suggestions, muted voices by children may ensue. But those voices later become a crescendo of children arguing, loudly with each other. Sometime those arguments may be inane with remarks, “You’ve been playing with that toy a long time, it’s my turn now.” This type of arguing continues sporadically throughout the day over toys or other minute subjects. After hearing various haranguing remarks by their children, parent’s anxiety level heightens with a need for respite.

First and foremost, parents need to reduce their anxiety level by calling a family “time out.” A respite that begins with children’s separation from each other by going to different areas of the home, with a parent similarly allowing a respite for themselves. Because of children’s attention span, a suggested respite for children should entail a specific time, depending on the age (3-12 years) of the children; with one minute allowed in conjunction to the child’s age (3 years with 3 minutes) (CDC, 2019) and more time if needed.

“STS” Coping Approach: “S” in “Stop” to Conflict:

The separation of family members is similar to the adult’s “time out, calming exercise, and communication” (TEC”), with parent’s encouraged to continue using this approach (Flores, M.C. 2020) With this adult approach of “time out,” younger children appear to have a negative connotation of being punished. Thus an approach that incorporates a similar verbal meaning of “stop,” “think” and “say it” is with the acronym “STS” can be utilized instead (see Figure 1). The first letter “S” in “STS” signifies the ability for family members to “stop,” by taking both a physical and psychological respite from each other, when conflict arises. When children are separated, each child should signify the activity to engage in, when alone. The activity should be sedentary activity, a video game, reading, an art project to help diminish their heightened emotions.

Figure 1: “STS” Coping Approach

“S” (Stop) – Children are separated in another area of the home, with a sedentary activity.

“TEC:” Similar to the adult approach of “T” (Time out)

“T” (Think) – After reunification, children are encouraged to engage in a reflective activity.

Similar to the adult approach of “E” (calming Exercise)

“S” (Say it) – Children can proceed in articulating their thoughts and feelings about the argument.

Similar to the adult approach of “C” (Communication)

“T” in “Think” to Conflict:

After a brief separation, the children are encouraged to think about the conflict by engaging in either artwork or journaling. This non-verbal expression allows them to think about the event, with a brief description of the conflict that ensued. The artwork or drawing should be preceded by their identification of their feelings, “happy,” “sad,” “mad,” and/or “scared,” related to the conflict. The artwork or journaling provides an opportunity for children to “T” or “think” about the event and thus express their affect. Sometimes children appear reluctant to discuss the conflict and instead discuss other situations. This is a process called “projection,” whereby children can feel a sense of safety, as they discuss the conflict.

“S” in “Say It” to Conflict:

One example as children engage in artwork is for parents to respond to the different colors and the placement of shapes. Observational, non-judgmental statements by the parents should include, “I see the yellow and blue colors are bright colors, if the colors could speak with feeling words, what affective response would be made from one color to the other.” Thus “S” of “say it” is encouraged, through these observational statements. Another example of a parental response to the shapes could entail, “I see in your drawings, big circles are all around the small circles. Now if the small circles could talk, what do you think those circles would say to the big circles?” Should children respond with, “You’re crowding me,” your response could be, “So those large circles are crowding the small circles, with further clarification of, “Is that how you felt when your brother/sister tried to take your toy away from you?” It is important to repeat the child’s statement, for them to feel you’ve listened to them; but also connecting their statement to the current conflict.

The parent-child communication should also include a discussion about the behavior and ways to prevent future conflict. The child should be encouraged to say what the conflict was about. A statement by the child of "I took the toy away, because (child's name) didn't want to share!" Parent may repeat the child's response of; (child's name) didn't want to share. How did that make you feel?" After the child has responded, a parent could then state, "What are ways to work together with (child's name) in sharing the toy?" Any questions should be in the form of "open ended" comments, which are statements that require a response.

Summary:

In writing this article, it was with the intent to provide parenting strategies with the children of today and tomorrow. This current quarantine is difficult for the family because of being in close proximity to each other on a daily basis. When daily conflict arises between children and family members, it exacerbates ones stress level and makes it difficult to interact in a calm and objective manner. Therefore in utilizing a different approach in implementing "stop," "think," and "say it" ("STS") with children, it takes a conscientious effort. The work is continual and at times appears relentless because parents will have to stop, from whatever activity they've engaged in to implement this approach. But if you persevere, the time taken will be fruitful, especially as each day passes and the conflicts diminish. When conflict periodically resurfaces, be encouraged that you have a "time proven" strategy that has worked in the past.

Personal notation: "Be gracious in hugging yourself (arms overlapping each other with hands on the shoulders to hug yourself) with these added words of, "You're on a worthwhile journey of nurturing your children today to the adults of tomorrow and it's because of you!!"

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Essential for Parenting Toddlers and Preschoolers. 5 Nov. 19. [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

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Gattuso, R. Preventing Household Conflict When You're Stuck at Home Together. 24 March 2020. <https://talkspace.com>

Clinical Experience:

Flores, M. C. (1992-2020) = Children, adults, couples, families and groups. <https://drmflores.com>

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