



Parenting During COVID-19: 25 Science-Based Best Practices

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- 1. Take care of yourself.** The number one thing that will protect children against experiencing this time as traumatic — stop their nervous systems from going into fight, flight, or freeze — is their connection to their parents or caregivers. Prioritize self-care (read: making sure you’ve eaten, not necessarily a face mask) so that you can be there for your kids.
- 2. You will get frustrated; when you do, apologize.** You will get exasperated and impatient with your kids because we are in a collective trauma, because this is all so incredibly challenging, because you are cooped up together 24/7, and because you are human. You can turn these episodes into opportunities to put into words what we all—including our little ones—are experiencing. *"I'm sorry I snapped at you, sweetie. I'm having a lot of big feelings, and we're in a pretty small space, so some of them spilled on to you. I'll try to do better."* Quarantining was made for rupture and repair, arguably *the* key component when it comes to fostering a healthy and strong parent-child relationship (which your kids are going to need more than anything right now).
- 3. Be the grown-ups.** It's on us to start conversations with our kids. Continue to ask them – in developmentally appropriate ways – what new things they've heard about the virus, to correct misinformation, and to answer their questions honestly and using short sentences. Kids get bogged down in words.
- 4. Choose what you say to yourself carefully.** You are not “homeschooling” or “working from home.” Those terms normalize circumstances that are anything but normal. You are stuck in your house due to a global crisis, attempting to get some work done and not to have your child’s learning come to a screeching halt.
- 5. Play, play, play.** Young kids work things out with stuffed animals, dolls, action figures, costumes. Let your little ones be mad at the virus, attempt to control it. Maybe Elsa casts a spell so that it freezes in its tracks. Maybe Ryder and the pups go on a rescue mission to help those who are sick. Maybe you mix a COVID-19 cure potion involving food coloring, glitter, and whatever else.
- 6. Provide a narrative.** Children need help making sense of events that – to them (and, in this case, many of us) – came about suddenly and without warning. Telling them a story about what happened, or even creating a book of sorts, can be a great tool to ease their concerns (and related behaviors).
- 7. View children’s behavior as communication.** Many kids will not tell you they're anxious, that everything feels weird and different, that they are disoriented and confused and unsettled. At least, not with words. What they are going to do is have big reactions to seemingly small things, or have difficulty falling asleep, or keep complaining even more than usual about their barely-perceptible boo-boo, or be more aggressive, or talk baby talk, or not be able to decide what pajamas they want to wear. It's up to us to get it, to realize that all of this isn't happening in a vacuum. It's not about the small thing, or the boo-boo, or the pajamas. It's about the big, uncertain, unstable world around them. And so:

8. **Try a hug first.** When your child is having a meltdown about pajamas, don't join her in that conversation. Don't give her two choices, or tell her she has to make up her mind, or give her a time limit. These aren't bad strategies, but they likely won't work now. Why? Because it's not about the pajamas. It's about feeling lousy; the pajamas are just the focus of the moment. Ask if she wants you to pick her up, snuggle for a minute. Acknowledge it's a weird, yucky time, and so things are feeling weird and yucky.
9. **Think top-down when it comes to "discipline."** This is a natural extension of #8, (and discipline is in quotes because I don't love that word, even in the best of circumstances). Discipline is best thought of as a container, an area delineated by figurative walls, inside of which your child feels safe. Have general expectations; maybe even hang them on the wall, like in school. Set some structures, some routines that keep things running smoothly. Think more about the big picture than about individual incidents, and when you do think about the latter, use them as clues to your child's general state (anxious, irritable, etc.).
10. **Put your phone away for set periods of time.** Our kids sense, and feel uneasy, when we are distracted. Mumbling "Mmmhmm" as your child tells a story, while you simultaneously scroll and swipe, is not helpful. Being intentional and clear about your phone use is. *"I am going to play with you right now, so I'm putting my phone on the shelf";* and *"I am going to take a few minutes to check my phone right now, so I won't be able to play for a bit."*
11. **Predictability is key.** It doesn't need to be in the form of a color-coded schedule mapping out when you are covering each academic subject between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. In general, though, kids (and grown-ups) feel safe when there is something about their day they can predict. *"In an hour or so, we are going to have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, then we'll watch a movie, then we'll do 20 jumping jacks, and then we'll FaceTime Grandma and Grandpa."* But:
12. **Let go of your expectations.** We are all feeling out of control. And so we're making plans, at least the plans that we can. Which likely involve your child's daily schedule, the activities you'll do together, the amount of screen time you'll allow. Notice your expectations. Then let them go.
13. **Validate feelings of anger and disappointment.** It stinks that your family had to cancel your spring break travel plans. Or that your child can't have his sleepover party. Or his school play. It's OK for your child to cry, hit the couch, even yell for a bit. Moreover: we are allowed to recognize how privileged we are, and feel sad, scared, and anxious at the same time. Be where you are. None of your, or your child's, feelings are bad, or unacceptable, or selfish, or petty. We are complicated; so are our feelings and reactions.
14. **Simultaneously, model reframing and looking on the bright side.** Maybe there's a lot more family time now that both parents are working from home. Or maybe your child can finally do that epic art project he's been thinking about. Or maybe he can take on a new job or chore, now that the whole family needs to pitch in, and you can emphasize what a "big kid" he's become. If there is no bright side yet, that's OK too. There doesn't always need to be a silver lining.
15. **Emphasize agency.** Your family is not just sitting around at home passively waiting for forces out of your control to take shape as they will. No! Frame what you are doing, what we all need to do, as a set of actions. Your family is doing its part by helping to stop the virus, exercising agency by washing hands so thoroughly, working together as superheroes spreading health and safety around the world.
16. **Answer questions with factual knowledge.** Then stop. If your children have questions about the virus, answer them honestly. Then stop talking. If they have follow-up questions, they'll ask. And then you can answer again.
17. **If your child asks the same question again and again, point that out.** "But are we going to get it?" "Wait, are we going to get it?" "Are Grandma and Grandpa going to get it?" If your child continues to ask the same question, or very similar ones, then he or she is likely *reassurance-seeking*, which can be a sign of anxiety. It's okay to acknowledge that: *"Sometimes when we are worried, we ask the same question over and over. The worry fools us into thinking that will help, but it actually doesn't."*

18. **Then provide helpful, calming strategies.** What *does* help when we're worried is getting into our bodies ("Let's do some jumping jacks!"), or doing some deep breathing ("Smell the cookies as they come out of the oven, now blow on them since they're too hot to eat"). You know what makes worry get even bigger? Worrying about the worry! ("And then worrying about the worrying about the worry!" your child may say, and suddenly you're in a playful interaction and things don't feel quite as bad anymore.)
19. **It's OK to say "I don't know," "I have to think about it," or, even, "I'm worried too."** Our little ones need us to project a calm, clear confidence. This is not synonymous with knowing all of the answers, or being devoid of our own emotional experiences. Pause. Think. Look something up. Ask a parent friend how they might respond. If your attempts to soothe your child are out of sync with your worried demeanor and energy, your child will notice, and this will be even more distressing for them. You're better off being honest than faking it: *"I am feeling a bit worried myself right now, and so I am going to take a few deep breaths before answering your questions. Do you want to come sit next to me and we'll take them together?"*
20. **Move your body.** Jump. Dance. Stretch. Family dance party. The mind-body connection is real. When we feel grounded in our bodies, our emotional state often improves as well.
21. **Focus on community, both local and global.** Talk out loud about how you are going to check in on your elderly neighbors to make sure they have all they need. Mention that right now everyone in the world is working together to solve this problem. Guess how many people on your street are washing their hands at the exact same time you are. Your family is not alone in handling these challenges; you are part of a greater whole.
22. **Let your little ones play "Baby."** One common way that little kids ask for extra comfort and nurturing is by playing baby, either directly ("Let's pretend I'm your baby") or indirectly (e.g., speaking in baby talk). Don't shut this down right away; rather, play along. *"Oh, my little sweet baby, yes, let me pick you up and give you snuggles."*
23. **Expect regressions.** When children have to adjust to a completely new routine, or are sensing anxiety around them, their developing brains can't always handle that shift on top of everything else; internal resources get allocated to the new task at hand, and something else goes. Your potty-trained toddler may start having accidents, or your self-assured kindergartner might start showing some clinginess. That's okay, and to be expected.
24. **Every day will be different, maybe even every hour.** For you, and for your kids. The moody and entitled meltdowns (ours and our kids!) will pass, as will the intense flickers of joy and connection, as will all of the mundane, neutral moments in between. Show up for all of it. Mostly because you don't have a choice, but also because it's kind of the whole reason we're here in the first place.
25. **Note your own mental health.** I noted it above, and now I'm noting it again. The single most important thing you can do to parent during COVID-19 is to take care of yourself. There has been a lot written about managing anxiety right now, but there's also a real risk that other mental health issues will flare up, either for the first time or in a relapse: depression, OCD, and PTSD, to name only a few. Many practitioners, myself included, are offering telehealth and teletherapy services. Please don't hesitate to reach out for support. Your child will thank you—even if it's not with words.