



A MESSAGE FROM SEL4TX ON COVID-19

March 16, 2020

As local and state leaders work to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Texans in communities across the state are likely experiencing a heightened level of fear, anxiety, and worry during these uncertain times. Parents, educators, and childcare providers, in particular, may fear for the ongoing health, safety, and vulnerability of the children in their communities. To say it is *only natural* to feel this way, somehow minimizes these concerns. The purpose of this document is not to minimize the concerns, but to offer guidance on managing and coping with these stresses. The document offers tips and strategies for preventing, managing, and coping with the fears, worries and anxieties that might be provoked by this health crisis and for developing the social and emotional skills youngsters will need for managing and coping with this, and future life challenges, as well.

Specifically, this document is intended to: (1) call attention to the ways in which adult's actions and emotions can have an impact on the social and emotional functioning of children and young people during this health crisis, and (2) offer guidance on how to effectively prevent emotional problems and improve children's long-term abilities to successfully manage and cope with life's challenges.

The attached document, ***Guidance for Talking with Children and Young Adults About COVID-19***, provides a variety of tips and strategies designed to help adults talk with children about the virus, including the importance of providing information and facts in an age-appropriate manner. It also offers suggestions for helping children and young people develop the social and emotional skills needed for navigating through the crisis and for meeting life's challenges in the future.

Use this document as the need arises and share with others who also may be struggling during this uncertain time. All that we ask is that you reference SEL4TX as the source for the document. For additional resources and information about SEL4TX, please visit our website at www.sel4tx.org.

Donna Black
President

GUIDANCE FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS ABOUT COVID-19

- Parents are encouraged to spend more time with their children during this health crisis. Not only will this help children feel more secure, it also will provide parents with opportunities to talk with their children about any concerns they may be having. Limit the amount of exposure children have to television or social media, as this can lead to increased worry and anxiety for children. Instead, spend time playing games or other activities of interest.
- Children will take their lead from the adults in their world; therefore, adults should monitor their own verbal and nonverbal behaviors and remain calm and in control during the health crisis.
- When talking with children, use age-appropriate language and answer their questions honestly and accurately. Explain (in simple terms) what is known about the disease and that scientists are working hard to find out more.

Use the current health crisis as an *opportunity* to teach and reinforce the SEL core competencies:

- Teach **SELF-AWARENESS** skills by encouraging children to talk about and identify their emotions. Reassure them that fears and worries are natural responses in uncertain times and that adults are doing everything they can to help keep them and others safe.
 - Teach *self-confidence*: Recognize children’s strengths and reinforce the role they play in having responsible behavior. Express confidence in their ability to seek help or find answers when needed, or to let adults know when others may need help or assistance. Praise children frequently for applying these strengths to help manage their feelings and emotions during the current health crisis.
 - Teach *self-efficacy*: Help children feel a sense of control over their circumstances. Explain to them that, while things may seem frightening, there are things they can do to keep themselves and others safe. Talk about the importance of washing their hands frequently with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds each time. Discuss the importance of eating healthy and getting plenty of sleep at night.
- Teach **SELF-MANAGEMENT** skills by modeling emotional control and managing daily stresses.
 - Teach *impulse control*: Talk about the importance of “thinking before acting.” Discuss situations you may have observed in which the health crisis led to feelings of frustration for people. For example, explain how the crisis led to shortages in some medical and household supplies. Talk about ways in which you observed people managing their impulses to cope with the frustration of not being able to access these supplies. Use other examples as appropriate.
 - Teach *stress management*: Discuss how the health crisis has led to many changes for people and some of these changes have resulted in stressful situations. For example, explain how school closings might lead older children to fear that they may not be able to finish their courses for graduation. Use other examples as appropriate. Identify ways in which children might manage their stresses, such as through mindfulness and relaxation strategies.
 - Teach *goal setting*: Help children learn to set and achieve goals. Since many schools will be closing, it is important for parents to set and keep a normal routine at home. Goal setting can become a large part of that routine. Help children identify personal and academic goals for the week, then set daily goals and break them into several shorter goals that can be easily achieved. Not only will this strategy help keep them on track with their studies, it will also help keep their minds occupied and off the health crisis.
 - Teach *organizational skills*: Since many communities will have reduced access to services and supplies as a result of social distancing efforts, this can be an excellent opportunity to teach preparedness through organizational skills. Explain to children that many people will be remaining at home during this time because community activities and events have been cancelled to ensure everyone’s safety. As a result, families will need to plan for food and supplies they might need while staying home. Turn it into a fun activity such as an adventure or ‘stay’cation. Enlist children’s assistance in planning and organizing the activities and supplies needed for an anticipated 14 day stay at home.

- Teach **SOCIAL AWARENESS** by modeling empathy and perspective taking. When opportunities are presented, discuss with your children the importance of practicing this in every day and every way.
 - Teach *empathy*: Acknowledge and discuss how others might have been impacted by the health crisis. Talk about how this might feel if it were you or your family. Discuss ways in which your family might help others in need.
 - Teach *perspective-taking, appreciation for diversity* and *respect for others*: Identify how other children and families might respond differently to the health crisis. Discuss how some groups and families have different beliefs and, while these may seem odd or strange to us, this doesn't mean they are wrong. Spend time discussing the fact that we are more alike than we are different.
- Teach **RELATIONSHIP SKILLS** by demonstrating and discussing ways to improve communications, and ways to listen and cooperate with one another. During this health crisis, there is a chance that children will be confined at home for an extended period of time due to school closures. Home confinement may result in children have "extra" time on their hands, thus they may become bored or agitated. If there are siblings or other children in the home, there's an added chance there may be disagreements and conflict. This is an excellent opportunity for parents to model, teach, and reinforce relationship-building skills.
 - Teach *communication* skills: Encourage children to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs in a non-emotional manner. Teach them to listen to what others say, then if clarification is needed, reflect what they heard using "I heard you say..." statements. Point out when body language and non-verbal expressions might be communicating a different message than their words. Teach children to use "I" statements instead of "You" statements.
 - Teach *cooperation* and *negotiation* skills: When conflicts or problems arise, parents should deal with their own emotions first, then listen to their children, rather than jumping in with a solution. Encourage children to use effective communication skills to resolve problems and conflicts. Explain that negative emotions are a natural experience when having problems and conflict and it is important to learn how to cope with these emotions, especially since the resolution may not always have the desired outcome. Learning to experience and cope with conflict and failure is an important factor in children's character development.
- Teach **RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING** by teaching children how to make constructive choices, especially during this health crisis. Children's safety is a priority at all times, but the current crisis offers an opportunity to teach them problem-solving strategies, which can reinforce their ability to make appropriate decisions for their own safety.
 - Teach children *problem-solving steps*: Children may not always know what the problem really is, so it will be especially important for parents to help them learn how to analyze the situation so they can resolve the problem responsibly. This may include looking at social norms and expectations and evaluating the consequences of their actions. Teenagers, for example, may encounter situations in which they face exposure to the virus as a result of an opportunity to engage in a desired social activity. They must be able to use problem-solving skills to be able to weigh the risks and benefits of their decision, including the possibility of exposing, not just themselves, but also others, as a result of their decision. Parents can help them navigate this process by teaching them strategies that include 1) identifying the problem, 2) analyzing the situation, 3) identifying a potential solution, and 4) determining the potential consequences of the solution. Parents may want to employ other examples to help reinforce the problem-solving steps.