

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

Thank you for joining us for today's Webinar. Kids, teens, and Coronavirus stress brought to you by Cigna. Please note that copies of the presentation slides and handouts are available for download in the dropdown box on the lower left side of the player window. Our presenter today is Cindy Dickinson. Cindy Dickinson has been an educator, counselor, and wellness specialist for 40 years and for the past nine years has represented Cigna's employee assistance program as a presenter in New England and the Carolinas. Cindy holds a master's degree in counseling and consultation. Cindy's life and work are rooted in a passion for helping people, young and old, reach their full potential and maximize their well being. And now, Ms Cindy Dickinson.

Cindy Dickinson ([00:50](#)):

Thank you very much. Welcome everybody I'm so happy to be here with you today just to talk about this incredible set of circumstances for being a parent and for raising our children in the best possible way. And you probably you noticed, whether with your own children or if you're a grandparent, your grandchildren or just those children that you love and enjoy, that there is a tremendous amount of anxiety among our children these days. And that was before COVID-19. We can really only guess at the impact that this pandemic is going to have on our children. But one thing we do know, and this is what we hold onto both as professionals and you can hold onto as parents or grandparents are those who care about children is that just one caring adult can make a big difference in the face of any trauma, including COVID-19.

Cindy Dickinson ([01:43](#)):

It's important to know how to help, but it's also important to know that it's a pretty simple process that just requires that you bring yourself to be available. I do wanna call your attention again to the handouts that are available with this presentation because they are very useful and have lots of practical tips and go into a little bit more detail about some of the things that we'll talk about today. So I encourage you to get those and to particularly have a close look at the one that deals with the developmental ages and stages and children called Age Matters. That's going to be a key to your success in helping your children get through this.

Cindy Dickinson ([02:22](#)):

And there are wonderful tips on what you can say as a parent or as somebody who loves the c- child that you are helping and lots of other resources including details on ways that you can help. So knowing all of this and knowing that if we can work together and if you can bring yourself to this process that there's a lot of good that- that can be done. Let's take a look at what we have today, uh, in our presentation goals.

Cindy Dickinson ([02:52](#)):

We'll try to understand the impact of this pandemic on families. We'll look at what children and teen-teens need and what you can do to help specifically and- and importantly, we'll take a look at when a child might benefit from professional help. And then finally, look at the shape and the limits of your parenting role. We don't have a playbook for anything that's going on here and that might sound familiar. Particularly if you're a new parent or if you can remember bringing that first child home from the hospital. Talk about feeling like there was no playbook, no owner's manual, no directions.

Cindy Dickinson ([03:33](#)):

That's kind of where we are now as parents and those who work with children because this is unprecedented obviously. We don't have answers, we don't even have all of the information that we would like to have, but we still have that need and that desire as parents to want to protect our children, to want to shelter them from as much harm as possible. But, uh, this is so pervasive and the situation is so challenging that we really can't totally do that.

Cindy Dickinson ([04:05](#)):

So it falls on us to compensate for the unknown, to compensate for what a new situation this is by getting our bearings as those meaningful adults in our children's lives and seeing where we can go and what we can do to help not only during this time but to help our children build skills as they go forward when this is all over.

Cindy Dickinson ([04:29](#)):

And one of the most important things to start with is to figure out how the world looks to your child. We know how it looks to us as adults. We know that even to us as adults, the world is no longer safe or predictable as it once was. There's a lot of discussion about why our children are so anxious and there are a lot of thoughts about the events in recent history and things that shape this level of anxiety. But here is something that we really can quantify that we really can look at as a cause for that. And if it seems like that to us, it's going to seem even more so to children and to teenagers.

Cindy Dickinson ([05:12](#)):

We're experiencing all kinds of fears including that really difficult fear that people that we know and love will get sick, will maybe even die. And that's a very difficult thing for people to deal with and again, that handout that helps you to deal or to- to communicate with children in a developmentally appropriate way, will be particularly useful if you have to have any discussions about death and dying 'cause that's a very age specific conversation. But if we feel this way, once again, count on your children and even your savvy teens feeling it with more intensity.

Cindy Dickinson ([05:52](#)):

Life is disrupted for everybody. Our- our normal days have been turned upside down. We have lost things, uh, we might even be experiencing a sense of grief. And if you think specifically of middle schoolers and teenagers for example and how important developmentally their social group is, their peer group. And with the exception of perhaps some, uh, digital opportunities to meet and get together, that's something that they are probably going to be experiencing grief over the loss of. So we can count on that kind of feeling coming from them and then if we feel as though this situation is out of control, if we feel as though there's nothing that we can do, think about it from a child's perspective. Understanding that children, particularly young children, don't feel like they have a lot of control over the world to start with. And that again, multiplies the intensity of what they're feeling.

Cindy Dickinson ([06:55](#)):

Now we can reinsure, reassure, we can support, we can put all kinds of- of safety and communication in place to help our children get through this and in so doing, we'll help them come out stronger on the other end.

Cindy Dickinson ([07:15](#)):

Here's a great way to remember what your child needs and when I say child, uh, from- for the rest of this presentation, please understand that I do mean teenagers as well, uh, they- they're all children of the sort. But this is really simple way to break it down and to remember how we can do our best to support this children. And the first is to provide facts. On an age appropriate level, in words and language, and times that they will understand and hear appropriately. Our children need to understand what is happening. Now for some very young children, that might be very little information. For your teenager, that might mean a lot more information. And every teenager is different, every child is different, and every parent is.

Cindy Dickinson ([08:04](#)):

So you as the parent, or the helping adult will figure out and find your own way in terms of what is important. But they need to understand what's going on. Not knowing, and it is for adults as well, is much worse than having information. The second thing that children need is for adults to be open. They need to be able to express their feelings, they need to be able to ask questions, and they need honest answers in order to feel safe, in order to feel comfortable and secure.

Cindy Dickinson ([08:41](#)):

Now sometimes, when we are dealing with our own feelings and our own questions and perhaps we don't feel like we have any answers because this is a tough one, it can be very hard to face being open with a child, having to, for example, admit that you don't know all the answers. Maybe you have your own very strong feelings. It's important that before you go into an open conversation, you do process your own feelings to the degree that you can get your own questions answered and be prepared to answer honestly. Because in this process, children learn that they can trust you. And again, having that trusting adult, having you as a trusted listener will be tremendously helpful to them.

Cindy Dickinson ([09:27](#)):

The experts say that the number one job of a parent or of anybody that loves and wants to protect children in this situation is reassurance. That every conversation needs to stress safety, needs to stress that we're doing everything we can in the situation to stay safe, to find answers and solutions. And perhaps for young children, you say something about all of the smart people in the world who are working on this or all the people who are in charge and what they're doing. In addition to that information, to- to give children hugs and a little extra closeness and your teenager might not feel like they want you to hug them a lot or they might not want to hang out on the couch with you, but they do need a kind of closeness.

Cindy Dickinson ([10:18](#)):

And that comes in the form of paying attention and in the form of listening. It also helps for that reassurance piece to provide structure. That's hard for adults in this situation. If you're working from home and trying to supervise your children's education and trying to create your own boundaries, it's very, very difficult to find a structure but that's what's needed to provide safety, to provide that sense of security.

Cindy Dickinson ([10:45](#)):

So children need a structure, whatever that might be and if you're not terribly structured parent to start with, does that mean you have to suddenly have to button everything up and be way more structured than is natural for you? Not necessarily. But provide what you find appropriate for structure that suits

your family. Everybody has routines and a certain amount of predictability that they follow in normal times. That's important in these unusual changing times that you do establish some kind of a routine and that there's a certain amount of predictability about that because young children particularly need routine and they need to know what's coming next.

Cindy Dickinson ([11:30](#)):

Or they need to know what to expect if it's going to be different. This is a new normal that we're looking at and we don't know how long it's going to last. So whatever you can provide for structure that will offer that security is going to be a great benefit. And there are many, many tools that children have and that we can give them in addition that will help them to manage their own thoughts, their own feelings. We'll talk about some specific things later on because these things that as a parent you can do together with your children perhaps, or you could brush up on what you know in terms of adult skills and explore what your children know.

Cindy Dickinson ([12:14](#)):

Now what do you say? There is another big scary question. You're in charge of the conversation as a parent, uh, it's scary, it can be difficult. And I once again say to you, trust your intuition, trust that you know your child, trust that you know your relationship and you'll be okay. None of this is designed to scare you. But it's important that you before you go into any conversation with your- with your children, are aware of where you are, how you're feeling, what your fears are because as I mentioned before, children pick that up.

Cindy Dickinson ([12:54](#)):

The next thing that it- it's helpful that you do is to really understand their developmental stage. For young children for example, they may need less information, they might have a very different understand of illness than an older child does. I refer you again to that wonderful handout for age appropriate conversations. Invite your child, but you know how it usually goes if you try to force your child to participate in a conversation. We've all had those "Hey how was school today?" Moments when you get an answer of "Good," or "Bad," or "I don't know." Those one word answers. The what do I say handout gives you ways to open up questioning, such as "There's been so much news about the Coronavirus, what have you been hearing?" Or "I have so many thoughts in my head with all the changes going on, sometimes it helps me to say them out loud, do you ever feel like that?"

Cindy Dickinson ([13:52](#)):

So if you're looking for some helpers for, uh, how to open up a conversation, this handout has some great things to help you. Inviting them, but not forcing it and not being prepared for the difficult questions. Not just difficult questions, but questions that are often repeated over, and over, and over again as the child really processes through asking questions. There's nothing wrong with that, nothing wrong with your child if they ask repeatedly, but they will probably need answers multiple times. It'll just require that you be patient.

Cindy Dickinson ([14:30](#)):

Direct simple answers are the best. Age appropriate, you might say something like "COVID-19 is a new sickness. The germs are easy to catch from other people and the doctors want us to stay home for awhile and wash our hands and wear masks when we go out so we don't catch it." Very simple

information, not loaded emotionally. It's the facts and it is appropriate for a particular age group. You might think ahead about these a little bit, but you don't need to be rehearsed, necessarily.

Cindy Dickinson ([15:02](#)):

Those questions again, if you want a list, check out the What do I say handout, one question might be "What do you miss the most or the least about going to school?" Or "What do you wish for right now?" I use these conversation starters in my counseling sessions with kids all the time and they really work. Draw out those worries by giving them an opportunity to respond n that opens up the gates to what they're feeling.

Cindy Dickinson ([15:32](#)):

As far as listening go, it's a good time to bring yourself fully to the conversation. To be there mentally, emotionally, and physically. No phones, no other, uh, activities going on while you're talking because children know when they have your full attention. Multi-tasking is bad for our current situation anyway ever though you probably have to do it. Listen actively, show them with your body, with your eyes, that you are listening. Um, reflect back what you hear them saying. It's a skill that can be learned pretty quickly and it lets people know that you know what they're saying. And validate those feelings. You might say to a teenager for example, "Missing baseball season is a blow, I know you're hurting. I hope the school will find some way to make it up." You can't offer a solution there all you can do is acknowledge that you know that they're feeling some powerful feelings and you've stated something hopeful at the end of that and that's going to show that they're okay in whatever they are feeling.

Cindy Dickinson ([16:42](#)):

And then finally, giving responsible reassurances. And the responsible is key because it's very tempting as a loving parent to wanna make everything better, to not want your child to get bad news and bad information. But whatever reassurances you give them, need to be on track with reality. So for you to say "Oh this will all be over in a couple of weeks and we'll be able to go to grandmas." That- that if you don't know for sure what that- whether that's going to come true, than it might be better to hold off and to try giving something that's a little bit more realistic.

Cindy Dickinson ([17:18](#)):

But if you can do these things in that conversation, these can be tremendously helpful and there are things that you can do as well and it feels so much better in any situation where we're essentially answerless and somewhat powerless to be able to do something. We can provide structure and one of the ways that we can do that is to give a child some control over germs. That this hand washing practice can be such a sense of strength and confidence for a child. You wanna really enforce it or- or reinforce it without anxiety and with confidence but merely, uh, having a child wash their hands and know that they're making a difference can be really helpful.

Cindy Dickinson ([18:06](#)):

Creating those routines or holding onto routines that you've had as a family, eating meals together, uh, doing chores, making sure that homework is completed. Making sure that you have expectations and rules within reason is another way to provide safety. However, our expectations have probably changed a little bit as have homework assignments, and chores, and meals. We're in a different time, but within the best of your ability. Try to stick with these things within a reasonable place.

Cindy Dickinson ([18:42](#)):

Now many children are- are gonna be looking for comfort. They're going to be exhibiting comfort behaviors. Some young children might wanna sleep in your bed if that happens to be their thing. It's okay to allow that but set a time limit so that you're not creating or they're not establishing a habit that's going to last for a long time. Help the child to understand that it's okay for right now because they're feeling a little bit un-nerved or frightened by this. But by next week, you'll be back in your own bed or whatever you decide as a parent. These are all your decision to make, but they are a great way to establish a kind of new normal because we don't know how long we're going to be in this situation.

Cindy Dickinson ([19:29](#)):

Limiting media exposure is critical advice for everybody, adults and children. But know particularly that young children can't tell the difference between when something is happening over and over and over again and something that is just being talked about over and over again. So that kind of exposure to a young child can be truly frightening because they see it differently from the way we do. With teenagers, uh, y- you don't know whether that will have that same kind of negative effect. It depends on the teenager. But it can certainly have an influence, depending on what you watch or what you listen to on that child's outlook, the degree of positivity. It can raise the stress level of all of us, so please be careful about your media. Again, it's a parent's decision, it's your choice to make. Use your intuition.

Cindy Dickinson ([20:28](#)):

Spend quality time together as a family. Now we have been at this for awhile, and my children have grown. I'm just here in the house with my partner and he and I do fine and have a peaceful easy time but thinking about being at home and possibly even inside with young children or with teenagers is a much more difficult situation. You just have to do the best you can to work in whatever quality you can find whenever you can find it with the understanding that you're not going to be perfect. It's not going to look like a 1950s sitcom. But there are ideas everywhere. And think in terms of looking for what brings you joy. You and your family, what do you love? What are your preferences?

Cindy Dickinson ([21:19](#)):

So if you see other families out riding your bikes and not one person in your family likes to ride bikes and you're thinking oh we should be out there riding our bikes, not necessarily. Maybe it's watching Netflix together, or maybe it is cooking or maybe it's doing something different but try to find those things that spark joy because this is not a time when that's easy to do. And as you see at the bottom of this slide, opportunities for physical activity are very, very important and I think it's one of the only times in certainly the life of the children that I see where they're anxious to get away from their screens and go out and play. But that can be a great anecdote for anxiety. By the way, just as great for adults. So make sure that they are moving in one way or another every day. And we now have unprecedented opportunities in many places to be doing that.

Cindy Dickinson ([22:20](#)):

What can help? How do we dig in? How do we get deep in there and help our children to either pull up their own coping skills or to teach them new coping skills? Because it is a time of high anxiety and many of our children started this out pretty anxious. But that also means that many children have been already working on strategies to self regulate. Many, many schools have such a strong social, emotion curriculum going on taught in younger classrooms, teenagers are aware of it, encouraged to use it. So maybe you dig deep and get some advice from your children, uh, maybe you teach them to question

their anxious thoughts by telling them to consider the evidence. I'd like to turn kids into detectives and if they're feeling anxious about something that might not ever happen for example, I ask them to play detective and find the evidence that that's dangerous for them right now.

Cindy Dickinson ([23:24](#)):

So you might want to work on adding new skills, but don't overlook what they've already learned. I have some great luck with, um, a website called Mindful Schools.org and they do a lot with deep breathing, which as we know, has a great impact on the brain and the central nervous system and really helps adults and children relax. But Mindful Schools.org is a source of, uh, great parent resources, activities, live classes, free and I've used them a lot. And I also work a lot of with the material by a New Hampshire psychotherapist called Lynn Lyons who really has a good handle on helping children, uh, live beyond anxiety and helping parents get a han- a handle on their own anxiety.

Cindy Dickinson ([24:14](#)):

So I find those to be wonderful resources. And then as we look at the next to the last bullet on this slide, the concept of helping our children be comfortable with solitude. Well what's the last thing most children want when they're anxious or when they're worried or when they're upset or when they have questions? That's probably to be alone. The desire is to be constantly together. You might know if your child is especially anxious that they want to spend all their time right beside you and being alone, uh, in small doses to start with can be a wonderful skill. It can help the child develop self confidence, develop independence and this is not probably a time that you wanna go all out on that. But, if you're also in the house 24/7 with your whole family, everybody needs to go to their own corners once and a while and have a little bit of alone time.

Cindy Dickinson ([25:16](#)):

Starting small, perhaps letting the child work on their own on an art activity, or maybe if it's safe then comfortable to be outside, perhaps that child is outside doing a project or maybe a chore and they have an opportunity to safely be by themselves. So taking those in small steps, particularly if it is an anxious child, can help not only now but way, way into the future. And then finally, we know so much about what happens when we help others. We see the brain change, we see different areas of the brain light up, we see it change it our mood. We see it make all kinds of different, a difference in our lives. And there are lots of ways now that kids are helping.

Cindy Dickinson ([26:06](#)):

You can see them doing art work, sending cards to people, supporting our health care workers. You can see them reaching out to neighbors in a way that doesn't involve contact. You can see them getting involved with their fellow classmates. And I see a lot of joy from where I sit with kids helping other kids or kids reaching out. So the more ways that we can involve them in helping others, the more that's going to shift their focus from what's scary about their life into what am I doing to help others feel good? And that can be a tremendous helping influence.

Cindy Dickinson ([26:47](#)):

Then we have our teenagers and sometimes, uh, when we talk about standard advice, whether it's a good emotional health in teenagers and good times or whether it's right now, what does our teen need? It can be very tempting to say, "Well how do I tell whether they're upset because they're a teenager or they're upset because of what's going on in the world? How do I know if moodiness is an issue? How do

I know, uh, if this behavior is normal?" Because if you have a teenager, you know what a difficult and sort of stormy time this can be.

Cindy Dickinson ([27:24](#)):

It's also tempting to think, and this is because teenagers make us think it, that they've got it all under control, that they don't need us, that they don't need anything, that they're grown up and- and that we don't need to approach them in the same way that we would give support to a younger child. Teenagers need that perhaps in a slightly different way, but just as much as young children, even though they don't want you to think that they do.

Cindy Dickinson ([27:55](#)):

Remember too that teenagers are in a place developmentally where they think they're going to live forever. So they may not see themselves in any risk, which can be both good and, um, maybe not so good in terms of risk behavior when it comes to staying safe. But it's important to open up a conversation, get that dialogue open. Again, use those open ended questions and be prepared to have a conversation as opposed to giving lectures. You probably know if you're a parent of a teenager lectures don't work very well even when there's nothing going on.

Cindy Dickinson ([28:35](#)):

More important now than ever to establish or continue that sense of trust that's built up with- with the two of you, and to allow those thoughts that the teenager might have, but not be forthcoming with to come out so that you can have a back and forth. The goal is dialogue. You still need to validate what the teen is feeling. And the older a child gets, the bigger the losses are likely to be. I was listening to a news feature about a young woman and her mother who had a trip to Hawaii planned for after she graduated, which is not long from now and that wasn't going to happen and what a loss that was and how they were feeling. And maybe graduation is- is- is going to happen differently or probably. So there are lots of things including the loss of a social group that are going to hit teenagers hard.

Cindy Dickinson ([29:27](#)):

Pretend you're a teenager and try to get that empathy from where they're coming from and to validate how they're feeling. Ask your teen about their coping strategies because they have them. Uh, they've developed some pretty good ones, maybe they don't use them when you can see them, but they have them. They use them, of course they can always use more, but you may find that your teenager can share some things that will help you and that's a wonderful way, just to have that back and forth exchange. Teenagers will be great about talking about current events. They hear all kinds of things. They hear things from their friends, they get things from social media, so that conversation about what's really happening, what's really true is an important one to have as well.

Cindy Dickinson ([30:16](#)):

And then just as with your younger children, be sure that, uh, they have opportunities to both ha- ha- start and finish projects and to reach out and help others. As far as knowing what's normal and what isn't in this time period, boy it's a tough one because we don't know what's normal for adults or we hear a lot about how it's okay to feel down and feel the sense of loss and we're- we're supported in whatever we're feeling now that as a world, but how do you know what you're seeing in your child or your teenager is okay versus something that you should have checked? I want to encourage you as a parent to listen to your intuition. If something makes you feel uncomfortable, something makes the hairs stand

up on the back of your neck, get it checked out. You need to have that comfort and that support of a phone call or maybe a word of advice from a, you know, maybe from your pediatrician or your health care provider.

Cindy Dickinson ([31:20](#)):

But you see in this left hand column, some things that may well happen as normal signs of stress. Now with teenagers, uh, for example, they are overly emotional for no clear reason, well lots of hormonal but, you may see a lot of that anyway. That's not necessarily an indicator of stress, more than normal. But if you have behaviors that are simply not like your child, worth asking somebody. Consider professional help if these become serious problems that go on and they interfere with daily life. You know, two weeks, but do it sooner if your intuition is telling you to.

Cindy Dickinson ([32:01](#)):

If there's no decrease in the intensity or those, uh, the, um, the nightmares and the worrying as time progresses and we get into a new normal, get that checked out. Uh, if a teen or a child asks to talk to somebody, that's pretty rare. But if they do, by all means, seek that assistance for them. And then of course, if there's ever any indication that a child wants to hurt themselves or they're thinking about hurting somebody else or those big intense things that can come as a result of feeling overwhelmed and powerless, you wanna contact your healthcare provider or if it's a serious threat, call 9-1-1 and you'll get information about where to go next.

Cindy Dickinson ([32:48](#)):

Trust your instincts as a parent. You know your child better than anybody else. And then finally, make sure as a parent and I- and I know it sounds like we're asking you to be perfect and- and we're not. But we do need you to come into this process of helping your child with your own interior lives, at least examine and, uh, having managed a lot of your own emotional stress if you can, finding those calm moments, finding a place where you're feeling okay and then approach your child and your lives together now with compassion. Save the criticism for later. Save perfectionism for later and find good enough. Because that can be from everything as simple as how perfect is my house for my next Zoom call all the way to oh my gosh, what do I want my child to- to learn in- in Chemistry as they're studying virtually?

Cindy Dickinson ([33:47](#)):

And sometimes, situations demand that good enough is where you stop. And as always, look for kindness, look for patience, and remember to model the kind of behavior that you want to see in your child and that will cause this positive interaction sometimes and hopefully even most of the time where kindness and patience will be get kindness and patience. This is a very difficult situation that we're facing today, something that we have certainly never seen before. There is a lot of information out there, a lot of resources for you and trust those parental instincts and the fact that you want more than anything, to do what's best for your child. I wish you all luck as we continue to find our new normal and know that you'll be sending your child out into the- the new world when it happens with some wonderful skills. Thank you so much everybody for being here today.

Speaker 1 ([34:50](#)):

Thank you Cindy and ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us today. That concludes today's Webinar.

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