



Kids are playing “coronavirus tag.” Should we be worried?

Written by Hannah Beach (April 2, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/rest-rhythm-release-helping-kids-cope-with-covid-19/>

Like many of us, my family recently learned that my son’s school would be shut down due to the coronavirus epidemic. On his last day of school before the shut down, we were chatting, when he casually told me he had been playing “coronavirus tag” with his friends at lunch!

Initially, I was mortified. My first thought was “Yikes! That is really insensitive!” As his mother, being aware of all the pain so many people are experiencing right now, I was CRINGING at the idea of my son participating in such a ghoulish game.

However, my second thought was, **“YES! Thank goodness. This is exactly what is supposed to happen.”** Let me explain.

It is normal – and healthy – for kids to play out their fears

I’ve been hearing from many parents that they are stumbling on their younger ones, finding them “isolating” their dolls to keep them safe. Other kids are pretending to be doctors and taking care of their stuffed animals in a pretend hospital. Even one of my staff members sent me pictures the other day of a series of scary dragon drawings that one of her younger students sent to her.

And I’ve learned that my son and his friends are not the only kids right now playing coronavirus tag. Friends and family members have shared the same thing with me, even though they live in other cities. In fact, there are reports of kids playing this game in many communities in North America and England!

It can be very worrisome and uncomfortable to see these shifts in the way that our kids play and express themselves. But here’s the thing: it is only natural for children to play out their fears and their anxiety through play and art. And it is no coincidence that this kind of play is emerging spontaneously amongst kids in households and communities and countries around the world. This is what is supposed to happen.

Play is how children digest their lives. It is how they make sense of their world, release intense emotions like frustration and anxiety, and understand what they are experiencing without feeling threatened or overwhelmed.

Through play, kids get to experience something one step removed from real life, in a way that helps them to feel that no matter what, they will be ok. In fact, children are drawn to make sense of scary things through play. We see this in their interest in fairy tales that often deal with frightening topics in simple ways. We see this in how they devour books in which being orphaned is a central theme (think Harry Potter, Anne of Green Gables, The Secret Garden, Bambi ... the list goes on and on!)

Why is this the case? Why do kids often want to read books in which children are abandoned or scary things happen?

When books and fairy tales are age-appropriate (an important caveat!), they gently touch on dark and frightening topics in a way that allows children to process them, one step removed from real life. By engaging in imaginary scenarios, scary themes and ideas do not feel as threatening as real life. Kids get a chance to see the imaginary child survive in the face of difficulty. Good triumphs over evil. They process that even when terrible things happen, it is going to be OK.

This is the same for other kinds of games and play with darker themes, which help children release anxiety in a safe environment.

That child playing hospital with a stuffed animal, tucking it into bed? They may be feeling a sense of agency. They become the nurturer; part of the solution to bringing comfort and ease to those in their care. In this case it may be dolls and teddy bears, not people, but their feelings of caring for others in this way can soothe them.

The child drawing pictures of scary monsters? They may be experiencing a sense of release by putting their fears out on paper.

The kids that are engaging in pretend sword fights with each other, attempting to slay the horrible Dr. Corona? Well, the slayer may be experiencing a sense of power by being the hero. And the child playing the “bad guy” may be enjoying digging deeply into this character, because it gives them a sense of control over things that worry or frighten them.

Fundamentally, it is through play that kids get to imagine how they will survive in the face of adversity, and practice being ok, no matter what happens. And this is why – as macabre as it sounds – we shouldn’t panic when we see our kids playing out their fears.

So what should – and shouldn’t – we do?

It’s amazing, actually, that nature gave children this incredible tool – play – to take care of their emotions. Play is not an “extra”; it is essential in our children’s lives. It is a release valve, a rehearsal ground for life, and a medium that allows children to safely make sense of and process their internal and external worlds.

But even if we know, theoretically, that this kind of play is healthy for our children, it can be difficult to know how we should respond when we become aware of our children exploring intense and scary ideas. Here are some guidelines:

- **DO provide kids with unstructured time that supports free play.**

Remember, you do not have to turn into an entertainment director. All you have to do is provide some time for free play – that is, time that is free of structured activities, TV, the Internet, and electronics – so your children’s imaginations can run free while they engage in any activity that is appealing to them.

And if you’re worried about your kids getting bored – don’t! In fact, if your kids get a bit bored while they’re at home, this is a good thing. It is when kids get bored that they start looking for things to do, and they start to put their own imaginations to work. This is when they discover and engage in play that supports their internal world and that helps to regulate their emotional systems.

- **DON’T comment on what kids are doing or saying.**

In order to fall into a world of play, it is important for kids not to feel self-conscious or like they are being watched. And in the same vein, it’s best to not tell children that this kind of play is “good” for them. Again, it’s likely to make them feel self-conscious, or they might even resist it. The last thing we want to do is to inadvertently remove this healthy emotional outlet from them.

So, it is a good thing to notice and to monitor their play – but don’t turn it into a topic of conversation around the dinner table!

- **DON’T try to influence the process.**

You might also be wondering if you should intervene, by offering to help your kids take care of their sick stuffed animals, for example. Inserting ourselves into our children’s imaginary worlds is not necessary and can even sometimes direct it away from where the child may naturally lead their play themselves. We need to let them play out whatever it is that they might be feeling or thinking, without influencing their own narrative or storyline.

Should we ever be worried?

Free play is especially important for kids during times like these. As parents and caregivers, our main focus should be to provide enough unstructured time for children to engage in free play, and to simply make note of what they are doing. It is very, very likely that we will see kids eventually move on from things like “coronavirus tag” as they adjust to what is happening in the world right now.

However, if we notice that a child seems very “stuck” on a dark theme to the point of obsession, it is a good idea to consult with a doctor or mental health professional. It is totally normal for kids to be making scary drawings and playing hospital right now, especially with so much changing on a daily basis – but if they seem obsessed with these themes for weeks or months on end, we should follow our guts and check in with a professional.

And if kids are engaging in forms of play that are hurtful to themselves or others (physically or emotionally), then, of course, we have to step in. For example, if a child is forcing another child into playing a game that is not fun for all involved, that requires our intervention. If an older sibling insists on playing the Coronavirus Monster and scaring a younger sibling in a manner that doesn't elicit delighted shrieks and clear signs of mutual fun, but rather fearful tears, we have to step in.

Let's be thankful for play

Children are not simply miniature adults. They process big emotions in the way that nature intended: through the safety of play, surrounded by the warmth and security of us.

There are always caveats; but especially at a time like now, we should expect changes in the ways our children play, and simply take note of them. It can even help if we practice being thankful when we see these kinds of play, because it gives us a clue as to what they are feeling inside. And, the knowledge that play provides a healthy outlet for our children to release their emotions and digest the world around them can help all to breathe a collective sigh of relief!

Warmly,

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