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Parenting during the coronavirus outbreak

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The Mental Health Foundation is part of the national mental health response during the coronavirus outbreak. Government advice designed to keep us safe is under constant review and will be different depending on where you live: [more details and up to date information here](#).

There's no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic is having a huge impact on family relationships.

Most of us are still at home and many parents are supporting our children's education. You can find up to date information [here](#) and [here](#).

Some of us will be shielding, or vulnerable. Some of us are managing alone with our children, or co-parenting.

Some of us are key workers facing the need to go to work and leaving our children either with partners or at childcare hubs. See [here](#).

Whatever your circumstances, this period may be tough on our mental health, and our relationships.

Whilst there may be challenges – around routines, missing social contact, staying in, and behaviour – there may also be huge opportunities to get to know our children better, to learn new things together, and to be together as a family.

“

Now, more than ever, parenting is about doing the best we can, with what we have.

”

This article is designed to give a few ideas and sources of further advice that might be useful.

1. Quality time together and with ourselves

We are spending a lot of time together at the moment.

It can sometimes seem like there is only one setting for family – everyone together.

However, there are a lot of ways to split that time so that we are able to have quality time with everyone we have in the household, as well as with ourselves. Outside of our immediate family, we can also keep in touch with friends and relatives using the phone and internet.

It's OK to take personal alone time as a parent

All parents need personal alone time. It's OK to find and take that. If there are other adults in the household, enabling each other to have personal time is a huge gift we can give.

It's especially important with babies and toddlers – though hard. If at all possible, try and use nap times to recharge rather than clean or work.

If you have a partner at home, spending quality time together is also important.

How to help children build their own spaces

Children also need time alone, as well as time with other members of the family. If there's more than one child in the house it can be great for when they spend time together – but each child needs their personal space too.

It might be appropriate to help your children each identify and make a space that is their own. This is hard to do in small flats – do what you can to create space perhaps by building a den on their beds.

Try to keep connected with friends and family

Social time within social distancing rules is also important. Phone or video calls and games with friends and relatives can be a good way to keep in touch and have a different

input – and letter writing for children and adults could be nice way to surprise someone you are missing.

Activities for the whole family as well as ourselves

Finding a balance of different types of activity is a good idea – but it certainly isn't easy, or always possible.

Reading together, playing games, making a meal together or doing something creative are all opportunities to have one-to-one or group time.

Keeping active is very important for our mental health. Whether that comes during our alone time as an adult, or is something we do together inside or outside, it's really important.

Trying to eat at least one meal together and giving time to reflect on the day can also give a chance for everyone to centre and connect.

Think about relaxing rules on screen time during these times

Finally, a word about screen time.

It's possible that at the moment we are having more screen time than we normally would. This might cause arguments or tension.

We may need to temporarily relax rules we may have on screen time so that we can all get quality time with each other, and with ourselves.

There's a huge amount of free, exciting content being developed at the moment for TV, and online. From virtual museum tours and theatre shows, to new content on streaming platforms and new games, there's a lot there that can be good for our mental health.

As with any screen time – it's good to know what your kids are watching and doing online, and to keep talking about it.

Read our guide on [talking to children about healthy internet use](#).

2. Routines and structure

Whether it's during school time, or during the weekend of holidays, it can be very helpful to plan the day, and the week.

When we are at home all the time, it is easy to lose track of time, or to end up in a rut of familiar habits that can increase unhelpful boredom.

Try and plan your day

A time to start the day can be a target to work towards – and online PE at gam seems to have become a tradition very quickly.

Nobody is saying that you need a colour coded timetable for every hour and minute – though if you like that kind of thing it certainly passes the time.

Try and keep mealtime and bedtime routines consistent

A meal planner to let everyone know what's on the menu for the week helps plan shopping and can give something to look forward to – especially if everyone gets a chance to have their favourite and the kids help with preparing food.

Similarly, if we try and keep mealtimes, and bedtime routines in place it gives a sense of consistency.

Remember children show stress in different ways so it may be that fewer vegetables are eaten, and bedtimes might take longer.

Sleep is important for teenagers and allowing them to sleep in may well help them to cope with the challenges they face, as long as they are not staying up all night worrying – or gaming.

Setting and rewarding chores and helping out in the house can help with boredom and give a sense of achievement – as well as taking some of the burden from us.

Even very young children can help as a game – teaching them about helping and responsibility.

Helping children with school work at home

School work at home is hard – you aren't a teacher – you are a parent doing your best to keep you children's brains going. The type of work and support schools have set varies between local authorities and up until Easter there has been a lot of trial and error.

From 20th April there will be a range of lesson and content available through [BBC Bitesize](#) which connect to the curriculum and stages in all four nations of the UK.

Although schools set work, it might be easier to get your children going with projects that relate to their own interests. That's OK too. If you work at home, you'll know that the rhythm of the day is different, what you can achieve varies, and that some days you have to cut yourself some slack and do something else. It's the same with supporting school work at home.

Try and define a couple of sessions in the day for primary age children. For secondary age you can encourage a longer session of study – perhaps sharing some of your tips if you are working from home too.

Go easy – and encourage them to share worries and disappointments they have about school, exam and next steps.

Helping your children stay in touch with friends

Social time is hard – but try to help your children stay in touch with their friends in ways that don't breach guidelines.

Video calls can be fun if you have the equipment – but supervise young kids closely – ideally be in the room or nearby.

You can also take part in the community by displaying rainbows, doing chalk pictures or clapping on Thursday – it reminds kids of their neighbourhood and can make new connections.

For older children and teens check in with them on how they are doing keeping in touch with friends. If they are having a problem, see if you can find a way that doesn't involve going out. It's hard to keep teenagers in at the moment but it's very important that they stay in and stay connected.

If slips happen and you find they've been meeting friends, try not to be too angry. If you can, don't punish them by removing means of keeping in touch with peers. This may be hard when a phone or console can seem like the only thing they care about.

3. Recognising and managing stress

It's important that we are able to find ways to recognise and address stress we are feeling – both in relation to parenting and in relation to work, family and other challenges.

Try and make time for ourselves

It can seem counter intuitive or impossible to make time for yourself, to think about yourself or practice self-care at the moment, but this is the time when you need it most.

Try not to judge or compare ourselves and others

It can be very easy to judge ourselves as parents based on what other people are doing that we aren't, on what people post on social media, or through a lens of what we don't have or can't offer.

It's really important to cut ourselves some slack. Right now, today you are giving your best to your kids – and hopefully there's enough left for you. If there isn't you need to find a way to replenish yourself.

Resources for our mental health

In our wider [tips about looking after your mental health](#) we suggest a range of ways of looking after your own mental health during lockdown. You can also find a range of resources, and make a plan for looking after your mental health at the [NHS Every Mind Matters](#) site.

4. Celebrating success and staying positive

Thinking positively can help us to overcome challenges of all sorts. That's not easy though for many of us.

Praise your children when they do well

When it comes to our children, take care to praise them when they do well. Tell them what they did that you were pleased or proud of and why. Be specific. This lets them know that you are noticing what they are doing, and that you are interested.

Praise the effort and work they put into things as much as, or more than, the outcome. It helps them feel confident about taking on other challenges.

How to set expectations with your children

Set your expectations appropriately though – it's unlikely that they can stay silent for a whole working day -but they might be able to let you take a call or answer an email without interruption.

Being specific can help – say 'I need 20 minutes for this call then we can play' is easier to understand than 'go away I need to work'

Talk about what you have been grateful for

At the end of the day talk about the things in the day you have been grateful for. You could do this at the dinner table, during bath time or as part of the bedtime routine.

You could write these down too and very quickly it will become a habit that can re-centre even the worst of days on the things, however small that went well.

If you can sit with your partner, or talk to a friend or relative about how you are learning, and what's going well at the moment, you may find that you are doing better than you might think.

5. Helping together

There is a lot of emphasis on community volunteering at the moment – and volunteering is great for your mental health. Lots of the volunteering opportunities are not open to children – though some are for teens.

There is a lot you can do as a family though. Look out for opportunities to write letters to your local care home, take part in clapping key workers in your street, or look at [our random acts of kindness](#) to see what you could do as a family.

Kindness is the theme of [Mental Health Awareness Week on May 18-24](#). Have a think about what you could do in your household to show others some kindness at that time.

6. Managing difficult behaviour and conflict

There's bound to be some tension in the family at the moment – it's very much expected that children will act out as part of the way they show stress – and we are often less able than normal to keep our responses proportional.

At times like this you may need to expect, and allow more meltdowns – they are dealing with an extraordinary set of circumstances.

The World Health Organisation has been promoting a three-stage model for dealing with acting out:

Redirect

At the first sign of misbehaviour try and divert onto something else – suggesting a game, a call with a relative, or your walk if you haven't been out yet for your daily movement.

Pause

If redirecting doesn't work and you can feel your temper fraying try to take a 10 second pause. Take a few deep breaths and come back to the situation in a calmer frame of mind.

Taking this further parenting expert Sarah Ockwell-Smith recommends the mnemonic PETER to help

P = Pause. Don't react immediately.

E = Empathise. Try to understand how your child is, or was, feeling and their point of view.

T = Think. Think about different ways you could respond and what would happen as a result.

E = Exhale. Take a deep breath, breathe out, relax your shoulders and picture your anger leaving.

R = Respond. Now is the time to respond to your child, not before.

It's great if you can acknowledge the emotion - showing that you understand how they're feeling, that it is (likely) a reasonable reaction to a strange situation, and that even so, it needs to change.

Consequence

Give your child the opportunity to do what you are asking of them. If they don't let them know that there will be a consequence action that you will take.

It needs to be proportional – don't threaten something you can't or won't do.

If they don't do what you ask, you need to give them the consequence and when it is over, go back to normal.

There are bound to be occasions when you lose your temper and shout. It's important that both you and they make up.

Apologies are important but they need to be meaningful. If you model apologising to them when you've lost your temper, they can do the same to you. For older children you can accept apologies with a thank you and remind them that they hurt your feelings but you can move on.

7. Talking about coronavirus

It's very important that you are able to talk with your children about the epidemic and what it means. We've produced [specific advice about having conversations about coronavirus with children of all ages](#).

Popular children's illustrator Axel Scheffler also collaborated with public health specialists to produce a downloadable book on [coronavirus for primary-aged children](#).

For older children and teens, there's a lot of good quality information available. Our friends at [The Mix](#) and [Young Scot](#) have produced dedicated sites for teens.

Overall, it's best to be as honest as you can, and answer questions as and when they arise. If your circumstances have changed – for example if you have been furloughed or the family income is changing, it's important to open about that with older children. This allows them to get their heads around a situation and to share their feelings with you.

8. Reach out

If you are struggling with parenting at the moment, you aren't alone. There is government guidance on supporting children and [young people's mental health and wellbeing here](#).

It's not a sign of weakness to reach out, it is a sign of strength. You might want to speak to a friend, or relative. You might have an online parent's group or forum like [Mumsnet](#) to call on.

If you are a single parent, it's bound to be a particular challenge – well done – you are doing a great job. Organisations like [Gingerbread](#) have particular advice for lone parents, including on co-parenting during the lockdown.

You might also be able to access a local [Mutual Aid or volunteer group](#). They can help with shopping and other supplies. Everyone can ask for help, whether or not they can offer help to others, now or in the future.

If you have a child with a long-term health condition who is at particular risk this can be very worrying. You may find specialist information [from Great Ormond Street Hospital](#) useful.

Finally, there are a number of parenting helplines and charities that can provide one to one advice on all aspects of parenting. Family Action supports families across the UK facing challenging circumstances. Their [Family Line](#) helpline specialises in supporting parents facing complex issues.

In England and Wales [Family Lives provides a helpline](#) on all aspects of parenting.

In Scotland [Parentline Scotland](#) provides a similar service managed by Children 1st.

In Northern Ireland [Children in Northern Ireland](#) does the same.

The Mental Health Foundation is committed to bringing readers reliable and relevant information. All of our pages are written and regularly reviewed by our mental health experts, in line with official advice on the coronavirus outbreak.

We need your support to keep providing vital information during this time.

Please consider making a donation today

Public Health England have developed explicit guidance on mental health in the crisis. If you want to develop a personalised plan for supporting your mental health you can also

visit the PHE [Every Mind Matters site](#), developed in collaboration with the Mental Health Foundation.

If you need to talk confidentially you can call Samaritans on 116 123 at any time. We also have a resource on [how to get help for your mental health](#).

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Do you need urgent help?

If your mental or emotional state quickly gets worse, or you're worried about someone you know - **help is available**.

You're not alone; talk to someone you trust. Sharing a problem is often the first step to recovery.

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