

Tips for Children during COVID-19

The most important thing to remember as we look for how to 'parent in a pandemic', is that there are no expectations. We are all doing our best to get through the day. Some days will be better than others, more productive, structured, less breakdowns, and yes, more clean!

But..... we want to remember that this will be a marathon and not a race. Parents are already feeling burnt out and exhausted. We have suddenly been thrust into the multiple roles of parenting 24/7, trying to work from home (which, lets be honest – we should call this at home *trying* to do work), playing the role of our children's social peer, taking on the task of online teaching, and above all - being mediator of the household. All this without the usual avenues of support in place such as grandparents, extended family members, teachers, neighbours and friends. Be kind to yourself, there will be days that are full of screen time, junk food, and frozen meals. And that will be okay. Because the most important thing we need to do each day is take a breath, tell ourselves and our kids that we will get through this, and above all, make sure that our kids feel safe and loved.

Common Reactions we may see during this time

- Emotional Changes - frequent crying, angry, aggressiveness, separation anxiety, defiance, withdrawal, apathy
- Behavioural changes - trouble sleeping, appetite changes, nightmares, clingy, repetitive play, regression (acting younger), hiding or hoarding of specific items or toys

Managing your own Anxiety (put your own mask on first!)

Its perfectly normal to be experiencing our own concerns, worries and fears right now in this uncertainty, but we want to be mindful of how we are managing things – as this will have a big impact on our children. Even though they may not be directly exposed, kids are very sensitive at recognizing stress and worry in others.

- Pay attention to how YOU are feeling
- Limit news consumption or having the news on the background around the kids
- Watch out for catastrophic thinking and sharing those worried "what ifs" around the kids.
- Try to avoid talking about your concerns on the phone or with other adults while around your children
- Take a break when feeling overwhelmed or anxious – take a walk, bath or shower, go into another room and take a few deep breaths

Try to Create or Stick to a 'BASIC ROUTINE'

As the weekdays and weekends blend together, gone are our regular routines which contribute to a sense of uncertainty and loss. Re-establishing or creating new routines can help parents maintain some consistency and structure to promote calm, reduce stress and help kids feel safe

- Control what you control- by making plans we can visualize the near future which helps create some semblance of control
- Try to stick to a regular weekday schedule – i.e. wake up close to the same time daily, stick to existing mealtimes, keep bath and bedtime routine the same during the week

- Create a timed day schedule that mimics the child's school day with clear periods of work, rest, and activity time. Letting kids pick the order of activities or academic work can also help them feel more in control of their day.
- Some parents find it helpful to print or create a visual schedule, list of potential activities, and use of a timer to provide reminders for periods of transition
- Don't forget the fun! Board games, craft activities, watching movies, musical activities, and cooking/baking together is a great way to slow things down and take our minds off stressful thoughts.

Try New Things and Get Creative

We all have those “when I have time” lists of things that are usually allocated to weekends or those large chunks of time such as holiday or summer breaks. Now is the time to engage in a big organization project (purging and sorting out the toy cupboard?) or making that complicated meal you saw on Pinterest or a magazine.

- Get outside and get moving within guidelines. Taking a short walk, walking a dog, and doing some online exercises such as yoga or structured workouts can be a good form of group exercise for the whole family

Some helpful fitness links:

<https://www.cosmickids.com/>

<https://www.fitnessblender.com/videos/fitness-blender-kids-workout-25-minute-fun-workout-for-kids-at-home>

- Go easy on the rules – while scheduling is important, it is also healthy to change things up and do something fun or unexpected. Have a picnic on the family room floor, eat breakfast for dinner, take a bath in the afternoon, or let a room get messy.
- Include your kids in making plans. Brainstorm possible activities for the week, such as watching a family movie, making a craft together, going on a scavenger hunt, meals to make and a list of family to connect with via telephone or video.

Creating Space for Ourselves and Each Other

Without school and work in our daily lives, families are spending a lot more time together. Tensions may be running high and siblings are likely oscillating frequently between a love/hate relationship (i.e., “thank goodness I have someone to play with, you are my bff” to “you are everywhere and I can't breathe in this space!”). It is important to set aside physical space and time for ourselves, our children, and our relationships.

- Ask yourself “what do I need during this time that I am not getting?” Time to read? A quiet bath? Enjoying a morning coffee? These little silent moments may be hard to find these days but it is important to find a way to put them back into our routine as part of our self care. Find times in the day that they may align with other activities the children are engaged in to allow us to stop and take a breath.
- Set aside a time daily in which everyone finds a quiet space to do their own thing. Establish guidelines for interrupting that space and make a list of activities that kids can engage in during that time.
- Plan a ‘parent only dinner’. Prepare a kids table or a kid friendly dinner that is separate from the parents to allow for some adult time to reconnect or even just have dinner in silence. Hype up the kiddie meal so the children are excited to sit at a separate fun kids table or enjoy a meal that is out of their regular routine.

Keeping in Touch Virtually

It's important to maintain a sense of social network and support, for both parents and kids. Communicating with others plays a huge part in regulating our emotions, keeping us grounded and feeling emotionally supported during this time that we are social isolating ourselves from our friends and loved ones.

- Social media – while technology can help kids feel closer to peers and family that they are unable to see during this time, it can also be a source of conflict and confusion with many parents. Consider letting them use FaceTime, Zoom and Skype to stay in touch. Make sure to outline family rules for using Social Media (i.e. Using it in a public room, only visiting approved and certain sites, time restrictions) prior to use and stay close by for supervision of young ones.
- Make plans – set regular social dates with peers over video, connect with grandparents nightly for stories and have afterhours conference calls with adult friends. Even though we can not physically see each other at this time, making structured social plans can give us things to look forward to and help break up the long days.

Keep Kids Informed but Keep it SIMPLE

Be thoughtful of the information and details that you share with your children during this time. Be honest and transparent, while also remembering that kids don't need to know everything as it can worry them. Talk to them in clear and reasonable way to help them understand and be mindful of your words and tone of voice. Explain why things are different (i.e., why they can't go outside with their friends or play with other kids).

For example:

- "As a family, we're making the choice to stay home and limit contact with other people. This will help us stay healthy and keep other people like our friends, grandparents and neighbours safe."
- "Remember honey, we are not going over to Cole's house because of the big cold/virus. We are staying home to stay healthy. Just for right now."
- "I can see you're pretty sad about missing your friend. It's no fun that we can't have friends over right now. I can talk to her dad about setting up video chats."
- "I know a lot of places are closed right now and we can't go to our favourite (store, restaurant, play place), but we are all working hard to protect each other and keep everyone safe."
- "I know you miss Grandpa. He's so much fun, isn't he? I miss him too. He can't come over until it's safe for people to visit each other again. I'm going to call him this afternoon, and you can take a turn on the phone if you'd like."
- "I know it's hard not to be able to play with Mikey right now, let's do something special for him and we can send him a picture when we are finished."

Let children lead the conversation and share with you the information they know/may have heard from others and give them a chance to process any worries they might be having about Covid-19 and what is specifically worrying them at this time. Afterwards, check in with them periodically

Challenging behaviour (tantrums, defiance, refusal to engage in schoolwork and chores, fighting with siblings) can be a sign that a child is actually feeling anxious, confused or upset. Try to respond to their behaviour in the moment in a calm and consistent way, and then during a calmer time, check in and ask how they are doing

Additional Helpful links:

<https://www.stewartmemorial.org>

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/10-tips-for-talking-about-covid-19-with-your-kids>