Effective parenting in times of Corona

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The continuity principle: How parents, teachers and social leaders can help children in times of Corona

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The continuity principle is a unified concept for coping with disaster and trauma formulated at the time of the First Golf War. Based on a review of the literature (Omer, 1991) the *principle of continuity* stipulated that "during crisis and disaster, one should aim at preserving and restoring functional, interpersonal and personal continuities, at the individual, family, organization and community levels." *Functional continuity* is the ability to go on functioning in spite of disturbances. *Interpersonal continuity* refers to the maintenance of contacts with family, friends, colleagues and any other circles to which one belongs. *Personal continuity* refers to feelings of sameness and coherence in our sense of self. For instance: for a 10-year old boy, *functional continuity* will comprise routines such getting-up in time to go to school, getting dressed, having breakfast and leaving for school, going through the school-day, doing homework, performing other routine activities (such as sports or hobbies), taking care of personal hygiene and going to sleep at the prescribed time. *Interpersonal continuity* will comprise those acts that maintain his relations with parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, classmates, teachers, etc. *Personal continuity* refers to the routines and messages that convey a sense of identity that may be paraphrased by statements like: "I am a good student!" "I love football!" "I have lots of friends friends!".

Crises are situations that threaten to disrupt those continuities. *The continuity principle* tells us that the best way of caring for individuals, families and communities during crises is to maintain those continuities that still remain and restore those that were disrupted. Breaches in daily routine, interpersonal relations, and sense of identity may aggravate the consequences of the crisis. This is true in war, disaster or trauma, as well as for any disruption negatively affecting a child, such as the eruption of social phobia or school avoidance. The same holds for times of Corona. We should then so act as to maintain and restore those continuities that are being threatened. Coming back to our 10-year old, we should take care that he wakes up at the usual time, fills up his morning with school-related tasks, keeps regular times for hobbies, computer and talking with friends, and takes part in family routines, such as sitting together at dinner. We should encourage him to keep in touch with his friends, classmates, teachers, grandparents and cousins. We should help him keep the sense of being a student, and practicing the skills and hobbies that characterize him.

The continuity principle helps us to know what should be done and also what should *not* be done. For instance, letting routines like waking time and school related taks fall in abeyance may cause demoralization and push the child to problematic habits. Therefore, maintaining a routine of school hours has important consequences that are not merely scholastic. A child who loses the sense of *functional continuity* as a student becomes vulnerable to a host of behavioral and mental threats, such as developing habits of idleness, becoming addicted to screens, and suffering physical and mental decay. By losing his contacts with friends, mates and members of the extended family, he may fall into an interpersonal vacuum that undermines his sense of belonging. This sense of disconnection may badly affect his mental and physical resilience. Moreover, when the child no longer feels he's a student, he becomes susceptible to problematic kinds of identity. We see this often in cases of school avoidance, in which the child develops a sense of being "incapable", "weak" or "sick". As time passes, a return to normality may become more and more difficult.

The principle of continuity can be translated into a series of tips for parents in times of Corona:

· Keep a clear and binding day routine. Announce to your children what the schedule for the next day will be. The schedule works best if it is formal, for instance is printed and shown in a conspicuous place. It helps to read the next day's schedule to the children before they go to sleep.

· Plan for a school routine at home during the morning hours. Organize the morning into different classes or school related activities. Don't rely solely on the instructions the school sends over the net. You can give the children teaching responsibilities, ask for help from relatives, or organize study groups with other kids through Skype or Zoom.

· In Corona-times having orderly family meals is particularly important. Children can be involved in the process of preparation. Cooking and eating together restore the sense that the family is alive and well.

· Grandparents can be very important in Corona-times. Ask them to tell your children bed-time stories. Grandparents can play a central role in the home-school. Involving the grandparents by Skype or Zoom can be highly meaningful for them, your children and yourselves.

· Show the things the children made during the day to members of the extended family, teachers and friends. Ask those persons to send your children feedback on what they saw. A child who gets messages of appreciation will feel proud. Those messages reinforce the self-image: "Grandpa thinks about me!" "My aunt now knows that I'm good at math!" "Even my teacher was impressed by the joint painting we made!"

· Corona-times offer parents a good occasion for establishing contacts with teachers, other parents, sports' coaches (for instance by asking for instructions for home exercises), etc.. Contacting those people is a legitimate step at Corona-times, because we are expected to overcome isolation by Whatsapp, Skype and Zoom. One possible positive result of the present crisis is that parents may come out of it better connected to the child's teachers, other parents, and additional figures in the child's surroundings. These contacts may help the parents to better monitor their child's activities, whenever necessary, after we're back to normality.

· Try to develop the habit of having zoom-meetings involving the children, grandparents and other people that are meaningful for you. Such a meeting, say once a week, will increase the family cohesion and your child's sense of belonging. It helps to prepare beforehand, for instance, by having things at hand that you want to tell or show. This will turn those meetings into a significant mirroring experience that will reinforce your children's self-image.

· Don't let your child stay closed up in his or her room for long hours. If the child refuses to come out, come into the room and sit down for a while. Show interest in the game the child may be playing at the computer. If you do this in a positive way, chances are that the child will relate to you as a guest and not an invader. You should know that the habit of shutting oneself up in one's room is an abuse of privacy rights. Privacy is a right among others, and not a holy of holies! The sanctification of privacy may completely undermine the child's functional, interpersonal and personal continuities.

· Ask your friends about leisure activities they've developed. We've already heard about original games, such as "Virtual Peek-a-Boo!" Share those ideas with friends and if possible, try to organize a competition. Competitions between families or groups tend to strengthen cohesiveness and the child's sense of belonging.

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