

**Refrigerator Notes
Keeping Calm and Providing
Supportive Parenting During the Coronavirus**

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These are challenging and unexpected times for families struggling with a growing list of major life issues including job loss, illness, financial loss, cancellations, school closures, and figuring out how to provide child care while working, or trying to work from home with children in the house. The goal is to stay safe and calm and figure out how to deal with this new life that will be anything but normal for a while. Here are a few tips for parents to consider with regards to keeping their children physically and mentally secure.

Talking with Your Children

- This time is anxiety provoking for everyone. Children will absorb the stress and worry about what they hear from their parents, peers, the news, and other adults. They will need parents to help filter and interpret the situation and to help reassure them that they are safe and cared for.
- Young children under age 6 don't need specific or detailed information about the virus, or the worldwide crisis because they are too young to process it. Keep the TV news off when younger children are around and avoid having them listen to your conversations with others because they will have difficulty knowing how to interpret the information. Explanations should be simple and factual. Here are two examples of ways to talk about this: *"There are some new germs that are making some people sick. We are helping by staying at home so that we don't share germs with other people. We are also going to stay healthy by washing our hands a lot, coughing in our sleeve and giving each other elbow bumps instead of handshakes."* Or, another way of saying this is, *"You have heard that big word coronavirus which means flu, like a big cold. A lot of people are getting this, but it doesn't hurt children or most grown-ups. We can make sure that others don't get it by washing our hands a lot and staying away from our friends a lot. We won't be able to visit Granny and Gramps for a while so they won't get sick. It is sad we can't see them, but we can do face time with them so they know they are not sick and that we love them."* Offer reassurance that your family is safe and healthy.
- Let young children know the things that you can and can't do as a family right now. *"We can't have your friends over or go to the playground right now because we don't want to share germs. We can call them often and we can also cook together, take walks, go for bike rides, and read together."* Don't be surprised if the virus theme and death and illness comes up your play times, this is completely normal and expected.

This is a healthy way for young children to work out their feelings of fear. If your child seems stuck in the fear, you can help your child think about ways to use puppets or imaginary characters to act out being brave helpers (doctors or nurses taking care of people) or to show acts of kindness.

- Your older school-aged child will likely have heard about the coronavirus. It is best to get ahead of the game by talking about things that might be scary before a scarier version comes from a peer or media. Rather than one big discussion, check in regularly with conversations while playing together or eating dinner. Start off by asking them if they have heard of coronavirus, and what they have heard or know about it. Beginning with what they know can guide you on where to take the conversation and what corrective information might be needed. When they ask questions about the virus or their social isolation, take the time to explain what is going on, how the virus spreads and how they can prevent it by staying at home, as well as how they can keep themselves and others safe. Encourage them to ask questions and express their worries or feelings of loneliness or anxiety. Take your cues from your child's questions as to how long this conversation should continue. Don't over explain. Wait to see if they have further questions. This conversation may occur in short discussions over many days or weeks as they absorb snippets of information, digest the meaning and come back with more questions. Focus on keeping the conversation open and creating a relationship where you are a secure and safe base to come back to. Avoid encouraging them to think about worst case scenarios.
- Some older children may want to find ways to be helpful. This might include calling elderly relatives, earning some money to send to a charity, or helping take care of younger brothers and sisters. This helps them feel a sense of control.
- With children of all ages be sure to spread a calm and patient tone during these discussions. If you seem anxious (which is understandable), this can escalate your child's anxiety ~ remember stress is contagious.

How to Manage School Closures

- If your children are home due to school closures, set up basic expectations. Just like your child's teachers do, post a daily schedule that everyone can see. Predictable routines help children feel safe, reduce their stress, and prevent power struggles.
- Your schedule or routine should include predictable times for various activities. For preschool children, this would include independent play time, play time with an adult, reading time, outdoor time, snacks, naps and meals, and likely some screen time for fun and educational activities. For school age children, some schools will provide structured learning assignments to work on during the school closures. Help your child work out a schedule to complete these assignments. If the school does not provide work, it is still valuable for parents to set up expected time spent on educational

activities including reading, math, writing, social studies, and science. These educational activities might look very different from traditional schoolwork. There are on-line resources for children to access that provide lessons in many different areas. Parents who have time may help children pursue creative learning projects. In addition to time spent on academic activities, be sure to include time for unstructured play, physical activity, meals, and for older children social interaction in safe ways (an outside walk with a friend or a Facetime or texting conversation). Stick to this routine Monday through Friday. Don't frame this time out of school as a summer holiday, rather a time to learn something new they normally don't have time for. Remember children thrive on stability and routine.

- Don't change your child's bedtime routine because there is no school. Lack of sleep will increase children's anxiety.
- Carefully think about your screen time rules and how much time you want your children to be on screens. These rules are especially important if you are at work and not able to monitor this. While this is not a time to be rigid about screen time, it is still important to monitor the amount and quality of the screen time. Work with your child to find interesting documentaries or educational programs to watch. Download library books or audiobooks related to their interests. Look for games that have educational value including activities like coding or planning and building a city. Try to keep your children engaged in learning activities and excited about the opportunity to learn something new.
- During this time, having play dates in your home should be avoided. Evidence indicates that although children are unlikely to get sick, they are carriers of the virus and can easily pass it on to adults around them.
- Outdoor activities where there isn't much shared equipment or physical contact such as riding bikes should be fine. Moreover, physical activity does reduce stress and is important for physical health. Monitor current expert recommendations as guidelines for what level of contact is acceptable and safe are changing rapidly as new information is available. Err on the side of caution, and do take these recommendations seriously.
- Encourage children to learn a new skill on YouTube or find a new educational game on line.
- Face time, texting, gaming and skyping with friends will help your child feel connected to their friends they usually see.
- Encourage your children to talk to grandparents or relatives via Facetime or Skype.

- Ask children to help around the house by giving them a daily chore or special job challenge (cleaning out the game closet, sorting out their dresser drawers, or babysitting for a younger sibling). Depending on your household, this can be framed as a way to help the family during a challenging time, or as a way for your child to make some extra money.
- While you can put together a big interesting list of daily activities for your children, one of the most important things is to make time in the schedule for time *playing with you* in a child directed activity. While you will be distracted by many other demands related to financial losses and lack of social contact, taking some special time one-on-one with your child will be the most important thing you can do to keep him calm and help him learn how to manage life challenges with persistence.

Teach children how to help. When children understand that washing their hands and avoiding hand shakes helps others and not just themselves, it can increase their sense of control. Their clean hands can become a check on their, “super power”.

- Use and model stress management strategies yourself and teach them to your children, such as, the “*turtle technique*”. This when your child (or you) goes in your turtle shell and tells yourself, “I can manage this”, or, “I can stay calm” and takes deep breaths while thinking of a happy place or time. There is a video vignette on our web site that shows you how to use the calm down thermometer with your child to teach how to stay calm and practice how to go into a turtle shell.
<http://www.incredibleyears.com/programs/parent/attentive-curriculum/>
- Help your children take the long view. Talk about things they will do when the virus has subsided and give them a positive image of their future. Praise them for achieving the goals they set for themselves for completing their daily schedule and plans.

Above all else, be kind and forgiving to yourself. Many parents will be facing seemingly impossible situations. Perhaps you have to work and have no childcare. Perhaps you are sick but feel you must go into work because you do not have sick leave. Perhaps you are trying to work from home with your young children running around. Perhaps you are caring for an elderly parent and are worried about spreading the illness to them. Or, perhaps someone in your family has caught the virus and is critically ill. In these situations, you may not have the time or energy to attend to many of the suggestions above. The most important thing you can do is to show love and caring for your child and to provide reassurance that you and your family will get through this somehow. Do your best to keep your child safe and cared for during the day. Create some structure you can realistically commit to and mostly achieve. Your child will be okay if you need to rely on screen time give yourself some personal time for exercise or alone meditating time. These are unusual times, and there is not a protocol for this. It is important to try to take care of yourself, so try to find someone to share your worries with, ask for help from anyone who might be able to support you, and hang in there.