

## Helping Children Thrive During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Welcome, Head Start community. I'm so excited to be here. I told you in my last vlog that I'd have a follow-up vlog for May and I am very excited to be here with Sangeeta Parikshak. She is helping me to deliver a mental health message this month. It is Mental Health Awareness Month, so, appropriate that we are here talking about this.

And so, but we will get started as we always do with a love note. I've got a really good one today. I'm very excited to shout out San Bernardino Preschool Services Department, that's PSD in San Bernardino. They developed, prior to COVID, developed this really great relationship, this partnership with the County Prevention and Early Intervention Department, and started providing services using graduate students to support mental health services.

And then, the coronavirus situation hit and they immediately pivoted to providing telehealth services, tele-mental health services to any enrolled family, regardless of whether there was a referral in place. And by doing that, they were able to find commonalities in the types of concerns that parents were communicating, and then to create professional development kind of activities for parents around dealing with these issues that were sort of bubbling up.

So, they have really just hit it out of the ballpark in terms of adapting to this really difficult time. And I think that partnership is what really did it for them. And I'm sure a lot of our folks are finding those partnerships you've established ahead of time, those relationships are really paying off. So, in light of it being National Mental Health Awareness Month, and if you don't know, May 7 is National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. We've got a lot to talk about that's relevant.

You know, we're getting a lot of questions, Sangeeta, about how to talk to children. We all have this sort of focus on mental health and Head Start, but boy, is it more prevalent now than ever [inaudible] pandemic and how do they foster the social-emotional growth, particularly during a time like this. And it's important, of course, to always keep in mind that developmental level of the child. And even though we service a very focused group of children, prenatal to 5, a difference between a 2-year-old and a 3-year-old is pretty substantial.

So, knowing how to deal with those different developmental stages is really important. So, I wondered if maybe you can get us started and just talk about what are some of the things that people can do to support children adjusting right now?

Dr. Sangeeta Parikshak: Yeah. Thanks, Dr. B. And it's really nice to be here with you. Thanks for having me on. And we're celebrating the mental health of America, right? I mean, that's what we're doing today. So, we've been getting so many questions, like you said, about how we can help children during the pandemic, lots of concerns from our staff, from our families.

And so, you know, we've been really trying to get a better handle on: Is this pandemic any different, as far as our approach to children than other types of disasters? And it is in a lot of ways. But when it comes to our kids, kids fundamentally, they want to feel loved. They want to know that they still have the stable base that they're used to and their caregivers. And so, really, we need to remember, we need to make children feel safe. And how do we do that? We

do that by providing information that is honest and accurate. A lot of the questions we're getting is: "How do we talk about the pandemic?"

Do we even tell them what COVID it is?" There's actually some really great materials right now coming out of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, where there are children's books being developed—coloring books that talk specifically about COVID; where the name "coronavirus" actually came from, helping children understand that, helping children understand what they can do to keep themselves safe. So, really giving them power and responsibility in this. You know, that's why Sesame Street's developed all this great stuff around washing your hands. You know, my daughter's 2 years old; she loves Elmo and now she loves washing her hands.

And so, you know, I just think that it's so important, as it is for adults, to give them some power and some control over the situation to the extent that we can. And that's how we talk about routines. Routines are so important, right? Because they wake up in the morning and they know what's going to happen next. Even though maybe they can't go to school right now, or they can't see their friends, and they can't see their grandparents, and they really want to, implementing a routine for them, so they know, "Well, "I'll be able to see my grandmother in three days on a zoom call," makes the world of difference for them, right?

Dr. Bergeron: And, you know, it's probably a little tempting. We actually talked about this on the other vlog, too. As the adults in the house, the parents, the caregivers, you know, things are a little looser: You're not getting up as early. It's really tempting to let all of those normal routines go: Stay up a little later; not eat as well; be a little looser. And that can be fun for a couple of days, but over a long period of time, kids really don't benefit from that. They really crave that structure.

Dr. Parikshak: Right. And I remember when you know, this whole shutdown order started, my kids thought, "Wow, it's like a snow day." You know, my 4-year-old is like, " "Oh, we're not coming home from school." That's kind of worn off now. Right? And so, making sure that we have that consistency, the structure for them to the extent we possibly can is important. I think the other things we need to remember is that kids are picking up on everything all of the time. So, if we have the news on, maybe we need to be a little bit more mindful about reducing how much news they're hearing.

You know, as an adult, I get stressed out listening to too much news, right? So, kids are picking up on things and they don't even have the awareness and understanding that we do around it. And so, just being mindful of those things and how much outside information they're getting, versus what we're able to give them is really important. And I can't stress this enough, and I love this about Head Start, is that we all get this. It's all about empathy. We need to have empathy for our children, right? We need to—we need to be, kind of, not as hard on ourselves, and we really need to have empathy for why they might be having more meltdowns than we are used to seeing, maybe potty training has regressed a little bit. And I've heard you talk about that is an example and some of your other vlogs, so ...

Dr. Bergeron: And even, you know, some of the learning. Like, you might've been really excited that your kiddo learned to write his name and then all of a sudden it seems like they've

forgotten or regressed and you—it just, it's OK. Take a deep breath. Because, you know, those routines that they had at school mattered, and you know, if they've been taken away, they may have lost some of that. And that's OK. It'll come back. The more relaxed I think our responses are to those things, the less, anxious our kids will be about them. Before we switch to our next lane, you want to tell people where coronavirus came from and how folks are using that in children's books. I think this is really kind of cool.

Dr. Parikshak: I wish I had the actual information right in front of me, Dr. B. [Laughter]

Dr. Bergeron: But the big word, the big word. Right? So—so—so, the virus looks like a crown, and that's the "corona" piece, and they've taken this and used it in these children's books, the virus with the crown and the illustration. And you know, it's really kind of neat because they're able then to tell the story in a way that's just a little bit less scary, right? And to be able to put something out there, that's a little stressful and, I don't know, just make it easier to talk about. I thought that was really neat. You sent me a link to a children's book, which I hope we can share here.

Dr. Parikshak: I did. I think we should. It's from the folks at Florida State University. So, it's a coloring book. That's where they talk about "the crown." I remember that now. And, also, I had seen some tweets happening where kids have started understanding that. And so, they're creating their own crowns now, right?

Dr. Bergeron: That's right. Yeah. We're seeing all kinds of, I mean, you could have a lot of fun with that and I hate to say that in the middle of something so tragic; but at the end of the day, when we talk about looking for learning opportunities, I mean, there's some really good, free microbiology lessons going on here. I mean, looking at that virus in that way and explaining how it's so tiny you can't see it, but when you rub your hands together under soap and water, you can break it up and get it. Those are things that are really hard to conceptualize even as like a tenth-grade biology student; but when we're in the middle of it and you can create something that kids relate to, you know, just gives you something, a diversion in a positive way, I think. You know, you were talking about the news. I mean, everything is so heavy and it just kind of lightens it up. So, we'll provide that link for everybody. I think here, I think we can't do that and then they can access. So, I think that'd be a lot of fun.

So, anyway, so there—we're—we're talking about mental health which is—it can be a heavy topic; but we're going to try to keep it in a frame that's accessible. Doesn't have to be super heavy. And we talk about the big piece is really the idea behind uncertainty. And I think we can all relate to that. I know I can; I keep, you know, expecting things to feel whatever we want to call normal. I'm not sure that word has a definition anymore, but, you know, and that uncertainty, even as a, you know, an adult, where I have, you know, a family and I've got the things I need. And even that uncertainty still just makes me very anxious personally. So, I would imagine that everyone's feeling some of that. And I think kids pick up on that kind of uncertainty. What do you think? Do you have some ideas for folks on how to sort of handle that?

Dr. Parikshak: Yeah. So, we're putting so much emphasis on modeling the behavior you want to see, right? In your children. And so, obviously I think we all need to take a step back and

recognize that it's very normal to experience anxiety, feelings of grief during this time, loneliness, during anytime of uncertainty. But particularly now when we're socially isolated, many folks don't have anybody with them in their home right now. So, it's a lot to take on. So, I say that the first thing that we need to do, I think, is cut ourselves a lot of slack and understand that maybe during this time we will be experiencing things we haven't experienced before. You know, we've been hearing about, more of a rise in people experiencing panic-like symptoms when they go grocery shopping and that type of thing.

So, we really need to label the feelings we are having. And we talk so much about how kids need to label their emotions. I think adults sometimes forget to label their own emotions. I think it's important to take a safe—a step back and say, "OK, I'm feeling panicky." What does that actually mean for me? Am I anxious about the uncertainty of the situation? Am I worried about getting sick? Because I'm out in a public space, am I worried I'm going to contaminate other people?" "What are the worries I'm having?" is kind of the second piece. So, once you label it, then you can actually decide why it's happening for you.

And then, actually express it to somebody, right? I mean, those are the basic things that, you know, I think educators really know how to do that with kids but forget to do that for themselves. And just like we talked about before, focus on the facts. If you know what's happening, it reduces the uncertainty. So, the things that you don't know about, because nobody knows about it, everyone has conjectures. We need to work on letting that go because we don't have any control over that. Focus on the facts and what you have control over, right? So, you hear about so many people, like they are just picking up the hobby of sewing because now they're making tons of masks. They're having lots of fun with it because that's what they have control over.

Dr. Bergeron: Do you think, I mean, our Head Start kiddos are very young and I'm sure there are—are—there are appropriate times to sort of be completely transparent with children. But do you think it's OK for kids to know that the parents might feel anxious or scared or, you know, feel uneasy about the uncertainty or should they be, you know, stalwart and strong in front of their kids and then like go in their bedroom and express that separately. What do you think?

Dr. Parikshak: I think it's a balance; but I think if one of the key things we want to be doing is modeling the behavior we want to see if we want our kids to be able to express what they're going through, we need to provide the safe space. And so much of that is saying, "I'm feeling really nervous about having to wear a mask and go outside right now. I wonder how you're feeling?" Asking them lots of wonder statements about to figure out their reaction, particularly 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, they're going to do a really amazing job at suddenly opening up if they see that their caregiver is probably feeling the same things that they are. It validates them, right?

Dr. Bergeron: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think that, again, you mean, you look for those opportunities to teach your kids and to develop those relationships is—as much as we wouldn't wish this, there are—there are—there's more time with our kids. We have more opportunity to connect to them. And maybe that's something that could be a positive outcome of a situation that isn't, you know, something that we would wish. And I like that, but so it's about using the language

that's appropriate for children and being able to ask them questions and get them to talk. I think that's, those are great.

Those are great pieces of advice. I think it also probably will help the adult to connect with their children in that way. Right? A little bit of relaxation around it and just recognizing that it's OK. And sometimes social media can be a really, great thing. You can get ideas and you can talk to people and sometimes it can be a little bit overwhelming because it can look like other people are in such great spirits. And if you're not feeling that way, you can feel like, "Gosh, what's wrong with me? How come I'm not, you know, celebrating in the way that all these other people are?" I don't know. I think it probably a balance of that might make a lot of sense for families, too. Do you think?

Dr. Parikshak: I think that makes—yes. For sure that makes a lot of sense. You know, so much—so many of us feel like we need to be on all day. on Zoom calls; we need to be really focused, you know, acting like everything is fine, like there's nothing else going on in our life, but that call at that moment. It's unrealistic. It's going to lead to severe burnout for people in the short term. Right? I mean, it can happen very quickly. And also, like you're saying, paying attention to all the social media messages that are coming out there. I think it's wonderful that my neighbor comes up with these really creative things to do.

And some of the things I use with my own children. But a lot of those things I tell myself, you know, that's wonderful for them. I did X, Y, and Z. Let me celebrate my own victory. And maybe, if it gets to be too much, you know, take a break from Facebook; take a break from other social media, and really concentrate on yourself and your own victories for you and your family, right? I mean...

Dr. Bergeron: Yeah, I think that's really important to remember. And you know, the last thing I really wanted to talk about are: What are the signs? What are the things we want to look for it as far as someone needing help and you know, who's going to watch this vlog? It's—these are going to be our folks watching this vlog. So, this could be relevant to you personally. We want you to take care of yourself. That would be you, your staff, your family. It also could be a good message for reaching out to families. And what are we looking for, if we're talking to them on the phone or what are those signs that—that we might need to take an extra step?

Dr. Parikshak: Yeah. So, you know, I mentioned earlier that people are experiencing more panic-like symptoms, and some people have said, "I've never had a panic attack before. And I started experiencing something like that recently, but I didn't know what it was." Right? So, things like heart racing, breathing fast, getting so overwhelmed you can't complete what you started doing. Right? So, having those experiences. Maybe, you know, you have a preexisting condition and you know this about yourself, maybe you don't. But either way, you should pay attention, if those types of things are happening and you just can't get through your normal routine. If you start avoiding social contact—and this one is tricky because we're all told to kind of stay socially away from people, but we're talking more and more now about it's about physical distancing, not social distancing. Right?

And so, if you or someone you know is avoiding people reaching out to them, you know, they're not engaging on phone calls, on video chat, and text, you know, they don't want to participate

in anything, then you're going to—that's a big sign, right? And that can also go hand-in-hand with lots of other changes in our body. And so, you know, we talk a lot about our physical health and our mental health are intertwined. Right? So, if you see things like a change in appetite, that could be overeating or change in your physical energy levels, you know, maybe you're hypervigilant, meaning you're just too, you know, you just can't calm down versus you may be actually not able to get up out of bed at all. Those types of things, those extreme changes in, kind of your normal way of being can be a really big sign.

And the other thing that people don't often think about, is increased irritability or anger. We've been hearing about increases in road rage, you know, when people are out at the end of the day, they're so cooped up. But if you're feeling more irritable than usual, that also actually could be a sign of depression. So, those are some things to keep in mind. And you know, I wouldn't be the behavioral health person if I didn't also talk a little bit about substance use. And just, you know, it's, alcohol is sort of a tricky thing to talk about right now. Liquor stores are essential and people are, you know, feeling like, you know, we want to be home, and we want to enjoy a nice glass of wine and we want to, you know, enjoy a nice meal.

That is all fine. But we also need to remember that alcohol is often used as an escape when you're feeling stressed. So, if you're combining feeling extremely stressed with drinking too much alcohol, then that could also be a sign that maybe you need to think about some other ways to cope with the stresses that you're feeling.

So, I think just thinking about both the food and the drink that you're putting in your body as a way to keep yourself safe is just a good kind of way to think about it.

Dr. Bergeron: And we have a lot of resources we can provide folks with this vlog, right? We've got some things that we'll attach that they can use as contact points. I'm sure that most of our programs have partnerships and relationships with local, you know, providers, but—but in case they run into a dead end ... I mean, there are, it is a little harder right now probably to reach people and maybe, some of these larger networks might be helpful to them.

Dr. Parikshak: Yeah. So, we'll definitely send out the suicide prevention hotline; we'll send out the SAMHSA hotline around disaster distress that was recently developed as a result of the need of the current pandemic. There's a national parent helpline we'll provide, and then, we'll provide—and then, we'll provide some numbers around substance use. I think it's—we always encourage people to reach out to their friends and family but sometimes that's just not possible for a variety of reasons. So, having these hotlines handy for yourself or for your families that you are work with is really key.

Dr. Bergeron: Good. So, we'll do that. Any other final words that you want to share with folks around mental health right now?

Dr. Parikshak: I really wish that we had worn crowns, Dr. B.

Dr. Bergeron: I know! It was really an afterthought. I was remembering that when you were talking about the word, coronavirus, I thought that was really, I didn't know that. So, that was news for me. I had learned much about the virus, but that connection there, and then seeing

illustrators take that and do something fun with it, you know. But we will provide the link to the book which folks need.

Dr. Parikshak: Yes, we will provide the link to the book. And, you know, I think I would just encourage everybody to remember that mental health is part of your overall wellness. So, don't shy away from thinking about these kinds of tougher issues. Take care of yourself and be well, and, you know, take every day at a time, most important thing.

Dr. Bergeron: Good advice. And I will also, in case you didn't know—I always end with an "In case you didn't know." We launched #HeadStartHeals, which is really dedicated to all things mental health. So, keep an eye on Twitter. We'll put resources up on Twitter, ongoing, not just now. And, we invite you to share your own stories with us whatever they may be that are great best practices for your colleagues to see. That's the great thing about our, OHS director Twitter account is that it allows you to connect with other folks. So, we encourage you to do that.

And just remember, Head Start is access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.