

Don't avoid the elephant in the room

IT'S been a tough few months for Australian kids. From climate change debates fuelled by fire and flood, to the global panic over the COVID 19 pandemic, kids and adults alike have been saturated with messages that 'the sky is falling in' for a sustained period. Its small wonder that anxiety is on the increase.

So what can we do to help the nation's children get the current crisis in perspective? Given that children are being directly impacted, with the daily rhythms of life in disarray, and parents themselves anxious, what practical tools can we give them to help manage those anxious feelings and maintain good mental health?

Dr Sarah Hughes is a celebrated child psychologist and an up-to-her-elbows-in-it working mum. In her busy practice she sees children everyday who are struggling under the weight of adult problems that they have no power to solve.

In her new book *Parenting Made Simple* Dr Hughes offers down-to-earth, judgement-free parenting hacks for real-world, stressed, imperfect and time poor parents. There is a whole chapter dedicated to anxiety; how to identify when it has become a problem for your child, and simple advice that parents and carers can follow to help children build resilience and cope in a world where the stresses are real and impossible to ignore.

Here's her top tips for helping your children navigate this fraught period:

Don't avoid the elephant in the room. There is no way to insulate children entirely from the crisis. Changes to routine, the eerily empty supermarket shelves, conversations with their friends and the news, mean children are going to notice change. That does not mean though that kids need to be across every breaking news development. They need to be kept out of adult issues, and protected from adult anxiety and panic.

So, when your child is scared because other kids are talking about COVID-19 and all the people who've died, don't avoid the conversation. Don't minimise your child's distress, or brush over their concerns and pretend it's a non-issue. Sit down and talk through the facts - the child-friendly filtered ones.

Like the fact that yes, some people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in Australia, but it's only a fraction of the people that live here, so many people do not have the illness. You can also reassure them that while some people have died from COVID-19 which is really awful and really sad, most people who get COVID-19 don't die, they recover. They're sick for a while, just like when you get a really bad head cold or the flu, but then they get better.

And because it's obvious, and kids pick up on more than you realise, you need to acknowledge that lots of people are feeling anxious and worried at the moment, but it's OK. It's important to help your child to understand that adults get anxious and worried too, just like kids.

Your kids will look to you for how stressed they should be, and they need your help to stay calm. Encourage questions, give your child's worries your undivided attention, and when it's your turn to talk, stick to the facts - but only the child appropriate ones.



PARENTING MADE SIMPLE

STRAIGHTFORWARD, PRACTICAL
STRATEGIES FOR COMMON
CHILDHOOD CHALLENGES

DR SARAH HUGHES