

6 of Garry Landreth's, "Rules of Thumb" as useful parenting reminders during COVID-19

(Adapted from, Landreth, G. (2012). Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship. Taylor & Francis.)

1) *Focus on the donut, not the hole.*

Remember to focus on what is going well and notice it to yourself and out loud to your family! Focusing on what is there (the donut) rather than what is missing (the hole) will help you create a sense of security and comfort for yourself and the family, together. All families have strengths and noticing the strengths in those relationships will help you focus on the donut!

2) *Be a thermostat, not a thermometer.*

When your child becomes escalated, anxious, upset, or even tantrums, try to stay calm. Being the thermostat of the house, allows your child to regulate back to you more quickly. If you find yourself getting escalated, take a break, walk out to the porch, ask another caregiver to take over (if available), or just hide in the bathroom for 5 minutes!

3) *It is not so important what you did, but what you do after what you did that really counts.*

Sometimes, even though we try to be the "thermostat", we just lose our cool and follow the child(ren) into an escalated state. We might find ourselves yelling or even threatening our kids! If this happens, you can fall back on this rule of thumb. Once you calm down, even a few hours later, you can apologize to your child(ren). You can model to your child(ren) how to recover a relationship, when you feel like you broke it, or damaged it. Relationships have ruptures, of course, Being able to recover from a rupture is a healthy coping skill that lasts a lifetime. Rather than beat yourself up for being human, model how to say, "im sorry I said that" or, "I am sorry I yelled earlier", will help your children learn the same skill, as well.

4) *If you can't say it in 10 words or less, don't say it!!*

Young children cannot hold attention of long, drawn out, rational explanations of what is happening right now. They mostly want to know they are SAFE. Remember that children do not typically develop abstract thinking skills until the age of 11-13. So, concrete, simple, to the point, honest (but not scary), and short information is best.

5) *Children are great perceivers but poor interpreters.*

"Children are like sponges", how many times have you heard that? And, it is true, they do perceive a lot of what is going on. Including your reactions! Unfortunately, they often do not *interpret* those perceptions, accurately. Using reflective listening skills (stating back what you hear, or see in their play) can help them open up

about their interpretations and perceptions. They tend to have egocentric thinking that is highly imaginative and anchored in a fair amount of fantasy. Children can think that they caused a pandemic because of a wish they recall making last month! Because, if you wish the wish with all your heart, it might come true! So, wishing they didn't have to go to school, for instance, might feel like they caused something, that they obviously did not (pandemic). Be aware of the fact that they might be worried about things they are mis-interpreting about this time.

6) *Don't try to teach a child to swim when they're drowning!*

If a child is having a tantrum or difficult behaviors. Try to focus on reflecting the feelings and experiences, rather than teaching, in those moments. You can always circle back to the behavior, choices, or other reasons that things went wrong at another time, when they (and you) are calm. Trying to teach when a child is metaphorically "drowning" will not work. Their computer brain is offline and they cannot process your words. Focus on reflecting feeling, like, "you are so angry right now", or "you are frustrated by the school project and you want me to know that", rather than fixing or teaching in those moments!