

Fears about RSV, flu and winter viruses can cause parental stress—4 expert tips to balance wellness and health risks

January 4 2023, by Emily E. Cameron, et al.



Parents need practical strategies to balance the health risks and stressors of kids getting sick as we trudge through the virulent flu, RSV and COVID-19 winter season. Credit: (Pexels)

[Pediatric emergency departments and clinics have been overcrowded](#) with the dramatic [increase in child respiratory viruses](#), leaving many families anxious about caring for sick kids.

Making decisions about what to do—or not do—can be exhausting, especially coming out of nearly three years of pandemic fears, [social isolation](#) and burnout. Parents need practical strategies to balance the [health risks](#) and stressors of kids getting sick as we trudge through the virulent flu, RSV and COVID-19 winter season.

As researchers of [family well-being interventions](#), we provide four evidence-based stress-management strategies grounded in [dialectical behaviour therapy](#) skills (DBT).

In tough situations, DBT encourages a mindset that balances accepting reality as it currently is (even if this is very much a reality we never wanted!) while identifying actionable steps to change our ability to cope, like bringing in [social support](#) and understanding our emotional reactions in compassionate ways.

To bring you the most relevant information, we collaborated with pediatric emergency physicians to integrate their frontline expertise.

Try these tips to build confidence that you're doing exactly what is needed for your kids this year.

(1) What are my most important values?

For many families, kids' activities are on the schedule again: fun with friends, time with relatives, celebrations. But having a cavalier attitude about including [sick children](#) at events—like in pre-pandemic times—might have costs down the road.

Consider your own values and identify the activities that are the most important, and consider what precautions you're willing to take to keep your [family](#) and community healthy. Maybe it makes sense to attend a small house party with daycare friends, but not a larger gathering at the

local arcade?

If limiting sick days matters to you, catching up on [COVID-19 boosters or flu shots](#) could save you weeks of [sick kids](#) at home. Now is also a great time to teach kids of any age about the basics of hand-washing, tissue use and the "[batman cough](#)."

Articles on the [new etiquette of coughs](#) highlight the [value of masks](#) for residual symptoms, and rebuilding trust with our communities.

Finally, keeping kids home when sick [really matters](#). It will also help you avoid the side-eye in public.

(2) How will I manage if they get sick?

If you have young kids at home, odds are they've already been sick and they'll get sick again. [Coping ahead](#)—anticipating and rehearsing responses to difficult situations—can reduce anxiety now and help you respond effectively in the future.

With the waves of child sickness, it's common to find yourself with depleted resources, physically and emotionally. In anticipation of the next onset of illness, a little preparation can go a long way to reduce family stress and promote recovery. Consider replenishing essentials, reviewing the plan for seeking health care, planning for childcare difficulties and managing tough emotions.

(3) My child is sick. How worried should I be?

Managing a sick child is tough when there is little to be done but wait and watch. DBT helps you ask "what is the problem to be solved?" This might be as "simple" as tolerating family physical and emotional

discomfort with compassion and care.

Staying present and focusing on [improving the moment](#) can help reduce distress when nothing else can be done.

Alternatively, more change-based action is needed. When faced with an ill child, consider looking from every angle of the situation. Remember there is no absolute truth and we can't predict the future. Be open to alternative options, check your assumptions and avoid using extreme language ("always" and "never").

It's key to critically assess the validity of information sources and prioritize those that are evidence-based, including [governmental or health board websites](#). Diving down the rabbit hole of googling symptoms will typically increase stress without offering meaningful benefits.

Fortunately, the [odds of serious illness or death are small](#) in Canada for most children. Ask a [health-care](#) provider if you're concerned your child may be at [greater risk](#) of serious illness (for example, if they were premature, have underlying heart or lung conditions, neuromuscular disorders, immune problems or take medication that suppresses the immune system).

(4) Back to basics

You may already be well versed in the importance of "basics" when it comes to serving your emotions. There is a reason why "hangry" is such a common concept! Small steps can go a long way to helping the household stay healthy, recover quickly and keep family moods up.

As a family, try to [prioritize plenty of sleep, nutritious foods and getting outside once a day](#). And while this is true for the whole family, parents

should also keep in mind the airplane rule: we must [put our own masks on before we help those around us](#).

Lastly, [social connection](#) offers a buffer to stress. Find ways to be creative with scheduling quality social connections consistent with your comfort level such as connecting with friends over FaceTime or only meeting outdoors.

During really tough moments, acknowledge the difficulty of the situation and remind yourself that you're doing your best in a really challenging time.

It's normal to be on edge and exhausted managing so much, particularly after three years of pandemic disruptions to family life. We hope these tips may provide even a small amount of relief this winter.

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