

Parenting Through a Pandemic

Living in self-quarantine means you're spending a lot of time in the house and more continuous time together as a family than ever before.

Maybe you're working from a home office or the kitchen table. The kids are jumping between online classes, social media, playtime, homework, hobbies, and family responsibilities. Maybe you have a parenting partner at home who needs to leave regularly to serve an essential job, or is recently unemployed or is also working remotely from home. Or perhaps you're a single parent, grandparent, or older sibling who is suddenly a stay-at-home, full-time childcare provider.

Whatever the situation is for you and your family unit, while you're social distancing and in self-quarantine, you're facing a vastly different lifestyle and a new set of daily challenges.

"Use this as an opportunity to create a healthy lifestyle," says Dr. Raul Poulsen, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the University of Miami Health System. "Adapt new ways to manage stress and anxiety. Stay physically active. Doing things together as a family will create unity and cohesion and establish a sense of normalcy."

Create a family schedule

"Consistency from day to day works best for kids," says Dr. Poulsen. "When things feel chaotic and unpredictable, it's more difficult for children to thrive."



Children of all ages will benefit from staying as close to their school schedule as possible. Older siblings might be able to help the younger ones maintain this schedule while you and your spouse are working from home. "Try to replicate these routines as much as possible to maintain a sense of normalcy," he says.

Create a weekly calendar for the family and keep it in a place where everyone can see it. "This schedule is a shared effort and a shared responsibility," Dr. Poulsen says. Create the schedule with input from your children and any others quarantining with you. "This will give children a sense of control and ownership over the schedule," he says.

Designate certain hours of the day or week to the tasks and recreational activities that matter most to you and your family. Keep critical personal dates or work deadlines on a different timeline.

Here's a list of ideas for things you can do with your family. Return to this list when the kids complain they're bored and have nothing to do.

Reduce stress and relax together

"Yoga is a good way of maintaining physical activity indoors, and it promotes mindfulness techniques," says Dr. Poulsen.

You can use an app or YouTube tutorial to learn some basic poses and how to focus on your breathing. "It's an easy way to relax your body and calm your mind. Research shows yoga and mindfulness techniques decrease anxiety, and it's appropriate for most ages and physical abilities."

Monitor the screens, not just the screen time

For children age 12 and younger, Dr. Poulsen recommends limiting their exposure to specific media. "Try to keep kids away from alarmist, fear-based information that's not appropriate for younger children."

For adolescents, Dr. Poulsen says 30 minutes of current events content per day may be appropriate. Up to two hours per day is advisable for fun, social screen time. This does not include online learning time. "Be gentle," he advises, "but set firm limits as to their access to the internet and certain sources of information."

Socialize from home

"Try to maintain your social interactions from a physical distance," Dr. Poulsen suggests. Here's how:

- Go old school. Send your friends greeting cards, handwritten letters, or postcards. Become pen pals.
- Play multiplayer online games together.
- Create shared fitness challenges or interactive contests.
- Play a board game together via video chatting.

- Make up a new tradition, and everyone commits to doing it at the same time in their own home every week.
- Collaborate on creating a family tree.
- Share your feelings of gratitude.
- Use video chat to share favorite recipes and cook them at the same time.

The value of alone time

"Sneaking in some time alone is more challenging now, with people spending the majority of their time together in small spaces. So," Dr. Poulsen says, "you should prioritize private time by including it in your family calendar, for children and adults."

He continued, "adolescents age 15 to 17 years old, especially, need private time to help them feel more normal and centered.

"And it's okay to tell your kids, 'Mom and Dad need alone time, too.'" Parents need quality time together as a couple without interruption. How much alone time? "For some families, an hour per day is manageable, and for others, maybe five hours per week is possible."

Share family responsibilities

"This is a good time for children to help out around the house," Dr. Poulsen said. Children who are old and big enough can be responsible for specific daily tasks and can pitch in with more substantial projects that require adult supervision.

Younger children can help out too. Try having them set the dinner table, feed the pet, or assemble a salad. Older kids can become more involved with meal prep. "Allow them to be creative and flourish in the kitchen," he said. "Ask your kids what flavors or ingredients they would like to try tonight. Teach them how to prepare a

family recipe, or learn together how to cook a new cuisine from a cookbook or online tutorial."

The kids have questions, anxieties, and frustrations. Make time for that, too.

"It's important to set aside time for serious conversations with your children," Dr. Poulsen says. "Provide uninterrupted time to have a real discussion."

But make sure you do your homework first. Before you talk to the kids about why they can't play with their friends or visit their grandparents for so long, it's important that you know why.

"Learn about what's going on from the most reliable source of information — the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," says Dr. Poulsen. "Digest this information, and provide it to your child in a way they can understand. Be able to answer their questions. You want them to feel that their concerns are addressed and that they are free to ask you questions."

Many children are celebrating birthdays, trips, group activities, and milestones at home this month. "Validate children's unmet expectations and their strong feelings of disappointment and frustration," he says. "Honestly answer their questions about future expectations. You want to make realistic promises for the future. Explore various outcomes and address the child's feelings and reactions."

When you have these conversations, the time and place are essential choices. "Find a safe space where the child feels comfortable, supported, and welcome to speak frankly. They may have a lot of questions," Dr. Poulsen says. "It's also a good idea to revisit these topics often. Your child's feelings about the quarantine and the pandemic aren't going to go away after one conversation."

If you have multiple children of different ages, speak with older and younger children separately to address their different kinds of questions and concerns. "If younger children can't express how they feel, encourage them to draw," Dr. Poulsen said. "This opens the door to express feelings with a picture."

"Once kids feel like they've lost control," he explained, "they can regain some sense of control when they better understand the situation. If your children are afraid and nervous, let them know it's okay to feel that way. 'Mommy and Daddy feel nervous, too. But we're going to work through this together as a family.'"

Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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Children take cues from their parents, he says, so if you are anxious and uncertain, they will be, too. "Uncertainty is related to the lack of information, and sometimes it's related to the wrong kinds of information," says Dr. Alan Delamater. *Read more.*