Parenting in a pandemic: A child psychologist's 5 top tips

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I am a researcher and clinical psychologist specializing in childhood disruptive behavior problems and when I first heard that schools in some parts of the country were closing in response to the COVID-19

pandemic, my first thought was "oh man, what about the parents?".

As part of my clinical research, I've spent the last six years in weekly sessions with families, helping parents develop strategies to more effectively manage their kid's defiance and aggression. Parenting is hard. But parenting in a pandemic? Well, that's next level.

This is because widespread closures of school and business mean that children will be spending more time at home with their parents, who are now not only responsible for parenting but also teaching. And all this is happening without reductions in parents' own workload and with considerably fewer opportunities and outlets for self-care. Ultimately, the combination of increased parenting time and responsibilities and less self-care almost guarantees that parents will experience huge blows to their frustration tolerance alongside heightened feelings of stress and anxiety.

Parents experiencing these kinds of emotions are likely to become less patient, more punitive, or more withdrawn. Essentially, parenting is going to become less effective. And what we know from the science is that ineffective parenting can play a big role in creating and exacerbating behavior problems in kids.

So that's the bad news. There is good news, though. There are practical strategies that parents can use to stop their household descending into a Lord of the Flies-esque scenario where the kids are in charge and it's your head on the stick.

But I'm going to level with you: the strategies that I'm suggesting are simple to write about but can be a lot harder to implement in Real Life. This is a Super Parenting approach that takes time and effort but is worth it because it works.

1. Do Special Play every day

Special Play is a particular kind of play with your child. Special Play should be:

- Child-led. This means following your child's lead in the play: they're in charge! You can follow your child's lead by avoiding asking lots of questions, making suggestions, or giving directions (e.g., "why don't we color her hair in rainbow?"). Instead, you can reflect your child's speech, describe their play aloud (e.g., "you've collected all the blue blocks"), and give them compliments on their ideas and behavior (e.g., "you've built an amazing rocket!").
- One-on-one. This means no distractions (e.g., phone, news), no siblings, and only one parent at a time (if this applies to your household).
- Creative. This means doing activities that don't have rules like coloring, Lego, and kitchen or train sets.

You can learn more about doing Special Play on our website. Special Play doesn't have to be long—five minutes with young kids is enough to have an impact—but it does to happen regularly. Daily, if you can manage it.

Daily Special Play will do a couple of important things. It will help maintain your parent-child relationship at a time when it's harder than usual to like your kid because they're more disruptive and you're less patient. It's five minutes everyday without disobedience and back-chat, filled instead with all of their good qualities. Daily Special Play can also help with some of that non-compliance because your kid gets reminded of all the great things about you, and when we like someone, we're more likely to respect their expectations. The other thing daily Special Play does is help regulate big feelings. This pandemic is scary. For kids, daily

Special Play provides unfettered access to the person most helpful for sorting out their big feelings: you. For parents, it's five minutes without worry and uncertainty, filled instead with fun and laughter.

2. Use lots of praise

Praise can be very powerful for changing behavior. When a behavior is followed by a good outcome like praise, that behavior tends to become more frequent. There are a few things that can increase the likelihood that praise will lead to change:

- Make your praises specific. Specific praise tells your child exactly what you liked about their behavior. For example, "you did so well playing by yourself while daddy finished his work call" lets your kid know that the specific behavior you liked was 'playing by yourself." A "good job" might feel nice, but it doesn't increase specific behaviors.
- Praise the positive opposites of the undesirable behaviors. When parents 'catch' their kid doing something, it's usually the not-so-nice behaviors. Praising the positive opposite flips this around by 'catching' the good stuff. Do you hate it when your kids fight with each other? Ask yourself what is the 'opposite' of this behavior. Is it using kind words with one another? Is it taking turns? Is it using words instead of fists? Whatever that behavior is, whenever it happens, catch it and praise it. For example, "I just heard the best sharing happening in here" gives your kids positive attention for the behavior you want to see more often: sharing.
- Make your praise emotional. Kids tend to get our emotions when they have let us down, especially at a time like this when patience is low. But at the heart of the parent-child attachment relationship is emotional connection and this makes emotional exchanges meaningful and motivating for kids. To reduce the

chances that they seek out emotional exchanges with you using undesirable behaviors, make sure your kid is getting your emotion when the good stuff happens. This can mean pairing your praise with smiles, affection, and changes in your tone and face.

We have more information about specific praise on our website, too.

3. Use rewards

Rewards are another 'good outcome' that can increase specific behaviors. Parents can and should use rewards liberally, but you make sure that the reward is linked to specific behaviors. This is the difference between rewarding a child for "being good today" and rewarding a child for "ticking off all three worksheets" or "doing the washing up" or "going the whole morning without swearing at your sister." Like non-specific praise, getting a reward for "being good" might feel nice but it doesn't increase specific behaviors.

At a time like this, you might consider introducing a 'token economy system." This system involves giving your child a tangible token (e.g., a sticker, a plastic coin) every time they do a pre-specified goal behavior (e.g., listening the first time, using manners). After collecting enough tokens, your kid can 'trade' them for something from their personalized reward list. This could be anything from an ice-block, to screen time, to choosing the movie after dinner. These are some things that make token economies more powerful:

- Make it personalized. This means using rewards that your kid actually likes and is all about motivation. If your kids hate ice-blocks, having an ice-block on their reward list isn't going to motivate them.
- Each sibling should have their own reward list. If there are

siblings in the house, they need different reward lists because kids have different interests.

- Rewards should cost different amounts. The reward list should be like a menu that changes with the seasons and includes dishes that differ in size and price. A good rule of thumb is that small, medium, and big rewards are those that can be given daily (e.g., small snack), weekly (e.g., ordering take away), and fortnightly or monthly (e.g., setting up a treasure hunt). Including costlier rewards helps spread out expensive or time-consuming things/activities and helps teach kids delayed gratification.
- Have a family meeting. Schedule a family meeting to discuss the new system. Set it up with your kids: they can help choose the reward, draw up the reward list, and choose a 'bank' for their tokens. Most importantly, clearly outline the specific behaviors that earn tokens. Act out the system using a stuffed toy to help with younger kids' understanding of the process. Make it fun!

4. Use consequences

In the same way that behaviors followed by a good outcome increase in frequency, behaviors followed by an aversive outcome decrease in frequency. This is why using consequences following undesirable behaviors is really useful: consequences can reduce misbehavior. There are a few things that make consequences more likely to be effective.

- Consequences need to be consistent. When a particular behavior is followed by an aversive outcome every time it happens, kids learn that the behavior is never going to get them what they want. But if a behavior is followed by an aversive outcome only sometimes, then kids can start to think "I might get away with it this time." This kind of thinking means that undesirable behaviors will keep happening.
- Consequences need to be fair. Consequences can vary—from

time-out to privilege removal to ignoring by the parent. The important thing is that the consequence is fair: time-outs shouldn't take place in dark rooms, privileges shouldn't be removed for weeks, ignoring shouldn't last all day. Aim to use consequences sparingly: your ratio of positive to negative interactions should fall heavily on the positive side. Avoid corporal punishment, that is, punishment that involves causing physical pain. Science shows that corporal punishment worsens behavior problems over time. Our website has more information about time-out.

- Some consequences warrant a second chance. For some undesirable behaviors like non-compliance with a parent request, it may be warranted to use a reminder or warning before implementing the consequence (e.g., "If you don't …, then …"). This is because something like non-compliance might happen because your child didn't hear you or got distracted by something. Other behaviors like hitting or spitting probably deserve an automatic consequence. This is because these kinds of behaviors are never okay under any circumstances.
- Implement consequences neutrally. When we implement consequences, it's usually for a behavior that upsets us and we tend to show these emotions to kids. But it's important to remember that it's the consequence that changes the behavior, not your delivery of it. Consequences don't need emotion to be effective and, in some circumstances, a highly emotional consequence can worsen the behavior because kids tend to become more emotional as parents get emotional. Implementing consequences like a robot means that you are showing your kids how to be calm when stressed and seeing this can help them calm down.
- Debrief the behavior after the consequence. Debriefing—having a conversation with your kid about why a particular behavior wasn't appropriate and the effects it had on other people—is

important for kids' learning. But try and get the timing right. Good learning doesn't happen when emotions are high. So do your debrief once everybody (including you) has calmed down.

- Have a family meeting. In the same way that explaining the reward system can be helpful for motivating kids, it can be helpful to have a family meeting to discuss the discipline system. Set kids up for success: kids should know what parents expect of them and what the consequences are when they don't meet those expectations.

The most important thing to remember about using consequences is that kids thrive when there are consequences. Having fair, firm boundaries that are consistently enforced creates a structured environment in which kids can feel safe. This is all the more necessary in our current uncertain, unstructured world. Knowing that your parent will reliably keep you safe is a fundamental pillar of a healthy parent-child relationship.

5. Take care of yourself

This feels trite to write because – #pandemic—but the first step in taking good care of kids is taking good care of yourself. Self-care is fundamental to effective parenting. Self-care will differ from person to person, but regardless of how you do it, make sure you schedule it in. Protect it. Prioritise it. This is especially true if your usual way of doing self-care has been affected by closures because you're probably in a self-care deficit. Figure out something else that fills up your cup because there's only so much you can pour out for others when your cup is empty.

This is a lot of advice and hopefully some of it is useful. I call this kind of parenting "Super Parenting' because it's hard: it takes time and effort to establish and maintain these ways of responding. But Super Parenting is only the method, it's not the goal. The goal is Good Enough Parenting.

There's no such thing as perfect parenting and you're going to stuff it up all the time because you're human. But kids are resilient and forgiving. Your best is good enough. Even if your 'best' isn't as good as before the pandemic hit, it's still enough.

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