

Single Parenting During the Coronavirus Crisis

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The coronavirus crisis is tough on all families. But for single parents, having to suddenly manage kids whose schools and playgrounds are closed and whose caregivers can no longer come to work can be especially overwhelming.

Getting through the actual day-to-day of life under quarantine — not to mention juggling working from home or dealing with the fallout from sudden unemployment — is stressful enough. Add to that the isolation from other adults in your social network, and the task of single parenting can feel insurmountable.

There's no magic bullet that will make living through this crisis easy. But we've put together some advice from our experts to help support single parents during this difficult time. In particular, we're focusing on tips for reaching out to find help (which is crucial to your mental health), balancing work and time with the kids (which can feel impossible) and handling difficult behavior (which is to be expected).

Start with acceptance

Acceptance might sound absurd in the face of such a challenging situation, but think of it this way: Accepting the situation you're in doesn't mean you have to like it. Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends a mindfulness concept called "radical acceptance," which means that you accept what is happening in the moment without judgment, rather than fighting what you're experiencing. It also means accepting the feelings you have — including things like anger and frustration. When you're stuck in a bad situation, check in with yourself. What is — and isn't — out of your control? Once you've acknowledged what you *can't* control, you'll be able to move forward to improve what you *can* control. Radical acceptance could enable you to:

- **Acknowledge that right now, you are in survival mode.** Be kind to yourself, and remember that though it may feel lonely, you are not alone. Everyone is going through this in one way or another. "If I read one more article about how this is a great time to reorganize my closet, I'm going to lose it," says Stephanie Lee, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "I think we want to dispel the myth that this is a good time to work on things. This is a time to survive and get by and that's okay."

- **Set the parenting bar lower.** Accept that there are going to be some days when if you can get everybody fed and bathed and squeeze in a little activity, that is a good day. “If you can move the bar up just a little one day a week, great,” says Dr. Lee. “And if it falls back down again the next day, that’s okay.”
- **Settle for less academics.** It’s virtually impossible to work from home and be your kid’s teacher five days a week. “If you can manage to do academic work with your child three days a week instead of five, that’s great,” says Dr. Lee. “If you can only do two right now, that’s okay too.” It can also be helpful to check in with teachers when you feel comfortable doing so, since they may be able to give extra support in stressful situations or even just provide additional time to complete assignments.
- **Go back to basics.** Try setting your priorities for the day in the morning. What has to get done? Then, maybe add what you’d *like* to get done. Kids — and you — need good sleep, some nutrition and ideally a bit of exercise every day. Those are the basics. That may mean going for a jog while your kid rides his scooter, but with parks and playgrounds in many places closed right now, it may mean taking a break to do ten jumping jacks or have a relay race in the hallway.
- **Find a few minutes a day for yourself.** These days, the old cliché of “putting your mask on first” has taken on a new But the idea that if you can’t help yourself, you can’t help your child, stills holds true. “One minute of self-care, five minutes of self-care — that doesn’t mean you go to the spa but it does mean maybe taking a walk if you can,” says Dr. Busman. “Or doing a three-minute meditation.” Taking small breaks throughout the day is crucial, even if it’s just to stretch or drink some water.
- **Relax screen time limits.** That doesn’t mean letting your kid watch TV all day. But allowing a little extra time on the iPad or an extra hour of gaming can give you time to recharge and let everyone have a little break. **Remember**, these changes aren’t forever — you’re just adapting to an unusual situation.

Find your village

If ever there were a time to ask for help, now is that time. And it’s important to model for your child that when you need help, you ask for it. When you can’t rely on your usual support network, you might:

- Reach out to your child’s teacher or school psychologist or counselor, or to your own therapist.
- Contact clergy members or other spiritual leaders in your community.

- Schedule regular FaceTime dates with grandparents or your child's favorite babysitter or the other parent if they're in the picture. "Just fifteen or twenty minutes of virtual childcare may give you the time you need to take a shower or start a grocery delivery list," says Dr. Lee. "I know one grandma who does little kid yoga with her grandchild once a week." Kids can entertain each other, too — setting yours up to chat with cousins or classmates can be a way to give other parents some breathing room at the same time. Scheduling these visits around the same time every day or every week can also give both your child and you a little bit of structure and something to look forward to.
- Have virtual meals with friends who live in other parts of the country and who are at home with their kids. "This may be the time to reconnect with that college friend you've lost touch with and introduce your kids to each other," Dr. Lee says.
- Call to see if local libraries or the music class you used to attend with your child are offering virtual sessions. Remember that you're not limited to resources in your geographic area. If a bookstore across the country has great kids' events that are now online, this is your chance to check them out.

Make a plan for juggling work and childcare

Working from home is hard and homeschooling is hard, so putting them together can seem impossible. If you're feeling overwhelmed by the balancing act, try these strategies:

- **Speak with your employer if you're working from home.** "Everybody working from home is working for and with someone who is also working from home," says Dr. Busman. "We are obviously concerned about our jobs, but depending on your situation, you can talk to your employer about taking some family medical leave or have a conversation about how to arrange flex time or how to consolidate work tasks during times that are going to align with what your child needs."
- **Use visual aids and timers to let your child know when you're available and when you need to work.** For young kids, Lee suggests setting kids up with an activity they can do relatively independently and then using timers or visual "stop lights" (clipping a green piece of paper to the door when you're available, and a red one when you're not) to teach kids about boundaries. "Then you have to check in every five minutes or so, non-contingently," she says, to let them know you are there. Eventually you can move to longer durations of time.
- **Go easy on yourself.** Like everything else about the current situation, your work life simply might not be up to its usual standards. But as long as you're staying on top of your essential day-to-day tasks, you are doing your job — even if you're usually determined to go above and be. Take comfort in knowing that your supervisor and colleagues are likely facing similar challenges themselves, and if you can, try to be open with them about what you're realistically able to put in at work right now.

Get ahead of behavior issues

The current situation is just as difficult for kids as it is for parents. And with everyone at home together, some conflict is unavoidable. Consider these tips for making the most of the challenges that do come up:

- **Avoid the temptation to intervene if you can.** Having more than one kid at home can be great, on the one hand, because they can keep each other company. But being cooped up can also lead to more bickering among siblings. Carol, a lawyer and the single mom of two 11-year-old girls, has discovered the beauty of noise-cancelling headphones. “I wear them sometimes when the kids are off playing or doing chores,” she says. “I have a tendency to want to get involved as soon as I hear them needing help or beginning to argue. It is helpful to me not to be able to hear them because it allows them more time to work through stuff on their own” This approach works well with teens and tweens. If you have little kids, you’ll probably need to be the referee and help them work it out. But having a calm discussion about whatever the issue is rather than just yelling at them (even if that’s what you really feel like doing) is likely keep things from escalating and you’ll also be modeling constructive ways of dealing with conflict.
- **Expect some regression and tantrums.** With the sudden restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic, children have suddenly lost their bearings in the world — their friends, their school, their schedule. And it’s expected that kids may be anxious and that may result in regression and acting out. The key, Dr. Lee says, is to not engage with tantrums as much as possible as long as the behavior isn’t dangerous. “We want to be careful that we don’t inadvertently reward kids in the middle of their tantrum with big, bold, and immediate attention, because it will inadvertently reinforce that behavior and keep it going.”
- **Heap on the praise.** On the flip side, it’s crucial to “catch” your kids being good. “I’m always all about the praise and there’s two kinds of praise. There’s general praise and then there’s labeled praise,” Dr. Lee explains. “General praise is things like ‘good job,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘way to go.’ Labeled praise is literally telling someone what it was about their behavior you liked: ‘Thank you so much for putting your plate in the sink.’”

The strategy of praising kids in this way is something Lee uses especially in her work with kids with special needs like ADHD and autism because it really helps to reinforce good behavior. But right now, with virtually all kids having to learn new routines and ways of coping, applying these praise techniques is beneficial to any kid living under quarantine.

If you let your kids know that *you* know they are doing the best they can, even in these deeply uncertain times, hopefully life will become a little easier for all of you. And right now, that is enough of a goal for any parent.

Figure out what does, and doesn't, work for you

When it comes to daily life during the coronavirus crisis, we're all making it up as we go along. It's not going to be the same for everyone. How you cope will depend, in part, on how old your kids are, how independent they can be and what your work situation is.

Linda, the single mom of a toddler in New York City, feels like she is drowning. For a week she and her daughter didn't get out of their pajamas. It took a while, but she says she discovered something that worked. "Art has been our saving grace." She spends hours each day letting her daughter go crazy with painting and has even been able to have some socially distanced playdates with the women from her moms' group where they meet outside and let the kids draw with sidewalk chalk.

Carol has been teleworking from home for over a month. "I've had time to figure out what works and what doesn't," she says. Carol has figured out that everyone does their best work in the morning, so that's when she sets her kids up with their schoolwork and when she tries to schedule as much of her own work as possible. In the afternoons they do chores and she takes her kids to a dirt field nearby where, she says, "they will ride their bikes in circles for two hours just to burn off steam."

Feel free to embrace whatever works for you and your kids. And if you try a strategy that's worked for someone else and find that it's not right for you, let it go. "This pandemic didn't come with a 'how-to' manual," says Dr. Lee, and remembering that can be the key to making this situation less stressful for you and your kids alike.