

CHALLENGING TIMES

“You don’t have to be perfect.”

Many families are at home together 24/7 and will be for some time to come. This means that there are many challenges for parents with young children?

Social distancing and rules about staying at home have totally changed daily life for us all. No change is easy, and this has been a particularly fast and difficult change to adjust to. So probably everything is challenging for families right now.

The rhythm of our days and weeks have changed completely, with schools closed and community resources limited. As we manage these changes, we’re also dealing with very real stressors about health, finances and even finding toilet paper! So this is a very hard time for families. It’s also the perfect time to remember that you don’t have to be perfect! You are allowed to feel tired, stressed and worn out.

The only two things that need to be on a parent’s to-do list right now are taking care of themselves and connecting with their children.

Taking care of ourselves is the oxygen mask approach, like in a plane, when the flight attendant tells us to put on our own mask before helping others. This is a reminder that we need to care for ourselves in order to care for our children. So parents shouldn’t feel bad about carving out time each day to do something that makes them feel good, whether it’s a workout, a shower or a chapter in a book.

And connecting with our children is not about creating detailed activities that cover every minute of the day. It’s not possible or practical to be engaged with them all the time. Especially if you’re also working from home. Connecting means finding times across the day to share moments of nurturing and affection. To cuddle, hug and kiss them. To read a story, play a game, watch them play, let them help us cook or sort washing. In times of intense change, children feel safe and secure when they can trust you to be there. That’s when they become free to do their “work” — playing, learning, exploring and creating.

DEALING WITH STRESS

“When we make time to ‘share our calm’ with children, they feel safe and secure.”

Parents should keep in mind that it’s okay if they are not 100% right now. The goal isn’t perfection. The goal is being able to meet the needs of our little ones with love.

All parents have moments when they wish they had done things differently. When that happens remember that it’s what we do after our misstep to reconnect with our child and re-establish our connection, that is most important. So, I might say to my toddler: “Mammy didn’t mean to yell when you spilled your drink. I shouldn’t have done that, and I’m sorry. Let me give you a great big hug! Everyone spills sometimes. Would you like to help me wipe it up with a towel?”

A final thought is that parents may want to consider strategies they can use on a daily basis to bring down their stress level. ZERO TO THREE has some great mindfulness practices for parents to check out, for example. Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and increase a parent's ability to be present and compassionate with their children, even during tough times.

How can parents help their young kids deal with the stress around them?

The first and most important thing parents can do is find times to connect with their children across the day. Think of ways to cuddle and check in with them. Young children manage their emotions with the help of their loved adults. So when we make time to “share our calm” with children, they feel safe and secure.

Notice how your child communicates their feelings through behaviour, and be patient with any changes — like your child seeming to “lose” potty-training skills, being more clingy, or waking more at night. These are often signs that a child is struggling or feeling stressed, so parents need to try to have extra patience.

Another strategy is using a consistent routine that children, even babies, can come to depend on. First, breakfast, then tooth-brushing, then dressing, then play time, then a story, then lunch, and so on. Routines organize us and help us feel secure.

Parents can also try age-appropriate ways to help children to communicate their feelings. Turn on some music for a “dance party” that lets children get their “worry wiggles” out. Paint a “feelings picture” to show each other how you are feeling. Try some simple pretend play with a stuffed animal or puppet; start by asking your child, “This is my stuffed dog, Spot. How do you think Spot is feeling right now?” Talk about and act out your child's suggestions. Sometimes young children express their worries and thoughts through play before they can describe them in words.

You can also make calming routines part of the day like sharing simple yoga moves before nap time or trying some of ZERO TO THREE's [mindfulness exercises for toddlers and preschoolers](#). Offer your child a gentle massage before bedtime. Sit together and share a familiar song or lullaby when they need some time to recharge.

How about families with babies? Are infants affected by the stress of those around them?

Even babies may pick up on their parents' and caregivers' stress. They notice when our voices, posture, expressions, touch and “way of being” is different.

You can help your baby feel secure, even when so much is changing by the day, by making lots of time for physical touch and holding. By responding lovingly to their cues and cries. By being patient with their fussiness — it's how they show us they are feeling unsure! And by using a fairly consistent schedule that they can trust and anticipate.

DAILY SCHEDULES AND ACTIVITIES

“Be flexible.”

One of the biggest stressors for many families at home right now is that there is no schedule. Both adults and children feel a little unsure about what to do with their days. A schedule can provide some consistency and daily routines, which are very helpful for young children. And creating a schedule helps us to focus on the need for a variety of activities, from reading together to physical play, free play and other activities. We all do better when we have a balanced “diet” of activities.

But don't let the schedule be in charge of you. You don't have to do everything on the schedule. Identify a few main activities that happen every day — mealtimes, nappy changes, naps, bath time — to form your basic daily schedule. Then, list categories of activities that your child enjoys, like physical play, reading, drawing/art, quiet play (like puzzles or blocks), free play, play with parents, chores and screen time (if you choose). You can slot in these other activities across the day, or ask your child to choose activities from this list, to fill out a daily schedule.

What activities can families do at home with toddlers and preschoolers?

ZERO TO THREE offers a range of age-based resources for babies [birth to 12 months](#), [12 to 24 months](#), and [24 to 36 months](#).

While it's fun for children to play *with* parents, it's also important for children to have some time to play on their own or with parents nearby, watching, but not involved. Time for independent play builds a child's problem-solving skills, attention, and persistence — and it also gives parents a few much-needed minutes to just *be*.

How can families stay connected with grandparents, relatives and friends?

Right now, video chat is a great tool to stay in touch. Young children — even babies — can recognize and build a relationship with someone who they interact with regularly on video chat. Here are some [tips for making the most of video chats](#) with your little one.

Another idea is to work on a project together, but apart. An example might be sending photos of things in the house from A to Z back and forth. You can also send videos of songs, stories and jokes back and forth.

ONE LAST REMINDER

“You have what it takes.”

RP: The most important thing for parents to remember is that you are your child's favorite person in the whole world. You have what it takes and what they need.

Looking for more information? Visit zerotothree.org/coronavirus for their latest resources and updates for families.