

Surviving the Coronavirus at Home: Managing the Side Effects by Thriving During This Time Together

One week before Denver Schools shut down, our fourteen-year-old daughter said: "I really don't want to be stuck at home with the two of you for two weeks". My wife and I gave a confirming nod. Like so many parents, that reality is now here. While we know that a sick member of the family needs to be isolated, that leaves the rest of the family stuck with each other for hours on end. While it's like summer break, you don't have the plethora of camps and community rec centers to break up the monotony of it all. Even for parents who love hanging with their kids, you can only take so much family time before you start to get stressed. For you and your kids, here are a couple of strategies to help you through:

- **Structure.** Adults generally find that routines help us be more efficient. While we might **like** routines, children **need** them. Sit down with your children and map out how the days will flow. Set up specific times for reading/homework, chores, independent free time, mealtimes, family time and bedtime. Like every teacher, write it down and post the schedule.
- **Time for Self.** Make sure your children know that you will plan blocks of time for yourself and that they will need to self-entertain (my wife has now claimed the kitchen to herself until 8 am). This will give you time for needed chores and your own mental-health time. Have several a day and work in times for your own self-reflection, checking in with other parents and exercise time. While these time segments will be shorter if you have preschoolers, make sure your children know that disturbing your time will result in a loss of privileges.
- **Free Play.** My mother had no problem telling my four siblings and I to go outside and play. Being outside in fresh air has huge physical and mental health benefits. While children might complain about not knowing what to do, they will quickly find something to explore or create while outside. If the weather or your living arrangements don't allow for outside play, try creating one room on the house where kids can just have free play and make a mess. Every Christmas, my son and I would set up his GI Joe fort and Hot Wheels track in the living room. While the rest of the house stayed normal, this was the place for unbridled indoor fun. You can also set up Zoom sessions for your children and their friends. This is also a great time to break out old hobbies and jigsaw puzzles.
- **Gaming.** I recommend that families have a limit of a half hour of gaming during the school week and several blocks of gaming time on the weekends. Given these circumstances, I'd probably go with the weekend rules just to help you and your kids survive. The same is true with TV, while binge-watching might be an appealing alternative, you'll pay the price in your child's moodiness after you pry them free of their screens. Several one-hour blocks a day is better than binge-viewing.
- **Family Games.** This is the perfect time to get out all those old-fashioned board games. You'll have a lot of fun just playing and laughing. Even older teens and college students will engage in the fun as they remember times from earlier in their lives. Watch TV together or share an electronic game or two. This would also be a great time to watch old family videos. Connecting with happier times is always good for our mental health.
- **Sleep.** While it might be tempting for your older children to stay up late every night and sleep late every morning, that's not going to be beneficial to their physical and mental health. You'll also be left with very moody children the next day. Stick with your bedtime schedule. Don't forget to enforce no screen time an hour before bed.

- **Your Community.** Rather than being on the phone or social media all day long yourself, try to schedule set times to check in with your adult friends. You can also consider setting up a Zoom community of friends where you can have a designated time to check-in with each other.
- **Limit the News.** For your own mental health, and the mental health of your children, titrate the intake of news. Constantly following the latest Corona news will only increase the entire family's anxiety.
- **Discuss Emotions.** Have a set family time to talk about how everyone is feeling and coping with the outbreak. I'd suggest doing this at the dinner table or after dinner. It's important to acknowledge their anxiety but also their loss and grief about upcoming trips and school programs on which they will be missing out. Then turn to your family game time and your usual routines. Children need to learn how to block out their anxieties and experience a sense of normal. It's getting back to those routines that help us survive.
- **Adjust to Your Unique Child.** The above recommendations need to be adjusted to the age and nature of your child. Children who struggle with impulse control, will need more structure and rules than your well-controlled child. Teens will need to be in contact with their friends over social media. While you'll need to extend their social media time, still have smart phone free times during the day and take the device at night. You'll also need to be aware of teens that will be tempted to sneak out at night to meet-up with their friends. Taking possession of the car keys is probably a smart move.
- **Have an Adventure Mindset.** In good times and bad, help your child understand that every moment in life offers opportunities to learn, create and grow.
- **Reach Out to Others.** Sure, we are supposed to socially distance ourselves, but that doesn't mean we can't help our friends and neighbors. This would be a good time to buy gift cards from your local shops and restaurant to help them bridge the gap. Your neighbor across the street might need a sanitary food delivery, a flower basket, or just a wave through their front window. Our daughter had a plastic bag-lined trash can out front to collect used shoes for children in need. Getting involved and expressing our empathy helps us all.

In closing, it's important to remember that this is a unique time for all of us so it's important to go easy on yourself. While I typically recommend that parents try and be 80% consistent with their parenting strategies, this, however, will be one of those times when you will need to let some things go. It's ok; this is a parenting experience to which we are all trying to adjust. Just do your best until the Coronavirus runs its course.

*Craig A. Knippenberg, LCSW, M.Div., is the mental health consultant for St. Anne's Episcopal School (ACIS) in Denver. He has provided child and family counseling services for more than 35 years and is the founder of Knippenberg, Patterson, Langley and Associates, one of Colorado's largest private practices (www.CraigKnippenberg.com). Experts for this article were taken from his new book [**Wired and Connected: Brain-Based Solutions To Ensure Your Child's Social and Emotional Success**](#) (Illumify Media Global, 2019) www.wiredandconnected.com. You can also check out his blog at: www.adventuredad.org.*