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Helpful tips for parents during these stressful times

Parenting can be a struggle even under the best of circumstances. This year has ushered in many new challenges for parents, including economic and health concerns, as well as dealing with distance learning issues. Couple those with normal toddler temper tantrums and the result is a recipe for a highly stressed parent.

Now is a great time to get back to parenting basics to help prevent and cope with children’s temper tantrums and distance learning blues, said Laura Hubbs-Tait, Oklahoma State University Extension parenting specialist.

“A toddler or young child expresses frustration and negative emotions with a temper tantrum, which typically involves screaming, hitting, biting or throwing themselves on the floor,” Hubbs-Tait said. “Because they can hurt themselves or others, it’s important to take steps to help prevent this behavior. When children are calm, parents can teach them how to breathe in order to calm themselves when the kids become frustrated. When parents see that a toddler or preschooler is becoming more stressed, they can help them calm down with breathing exercises.”

One method is to teach the child to blow on a pinwheel. Encourage the youngster to make it spin slowly and then faster. End with slower blowing/breathing to increase calming. Another breathing exercise is to have the child take a deep breath while raising their arms over their head and pretending to be a tree. Parents can tell the child to use their mouth to make wind that will blow the branches and leaves. Have the child blow faster and end with slower blowing and breathing to increase calming.

A key element when a child throws a tantrum is for the parent, grandparents, childcare provider or teacher to remain calm.

“It’s important for the adult to practice their own self-calming routines and take a few deep, cleansing breaths or whatever calming methods work best for you,” she said. “If needed, have someone calm stay with the child while you walk away to calm yourself.”

When dealing with the tantrum, help the child become calm by speaking softly. Hold the child gently and have them use breathing and calming routines. Do not bribe the child to stop or give in to what the child wants.

“For public tantrums, or those that are affecting the whole family, give the child the choice of calming down there or going to their room to scream and cry,” Hubbs-Tait said. “However, only offer choices you’re willing to put into practice.”

With older children who may be stressed with virtual or homeschool learning, it’s important to keep a routine. Balance the student’s learning time with relaxed time and activity time. Practice patience, patience and more patience and look for the positive moments in each day.

To help enhance focus during school time, select a location in the home that is exclusively theirs for learning. Avoid distractions by turning off all electronics not needed for instruction.

“Help your child identify feelings that may be clouding their learning. Respond with empathy, confidence and encouragement. Say ‘I’m glad you told me how sad you are. Not being with your friends is hard. I think you can finish what your teacher wants you to do now, and then we can talk ways for you to safely connect with your friends,’” she said. “Recognize the child’s competence and effort, as well as promote independence and planning. Also, encourage flexibility and accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.”

Parents also need to take care of themselves during this time. It can be very stressful trying to maintain working full time while helping children learn. Parents often may feel there is no break from kids or work.

To get a break, pair up with other parents and families and trade off giving each other some needed time away from the children. Start a play group for young children for an hour or two so parents (or grandparents) can take some time off. Be sure to follow all safety guidelines of wearing masks and washing hands often.

“During these stressful times, it’s imperative parents and other primary caregivers take breaks. Some of the breaks can be with the kids,” Hubbs-Tait said. “For example, take the kids on a walk and look for positive things. Look for community opportunities where you and your children can help. We’re experiencing a time of greatly heightened anxiety and distress and it’s vital to stay physically and emotionally healthy.”