



# Strategies to Maintain Positive Parent-Child Relationships Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic



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## INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, families are feeling increased levels of stress in various aspects of their lives. Parenthood is already defined by elevated levels of stress (Doss et al., 2009). Increased levels of stress can lead to increased levels of physical, emotional, and cognitive fatigue for both parents and children (Deater-Deckard, 2004). As stress levels rise, child misbehavior may increase as well as harsh parenting which combined may lead to child maltreatment (Beckerman et al., 2017). Child maltreatment may occur from a variety of risk factors including single parenthood, number of dependent children, or economic distress (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, families are more likely to endure economic distress, social isolation, lack of educational services, and harmful effects to both physical and mental health (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010). It is important to identify protective factors that may mitigate the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has on parental stress and potential child maltreatment. School psychologists are uniquely positioned to make a positive impact on parents and children by teaching parents positive coping strategies and effective parenting skills. This is especially important during COVID-19, as families are experiencing various stressors unique to their situation.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this project is to provide school psychologists and other educators working with families positive coping strategies and evidence-based, effective parenting skills they can put into practice. To do this, it is first important to teach parents how stress related to COVID-19 adversely impacts parenting and the parent-child relationship. Next, it is important to teach parents easy to implement, evidence-based strategies that improve the parent-child relationship. Parent-Child Interaction Training (PCIT; McNeil & Hembree-Kigin, 2010) is an evidence-based program used to decrease children's problem behaviors and build a positive parent-child relationship. Although PCIT is traditionally used within a clinic setting, the strategies taught during the first phase of PCIT can be used to prevent behavior problems and help children to feel calm, secure in their relationship with their parents, and good about themselves (PCIT, n.d). Lastly, Teacher-Child Interaction Training is an adaptation of PCIT used in the school setting. Our project will also explain and give examples of how teachers can implement these same skills to support positive teacher-child relationships with their students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## PARENTAL STRESS

### Parental Stress and Pandemic-related Stressors

The role of parenting involves both caregiving and developing an intimate relationship with your child. These two things can be very exhausting and rewarding at the same time. Deater-Deckard (2004) defines parenting stress as "a set of processes that lead to aversive psychological and physiological reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood." Possible sources of parenting stress include health concerns (developmental delays, emotional issues, chronic illness); parental behavior (warmth, attachment style, discipline); and outside factors (cultural influences, socioeconomic status, safety). Increased levels of stress can put strain on parent-child relationships and may lead to increased levels of physical, emotional, and cognitive fatigue (Deater-Deckard, 2004).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, families are feeling increased levels of stress in various aspects of their lives. Currently, families are more likely to endure economic distress, social isolation, lack of educational services, and harmful effects to both physical and mental health (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010). Due to social distancing and lockdown measures, families are facing new demands of home-based schooling, possible limited resources, and uncertainty about the future (Chung et al., 2020). This "collision of roles, responsibilities, and expectations" increases parental stress and increases the risk for family violence and child abuse (Campbell 2020, Coyne et al., 2020, Brown et al., 2020).

## CHILD-DIRECTED INTERACTION (CDI)

### CDI Strategies

Child-Directed Interaction (CDI) strategies improve parent-child relationships by teaching caregivers how to attend to their child's appropriate behaviors and ignore inappropriate behaviors. Although CDI strategies are traditionally taught to parents, these skills are also effective in educational settings (Lyon et al., 2009) and can similarly be used to foster positive teacher-child relationships. Within the CDI framework there are two distinct sets of skills: "Do" skills and "Avoid" skills. **As parents learn each skill, they are encouraged to practice the skills with their child throughout the day as well as during 5 minutes of "special playtime."** For CDI to be effective, parents and teachers must consistently implement each strategy. If CDI skills are routinely practiced, parents will build a stronger relationship with their child. In addition to improving the parent-child relationship, children may also experience improvements in self-esteem, frustration tolerance, and perfectionism. Additionally, younger children may learn to engage in play activities (self-entertaining) for longer periods of time and improve opposition among children who are noncompliant.

### Interactive Skills to Learn and Utilize: "Do" Skills

#### BEHAVIOR SPECIFIC PRAISE

- Behavior specific praise (BSP) should be used to reward pro-social behavior. BSP involves giving children approval or affection through statements that convey what the parents like about the child's behavior. **Examples of BSP include "I like how you are sitting quietly."** or **"Thank you for sharing your marker with me."** Parents are encouraged to provide BSP every 30 seconds during the 5 minutes of special playtime.

#### REFLECTIONS

- To initiate reflections, the adult repeats what the child says. Parents or teachers may restate exactly what the child said or elaborate. In addition to conveying acceptance and understanding, reflections may also help adults correct grammar or phonological processing errors. **For example, if the child states "I draw a flower," the adult may say "You drew a pink flower."**

#### IMITATE

- During special playtime, parents are also asked to physically imitate what the child does. Imitation may help increase the child's self-esteem, lets the child lead the play activity, and reduces the parent's need to create a developmentally appropriate activity for the child. Parents are not expected to imitate every move of the child. Instead, the adult simply plays with the same toys the child is playing with and manipulates the object(s) in a similar manner. **For example, if the child is building a house with Legos, the parent could build a house with Legos as well.** However, the adult may build a smaller house and make a statement such as "Your house looks awesome, I want to try and build a house like yours."

#### DESCRIPTIONS

- Parents are also asked to describe the behavior of the child. Consistent descriptions of what the child is doing communicates to the child that he or she has the adult's undivided attention. Additional benefits of descriptions include helping the child organize thoughts, helping them feel as though they are leading the activity, and introducing academic concepts. **For example, the adult may state "You used three different colored markers, red, yellow, and blue."** To effectively implement descriptions, the adults should comment directly on the child's behavior and use the word "you" in their statement.

#### BE ENTHUSIASTIC

- Lastly, parents are encouraged to remain enthusiastic throughout special play time. **Parents may convey enthusiasm by using an animated voice with various inflections.**

## REACTIVE STRATEGIES & METHODS

### Reactive Strategies: "Avoid" Skills

#### AVOID CRITICISMS

- Obvious criticisms such as "You're being ugly." should be avoided as well as criticisms that include the terms "no," "don't," "quit," "stop," and "not." Sarcasm should also be avoided. To avoid sarcasm, adults are encouraged to regulate their tone of voice.

#### AVOID QUESTIONS

- Questions may be hard to avoid for adults; however, discouraging adults from using questions during special play time provides many benefits. Questions can make the child feel like the adult disagrees with their actions or is not paying attention. Avoiding questions also helps the child feel like they are leading the activity. Questions such as "Should you color the front door red?" "That's a dog?" "Huh?" "Okay?" or any other question that begins with who, what, when, why, where, or how should be avoided.

#### AVOID INSTRUCTIONS

- Direct and indirect instructions should be avoided during special play time because they do not allow the child to lead the activity. Direct instructions are statements such as "Sit down." Indirect instructions are statements such as "Can you build me a house with your Legos?"

### 5 Minutes of Special Play Time

Adults should set aside 5-minutes a day, on particularly stressful days, to attend to a child or student. This practice can be therapeutic for the adult and child. During this time, adults are encouraged to use specific CDI evidence-based strategies: a) behavior-specific praise, b) reflections, and c) descriptions d) imitations e) enthusiasm with children/students. In addition, the adult is discouraged from using reactive strategies that are likely to exacerbate stressful or challenging situations (i.e., criticisms, instructions, and questions). Ample examples for home and school should be provided and strategies should be defined and modeled. Once mastered, adults can adapt these strategies for working with children/students of all ages.

**\*Although PCIT is traditionally used with children ages 2-7, the skills can be adapted and delivered in ways that are developmentally appropriate for older children/students (e.g., instead of special play time a parent/teacher can spend 5-10 minutes listening, reflecting, describing, and praising an older child/student. For younger or older children, the key is to follow the child's lead.**

### Examples for Parents

- The most **fundamental rule of CDI is for adults to allow the child to lead** and to attend to appropriate behavior. As adults, we often direct children's activities (e.g., telling them when to get up, eat, do homework etc.) and we rarely allow them to lead (which is naturally enjoyable!).
- When children comply**, parents should be quick to notice (e.g., "You have great listening ears!" "You did that right away, nice job." If noncompliance or misbehavior occurs, parents should use effective instructions (i.e., tell the child *what to do*) rather than "stop, quit, don't" statements.
- If **misbehavior that cannot be ignored** occurs during special play time, it is appropriate for the parent/adult to simply tell the child "we do not \_\_\_\_\_," special play time is over.

### Example for Teachers

- Teachers may consider spending 5 minutes of time with an individual child (targeted for intervention) before school, after school, during part of the child's lunch or recess.
- Teachers can implement CDI strategies classroom wide to all children throughout the day to improve relationships and increase prosocial behavior.
  - BSP** - "I am proud of my friends who are coloring quietly." or "I like how everyone is remembering to put their microphones on mute!"
  - Descriptions** - "Look at how many of my friends remembered their chrome chargers!"
  - Reflections** - Reflecting on what students share during morning meeting, may be something teachers naturally do. When a student shares, a teacher simply reflects that information back to the student. (e.g., Student - "I'm feeling overwhelmed with asynchronous work." Teacher - "I hear you are overwhelmed. Adjusting to remote learning is overwhelming.")