



TRIPLE P GUIDE

Parenting during COVID-19

COVID-19 represents a challenge to families around the world that is unlike anything we have ever experienced. Most parents when confronted with a highly stressful situation like this have a basic concern for the wellbeing and safety of their children. To care for children effectively, parents must also look after themselves.

As parents, we ourselves may be feeling a range of uncomfortable feelings (including anxiety, anger, sadness); as well as uncertainty about what to do and how we can cope. These feelings are entirely reasonable and normal. It is important to remember (and to remind children) that communities are working together to keep people safe (e.g. healthcare workers who are looking after people with the virus; supermarkets bringing in new rules to allow more vulnerable people to do their shopping safely). This guide helps parents to support their children and look after themselves during this difficult time.



Reassure your child that your family is your top priority

In all conversations with your child, stay as calm and comforting as possible. Explain to your child that they should tell you if they are feeling unwell. Make sure that your child knows — through your actions and your words — that it is part of your job as their parent to do everything within your power to keep them safe and that this is exactly what you are doing. For example,

say *I'm your parent, it's my job to keep you safe and we are doing everything we can.* This will help them to feel safer and, for older children, to better understand why you must observe the restrictions being placed on all families by government authorities (e.g. not going to the local park and keeping them away from social gatherings with friends).



Take care of yourself the best you can

It is entirely reasonable to feel anxious, distressed, confused and angry at times during the current situation. Dealing with your own emotions effectively means that you are better placed to support your children. In dealing effectively with your own emotions, you are also setting an excellent example for your child. Some useful general strategies for dealing with big, uncomfortable emotions include:

- paying attention to your emotions and your thoughts
- taking a break from interacting with family members if you are not in control of your emotions (e.g. you

might say *I'm feeling upset at the moment and I can't be as calm as I would like in this conversation. So I'm going to sit in my bedroom and read for 10 minutes to give myself a chance to settle down*)

- talking to supportive friends and family
- deep breathing
- exercise
- practising mindfulness

There are many helpful and effective ways to manage uncomfortable emotions — singing, dancing, gardening and drawing are examples. Keep healthy and safe (good personal hygiene, exercise daily, eat well, get enough sleep, avoid using alcohol or drugs to lessen stress). Avoid behaviour that might increase your stress (e.g. it is helpful to keep informed about COVID-19, but constant checking for updates can increase stress). If these strategies do not work, you may wish to think about seeking professional help (there are a number of excellent [online support](#) options).



Make sure your children know you are ready to talk

Most children won't be as preoccupied with COVID-19 as adults. However, it is essential that children know they can talk to parents about their concerns and have their questions answered truthfully. Let your child know that when it comes to COVID-19 and this difficult time, you are there for them (e.g. *If you have any worries or questions about what is going on at the moment with coronavirus, you can always come find me and we can talk it through*). It is a good idea to follow their lead. With children who seek out a conversation, this involves providing only as much information as they have asked for. With children who do not seek out a conversation, be on the lookout for signs of distress or changes in behaviour (e.g. a child who becomes more clingy or aggressive). Although there may be other reasons for these changes, keep in mind that they may be related to COVID-19.

When talking to your child about their feelings, stop what you are doing and listen carefully. Avoid telling your child how they should feel (*Don't worry about that*). Instead, let your child know it is OK to be worried, sad, angry or disappointed. Talking or drawing can help children better understand their own feelings and concerns. Common sources of concern, frustration or sadness might include worrying about grandparents' health and missing spending time with them, falling behind with schoolwork if they are not attending school, not being able to spend time with friends or not being able to play sports with others. Reassure your child that people around the world (healthcare staff and scientists) are working to help each other and to develop medicines that will help everyone.

Talk to your child about what is going on around them in relation to COVID-19. However, it is important not to talk to them too much about it — this can increase children's fear and distress. As adults, it can be hard to focus on anything other than the current situation. But we need to make sure this does not colour our interactions with our children. Follow your child's lead — this will help you to spend about the right amount of time talking to them about COVID-19, while also helping you to think about other things. You need to be thoughtful too about the conversations you have in front of your child and limit your child's media exposure around COVID-19.





Be truthful in answering children's questions

General guidelines for answering children's questions include:

- 1 Find out what they think they know about the issue (e.g. through social media or their friends) before answering.
- 2 Keep your answers simple and appropriate to your child's developmental level.
- 3 Get your information from reliable sources (e.g. UNICEF, the World Health Organization websites).
- 4 If you don't know the answer, offer to try to find it out for them. If they say *Don't bother*, you can probably leave it. However, if the answer is important to you personally, you might say *That's an interesting question. I'm going to look up the answer because I'd be interested in knowing it.*
- 5 Don't make promises you can't keep (e.g. *Things will be back to normal by your birthday.*)



Maintain everyday routines

We all do better when we have some structure around us (particularly in times of stress and uncertainty). As much as possible, stick to your regular family routines (e.g. mealtimes, bedtime routines). You will also be introducing new routines (e.g. more regular washing of hands; keeping more distance than usual between yourselves and others if outside the home; managing a situation where you are working from home while your child is also at home). Where it is possible, involve your children in the development of these. It is predictable that some of these new routines may result in a temporary increase in arguments between parents

and children (e.g. the need for more instructions and monitoring around hand washing). It might take a little time for the family to adjust to the new routines — be as kind and patient with both yourself and your child as you can.

It is useful to work out a timetable or schedule for each day to help you and your child cope with being at home during this time. Keep the difference between weekdays and weekends. During weekdays when your child would have been at school, this timetable should include learning activities as recommended by your school. Keep in mind that home learning during this time will not be the same as a regular school day. Have

realistic expectations (both for yourself and your child) around home learning. For toddlers and pre-schoolers you may want to adapt some of the daily routines they are used to from their child care (if applicable). Drawing up a timetable for the day could be an activity that you do with your children each morning (you will most likely

also benefit from having a timetable). If you are working from home, you might think about scheduling breaks at the same time as your child. You might also need to set some new rules about interrupting politely and waiting for your attention. An example timetable is shown below.



My Daily Timetable (an 11-year old)

| Time | Activities |
|-------|--|
| 7.00 | Get up; wash hands; get dressed; have breakfast; feed dog; wash hands |
| 8.00 | Read, draw, pat dog (wash hands) or play a game |
| 8.45 | School work — Math (online/workbooks) |
| 9.15 | School work — English (practice spelling words) |
| 9.45 | Free time (pick from activity list) |
| 10.15 | School work — Science (do an experiment with a parent) |
| 10.45 | Wash hands; snack time |
| 11.30 | Free time (pick from activity list) |
| 1.00 | Wash hands; have lunch |
| 1.30 | Free time (pick from activity list) |
| 2.00 | School work — History (do some research on my school project) |
| 2.30 | School work — English (reading) |
| 3.00 | Pack up school work; wash hands; snack time |
| 3.30 | Do some exercise (e.g. skip inside; make up a dance; have a game of handball; follow an online exercise program) |
| 4.00 | Relax — watch an episode of my favourite show |
| 5.00 | Play a game with the family |
| 5.45 | Video call with a friend or grandparents |
| 6.00 | Wash hands; help with preparing dinner; have dinner |
| 7.30 | Shower or bath |
| 8.00 | Brush teeth; family reading time |
| 8.30 | Go to bed |

The timetable might not always go exactly as planned. That's OK. Having a timetable is about providing some structure and guidance for the day. When things don't go to plan, be patient with yourself and your child; and work together to think about how to make it work better the next day.



When children are busy, they are less likely to be bored, anxious, sad or get into trouble.



Have a family plan

Plans are very helpful in times of anxiety and uncertainty. Each family needs to develop their own plan. The plan should include regular handwashing; keeping a distance between yourselves and others; and physically staying away from vulnerable family members and friends. Children have an important part to play by following these rules. Where possible, include kindness to others in your plan (e.g. offer to pick up and leave groceries for an elderly neighbour or someone with special needs). In this way, you are also showing your children one of the qualities that you want to encourage in them. Where you can, involve your children in the creation of the plan. Given the rapidly changing nature of COVID-19 and government recommendations, this plan may need to be reviewed quite frequently. Keep your conversations around the plan brief and matter-of-fact.



Have plenty of interesting things to do at home

When children are busy, they are less likely to be bored, anxious, sad or get into trouble. Work with your children to come up with a list of 20 or more activities

that they can do if they find themselves bored and not sure what to do. Make sure that you include physical activities to keep children active — there are many that can be done either inside or outside.

For younger children, activities might include drawing, painting, building an obstacle course, playing with blocks and play dough, and playing hide-and-seek. For older children and adolescents, activities might include cooking, completing an online exercise program, drawing, playing catch or handball, and listening to music or a podcast. Board games and puzzles are great for children of all ages. Put a copy of the list somewhere in the house where your children can easily see it (e.g. on the fridge). This may be a good time for you and your child to take on a new project together (e.g. learning a new language or making an online photo book).

Make sure the activities are not just variations on screen time. However, at times like these, it's OK to loosen up on your usual screen time rules and allow more than usual. Some screen time could include other family members or friends (e.g. having a family movie night; playing online games with friends; talking to family or friends online).



Take notice of behaviour you like

During this difficult time, think about the values, skills and behaviours you wish to encourage in your children. There are many opportunities to teach your children important life skills (e.g. being caring, helpful, and cooperative; getting on well with siblings; taking turns). Pay careful attention to your children's behaviour during this time. Whenever they do something you like and want to encourage, specifically name the behaviour and then use plenty of praise and positive attention to encourage it in the future — you will find this is a very powerful thing to do. For example: *That was lovely that you suggested we phone your grandmother. That's so kind that you thought to do that. She really appreciated it or Thank you for reading quietly and waiting until I was off my work call to ask me your question.*



Help children learn to tolerate more uncertainty

The COVID-19 crisis is creating uncertainty for everyone. As parents, we need to find a way to accept this uncertainty ourselves. Then, through our actions and words, we need to demonstrate this acceptance to our children (e.g. *We don't know when this is going to*

be over. I know it's hard to not know. We just have to remind ourselves that we are doing our best to stay well and safe, and that the whole world is working together on this problem). Big changes to children's lives can be hard and often scary, but they can also create opportunities for learning new skills (e.g. different ways of communicating with friends and loved ones). If you have serious concerns about your child's emotional health, seek professional support.



Reach out and connect with loved ones

Social/physical distancing does not have to mean that you, your children or your extended family members feel alone or isolated. We are all in this crisis together. Make greater use of phones, online communication tools (group video conferencing) and social media to keep in touch with family, friends, and neighbours. Children love being experts — maybe they can draw on their knowledge of social media to teach other family members how to use these tools to stay in touch.

Get more tips and strategies online to help during this crisis: triplep-parenting.ca



Matthew R Sanders, AO., PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist, Founder of Triple P and one of the world's leading experts on parenting.



Vanessa E Cobham, PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist and an internationally recognised expert in child and adolescent anxiety and posttraumatic mental health (specifically disasters).

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