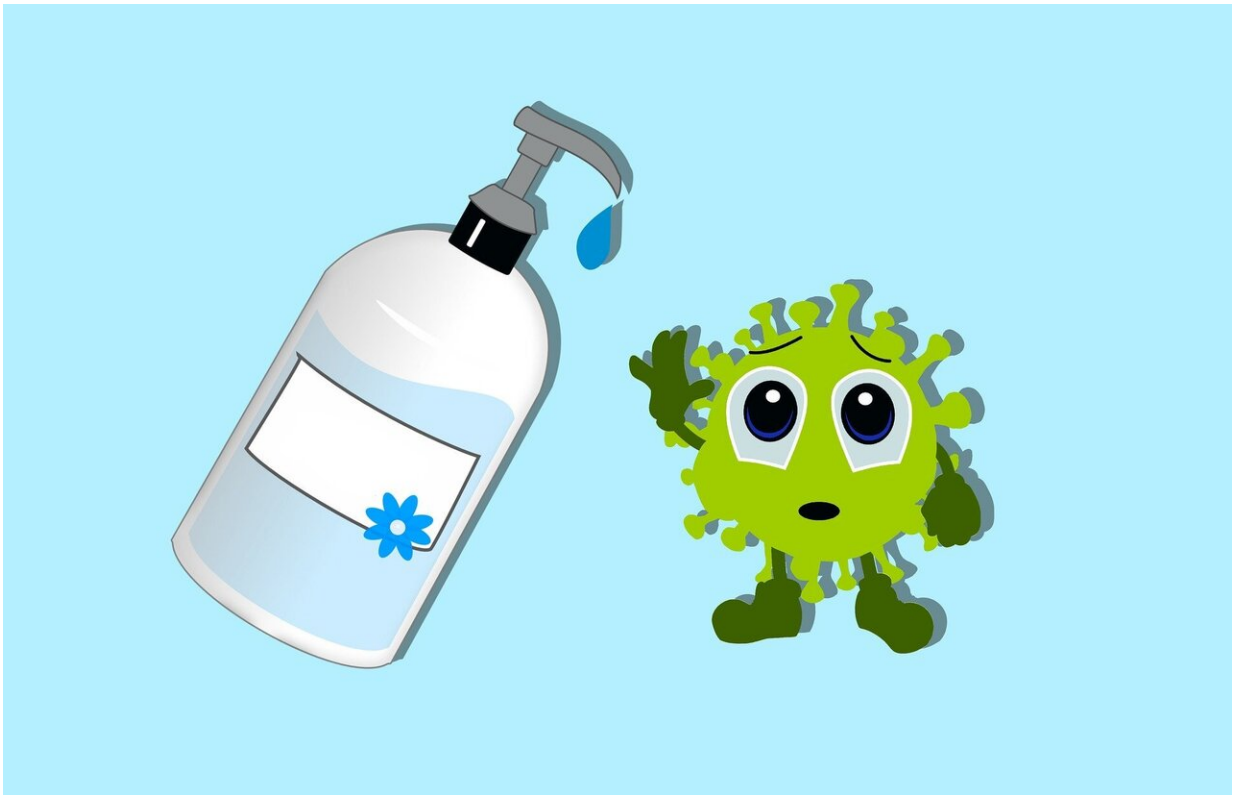


Five ways parents and children can win in lockdown

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With the novelty of home schooling wearing thin and the reality of not seeing schoolmates hitting home, children across the country might be feeling more unsettled than enthusiastic. Parents are also under pressure, as the work emails, household chores and lesson plans mount up, taking

the art of multi-tasking to a whole new level.

That's why it's essential to have a coping strategy and Dr. Dan O'Hare, an educational psychologist at the University of Bristol, has identified five key points to keep in mind.

Be stress-savvy

It's not just parents but also children who are likely to be feeling stressed in these tough times. Being able to spot the signs and symptoms is half the battle.

"Firstly, adults need to be aware of their own stress responses and find ways to keep calm, whether through music, breathing exercises or other relaxation techniques. This will put you in a stronger place to recognize stress in children and find ways to support them," said Dr. O'Hare, a lecturer in the School for Policy Studies and joint Chair-elect of the British Psychological Society's Division of Educational and Child Psychology.

"Signs of stress and anxiety are different for every child. It may manifest itself physically with headaches, loss of appetite, or wetting the bed. Some children may talk about their worries, while others might withdraw into themselves or appear more willful. All of this is completely normal."

Although some children, particularly those who are older, may be able to self-manage their stress, this is harder for younger ones.

"Try to help them understand and label their emotions, so they can start to recognize and feel more comfortable with such feelings. It's also really important to do things to reduce their stress levels. Exercise, art, drama, music, and other artistic activities are all good options, so be as creative and varied as possible," Dr. O'Hare added.

Communication is key

Children turn to their parents for information and reassurance, especially when facing uncertainty, which makes having regular conversations vital.

"It really is good to talk, even if you don't have answers to all their questions. It's important to explain that we just don't know at the moment and validate their emotions by saying you feel a bit scared too. Remember, they will probably have heard things from other sources, which may need correcting or putting into context," Dr. O'Hare said.

Parents often worry about how much is safe to say and whether children should watch the news.

"Be truthful but also mindful of your child's age. Providing factual information but adjusting the amount of detail to suit their age will help strike the right balance. For instance, you might say: 'we don't yet have a vaccination for Coronavirus, but doctors are working very hard on it,' or 'a lot of people might get sick, but normally it is like a cold or flu and they recover.'" Younger children might understand a cartoon or picture better," Dr. O'Hare said.

"Rather than having rolling news on TV, it's better that adults watch news programs and then filter this information, taking into account their child's age and level of understanding. Welcome their questions as an opportunity for open discussion and chance to alleviate their fears."

Besides putting children at ease, communication can help keep them safe and healthy.

"Remember to keep sharing practical advice. For instance, regularly washing their hands for 20 seconds and following the 'catch it, bin it, kill it' code for coughs and sneezes. Find imaginative ways to keep

reiterating it and maintain their motivation to keep going, such as choosing a special song to sing," Dr. O'Hare added.

Plan together

Setting a routine and structure offers many benefits, especially if your child is involved.

"Having a plan and a predictable routine for the day can be very reassuring, as children, like adults, appreciate knowing what is going to happen. Providing this source of security is particularly important during uncertain and unsettling circumstances," Dr. O'Hare said.

"Actively including them in this process means they're more likely to embrace it. The routine could be displayed using a timeline or possibly pictures and other visuals. Encourage children to develop independence by referring to their own plan themselves."

Being organized and establishing boundaries can also reap rewards.

"It's not just about tidiness. Keeping schoolwork in one place, so it doesn't spread out over the house, will help to maintain a boundary between work and home. If this isn't possible, there might be other ways to mark the end of working, for instance putting it the work away and enjoying an 'end of the day shared dance,'" Dr. O'Hare said.

"Don't worry about following the plan to the letter, or even abandoning it altogether if it's causing more stress, friction or conflict. It's fine to be more free-flowing and guided by the activities that children most want to do, particularly in the early stages. Whatever plan you have needs to be sustainable and enjoyable."

Have fun together

If you're trying to replicate a full school timetable, go a little easier on yourself and your children.

"This simply isn't realistic or even desirable. Allowing yourself and your children to accept this can be a big weight lifted. It's absolutely fine not to be doing schoolwork for six hours a day and to avoid putting too much pressure on academic work," Dr. O'Hare said.

Building relationships, enjoying shared activities and reassuring children are all equally important parts of the equation.

"Psychological wellbeing is paramount and that might mean shifting the focus away from formal learning to expressing feelings and creative activities, like arts and crafts. Reducing your child's exposure to peril, for instance TV programs or stories featuring destruction and death, is another key consideration," Dr. O'Hare explained.

"In practice that might mean watching a comedy show or finding light-hearted stories to help reduce and counteract any feelings of stress and anxiety. Despite the difficult situation, children still need to have fun and laugh. Parents should encourage this and join in."

Think out of the box

Technology presents risks but also lots of opportunities to help children thrive through this challenging period.

"Parents can help children to manage and limit how long they're spending on screens each day. Try to reach a sensible agreement while also recognizing and exploring the great advantages. For instance, by

establishing a group Skype or WhatsApp call children can still stay in touch and talk with their friends, which will make a big difference to their quality of life and help restore a sense of normality. Most children are used to seeing their friends throughout the week, so this is really important," Dr. O'Hare said.

Screen usage also doesn't automatically make you a couch potato.

"It may not always be an option to play outside. Fortunately, there are some fantastic online exercise classes for [children](#) and adults alike. For instance, PE With Joe on YouTube has helped embed physical activity into the daily routine in a fun, accessible way. Staying in touch with other parents through email, social media and other platforms is another way to stay abreast of what support is out there," Dr. O'Hare added.

Provided by University of Bristol

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