

The Pandemic Parenting Guide: How to Improve Your Child/Teen's (and Your Own) Emotional Well-Being in Times of COVID-19

In this unprecedented novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, many parents are left struggling with navigating a new, uncharted territory of challenges, while trying to grapple with and establish new norms in the household. Given the rapid and drastic changes in daily life that the world has witnessed recently, it is not uncommon for parents to doubt their parenting approach, whether they are doing enough, and/or wonder about what else could they be doing. Many parents are understandably feeling overwhelmed. While you're very likely doing the best you can as a parent in these challenging times, if you're looking for strategies for more effective parenting in the face of this pandemic, below are some key strategies to refer to. These may help reduce overall anxiety in the household and help enhance the emotional well-being of your child/teen. Remember- the goal is neither perfection nor achieving maximal productivity, but, rather emotional and physical wellness.

Provide Some Structure to the Day: Having an open-ended day with no clear schedule does not typically bode well for most children and teens, and may contribute to increased anxiety. Having structure helps to introduce some predictability in these uncertain times. Also, this may help children feel a sense of accomplishment and a sense of agency. However, it would be beneficial to do this in moderation; do not go overboard with scheduling their day. Too much or too restrictive scheduling can be an impediment as well. There can be flexibility in the schedule as long as there are regular bedtimes and waking up times as much as possible.

Prioritize Positive Feedback, and 'Pick Your Battles':

Many well-intentioned parents feel the urge to redirect and correct each and every 'annoying' move of their child/teen (this tendency may be more at the forefront now, given so many people these days are at home the entire time with their children). Refrain from doing so. Instead, choose to notice and praise the desirable behavior that your child is exhibiting. Giving specific praise rather than general praise is more beneficial. Also, distinguish whether the behavior is just annoying or actually risky/dangerous. What seems like annoying behavior may sometimes be your child/teen's way of coping, and is often unintentional. Giving attention to the undesirable/'annoying' behavior is more likely to reinforce it. Furthermore, frequent negative feedback and criticism can

negatively affect a child's developing self-esteem.

Spend Some Quality Time Together: Even 10-20 minutes of quality time together with your child/teen on a regular basis can be meaningful for them, and help them feel supported, understood and calmer. For children between 2 and 10 years of age, this can be in the form of 'child-directed play' or 'freely chosen play'. As the name suggests, in child directed play, the approach is not one of giving instructions or telling the child what to do or engaging in competitive play, but, rather of letting the child direct and guide the play. This type of play helps cement the bond with your child, and helps children gain confidence and self-esteem. You can learn more about the do's and don'ts of child directed play through this excellent

resource: <https://www.seattlechildrens.org/health-safety/keeping-kids-healthy/development/child-directed-play/>. For older children, you may engage together in an activity of your child's choice, such as age appropriate boardgames or hobbies, (without controlling, directing, or criticizing). If you have a teen, consider engaging in an activity or conversation of your teen's choice with a goal to actively listen and support them. You can read more about active listening and validation here: <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/how-talk-your-anxious-child-or-teen-about>.

Pause and Slow Down: Practicing mindful pauses during the day can help you and your child have better emotional health in general, and can also help to feel calmer and regain perspective when things start to feel overwhelming. This can also help you be more patient, less reactive and therefore, more effective at practicing effective parenting. Check out mindfulness exercises for yourself at: <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/accessing-your-ability-mindfulness-times-stress>. You can learn more about mindfulness based breathing exercises for children at: <https://www.seattlechildrens.org/pdf/pe727.pdf> and at <https://www.seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE698.pdf>. Headspace provides strategies for meditation for children here: <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/kids>.

Encourage Your Child/Teen to Resume and/or Cultivate Hobbies:

Learning through schoolwork is important, but, creative pursuits are as important for the developing brain. Whether it is resuming playing the piano/guitar, singing, dancing, writing, drawing, painting, reading, or something else, you can encourage your child to indulge their creativity further while you are at home with them. Creative activities can help your child experience a sense of fulfillment and joy, which in turn, will help enhance their emotional and cognitive well-being.

Set Limits on Media Use and Explain What the News

Means: You may have heard about this already. Repeated cycles of news about coronavirus and its impact can be exhausting, scary, confusing and/or overwhelming for children and teens. Limit daily news intake to a reasonable level based on your child/teen's age and developmental level. This can help everyone in the household feel calmer. You may also need to explain to your child what certain news really means. Do this in a factual way that is also developmentally suited for your child. In addition, children, particularly younger ones, would benefit from reassurance of safety from their parents

during these challenging and uncertain times. However, excessive reassurance (when there are almost constant/frequent requests or check-ins for reassurance throughout the day) is not beneficial in the long run.

Help Your Child/Teen Stay Electronically Connected with Friends: Due to the novel coronavirus, CDC recommends limiting children's contact with others outside your immediate household 'as much as possible'. Follow the CDC guidelines, and help your child/teen stay connected with their friends via digital media, through phone, video chats, etc, instead of in- person. For teens who have social media accounts, continue to supervise/monitor use of these accounts appropriately.

Entrust Your Child with Developmentally Appropriate

Tasks: You don't have to do things for children that they can do for themselves, such as putting their crayons back, cleaning up paint after painting, helping roll out the dough, folding laundry, or any other simple, household activity that is appropriate for the age and developmental level of your child. Teens may be able to help with tasks, such as helping younger siblings with learning activities, selecting items online for online grocery delivery, etc. This can help your child/teen gain a sense of mastery, agency and confidence. Needless to say, don't go overboard with this, and supervise and monitor tasks as appropriate.

Attend to the Basics:

Attend to the basics of care for your children and for yourself- such as getting adequate sleep, healthy food, rest, and if and when feasible, engaging in something that is fulfilling. One of the important steps of effective parenting is ensuring that you are taking care of yourself.

a) **Sleep:** Optimal quality and duration of sleep is essential for optimal brain functioning and emotional well-being. This applies to people of all ages, and even more so, for children and adolescents, given their brains are developing. We know that less sleep can lead to irritability, exhaustion, in addition to increasing risk of depressive symptoms and impairing alertness. In children and teens, less sleep can affect key

physiological processes that are essential for growth and maturation. Sleep hygiene measures can go a long way in ensuring optimal sleep. Some of these measures are: having a regular bedtime, maintaining comfortable room temperature, avoiding media/TV/screens emitting blue light- at least for an hour prior to bedtime, avoiding caffeine and caffeinated drinks in late evening, engaging in regular physical exercise preferably before 6 pm, avoiding rich, fatty, or spicy foods prior to bedtime, and getting exposure to natural light during the day. You can learn more about this here: <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/what-poor-sleep-could-be-doing-to-your-child-or-teen/>

b) **Coronavirus Precautions:** Implement and teach your child/teen the novel coronavirus precautions as per CDC guidelines. Watch your child/teen for any emerging signs of illness.

c) **Learning:** Coordinate with your child's school for your child's learning activities and to discuss any challenges your child may be facing in accessing or completing schoolwork

d) **Exercise:** Help your child/teen engage in regular physical activity, as appropriate for their age and as advised/permitted by their pediatrician

e) **Professional Help:** If you or your child/teen suffers from a mental health condition, make sure to seek/continue

professional help. Most physicians and mental health professionals are seeing patients via telepsychiatry/telehealth.

Practice Compassion Towards Yourself and Your

Child/Teen: Practice compassion towards yourself as well as towards your child/teen. Compassion is the innate trait that helps us notice suffering and experience a wish to alleviate that suffering. As we know, suffering is a part of the human condition. Being compassionate does not mean being lax on limits, rather it entails noticing the common humanity in ourselves and others. Engaging in compassion practice has been shown to be beneficial for emotional well-being, and may help in decreasing stress. You can learn more about compassion exercises

here: <https://centerformsc.org/practice-msc/guided-meditations-and-exercises/>

Note: For the sake of simplicity, the words 'they', 'them', 'their', have been used in this article as pronouns for child/teen. Please substitute these with the appropriate pronoun as it relates to your child/teen.

This article is for informational purposes only and is not intended to provide medical or psychiatric advice or recommendations, or diagnostic or treatment opinion. The content of this article may not apply to you if you are suffering from COVID-19. This is not a complete review or

description of this subject. If you suspect a medical or psychiatric condition, please consult a physician and/or mental health professional. All decisions regarding an individual's care must be made in consultation with your healthcare provider, considering the individuals' unique condition. If you or someone you know is struggling, please contact the 24/7, confidential National Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or use the crisis text line by texting HOME to 741741.

This blog post was posted on April 28, 2020.

About the Author



Richa Bhatia, MD is a dual Board Certified Child, Adolescent and Adult Psychiatrist, and a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association.

Her professional opinions have been quoted in CNBC, the Guardian, US

News and World Report, AARP, and other national/regional media. She serves as Section Editor for Child & Adolescent Psychiatry for the journal- Current Opinion in Psychiatry, and as an editorial board member for the journal- Current Psychiatry. Previously, she served as a faculty member in the departments of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. She is the author of

2 books: 'Demystifying Psychiatric Conditions and Treatments' and '65 Answers about Psychiatric Conditions'. She is the recipient of the Marian Butterfield award by the Association of Women Psychiatrists.