Navigating through oceans of uncertainties with young children

By: Cindy Horwitz, LCSW, MPH, IMH-E®
The Early Childhood Council of Hillsborough County, Inc.

How do we discuss the current chaos of events with our children when we might be trying to navigate through oceans of uncertainties ourselves? When dealing with pandemics such as coronavirus, our past traumatic experiences or “sharks” tend to resurface in our shallowing waters. The loss of normalcy can evoke all kinds of feelings within us and it is not a one size fits all approach to calm our waters. I'd like to ask you, “How are you?” It is ok to not be ok, or even not sure at the moment. Naming and acknowledging our feelings is the first step to accepting our new sense of normalcy. Our emotions hit us like waves and that is part of the process. It is all about how we handle those waves and sharks surfacing that matters. We too are feeling a loss of safety. How do we regain control? We have to learn to let go of what we cannot control and find constructive ways of what to do with those feelings.

I would like you to reflect on how you are adjusting during this time. I challenge you to be intentional when partaking in self-care activities such as taking deep breaths, sipping on that warm cup of coffee, going for a walk, Face Timing with a friend, etc.

We must take care of ourselves and model self-care for our children, especially during this time. Find time for making positive memories and interactions with your children. Once we can calm our waters, we can begin having conversations with our children. “When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it’s our job to share our calm, not join in their chaos” (L.R. Knost).

From birth, we learn to pick up cues from our environment and through experiences we learn how to respond. Young children in particular, are highly sensitive to stress in their caregiver’s experience. Despite our best efforts to control our waves, our children are sensing that our world is vastly changing around them. Children will develop anxiety and are more inclined to act out as a result. It is our responsibility as caregivers to discuss these changes with them. The beloved Mr. Fred Rogers advises, “When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”
For Families:

• Use words and explanations that your child will understand at their developmental level. Be sure to keep explanations brief. Visuals, particularly social stories are an invaluable method of explaining current events to children. Children learn through storytelling and might find this comforting.

• Establish a routine. Children tend to thrive when they feel they can anticipate what might be coming next. This provides them with a sense of security. Consider making a new daily schedule while keeping regular mealtimes and bedtime the same. Offer them several options based on standards or daily routines that you already follow in your household. Giving children preselected options will allow them to feel that they are participating and validated by having their voices heard, thereby providing them some semblance of control.

• Provide them ways of dealing with these feelings, such as taking deep breaths, reading a story, stroking a pet, or holding a calming object. Engage in self-care activities together whenever possible.

• Lastly, reassure your children that they are safe. Remind them that you are available to discuss their feelings as needed. Remember— just being with your child helps them feel loved, protected, and safe.

For Educators:

• Being transparent with your students is important — children are sensing that their school and home is changing. Discussing these changes openly can help them.

• Tell the parents that the children will be discussing current events. Invite the parents who might be anxious to come and join the conversation.

• Use words and explanations that are appropriate for your children’s developmental stage. Be sure to keep explanations brief. Visuals, particularly social stories are an invaluable method of explaining current events to children.

• Discuss and review any changes to the daily classroom schedule with the children. Incorporate a visual schedule at your children’s eye level for them to reference.

• Talk to the children about the importance of social distancing and handwashing. Turn these topics into a game or dance. Demonstrate proper handwashing techniques for the children.

• Ask the children how they feel about the virus. Use a feelings chart or wheel to help children choose their feelings. Give the children verbal praise for sharing their feelings. Provide them ways of dealing with these feelings; such as taking deep breaths, reading a story, stroking a pet, or holding a calming object.

• Incorporate Dr. Becky Bailey’s Wish You Well Rituals. Wishing each other fosters the growth of empathy while allowing a child to the process when someone from our school family is absent or ill.

• Lastly, remind the children that they are safe.