

Toolkit for Emotional Care During Social Distancing: Practical Strategies for Separated Parents and their Children

Lyn R. Greenberg, PhD, ABPP

Resources compiled by Madeline Miller, MA student and Sarah Wilkins, PhD student

AFCC and other professionals have published excellent guidance for coparenting during the coronavirus crisis – specifically advising compliance with the parenting plan, transparency, flexibility, modeling good health care practices, generosity toward one’s coparent and creativity in supporting the other parent-child relationship¹. For many families, practical tools and problem solving may be essential – not just for healthy coparenting, but for supporting children through a crisis and promoting healthy adjustment.

Remember that you still have resources. Everyone feels destabilized by the current situation, but professionals are mobilizing to meet it. If you have been working with a parenting coordinator, mediator, or therapist, that person may already be set up to continue working with you by telephone or remote video conferencing. Stressors associated with current anxieties, school closures and social distancing requirements will impact every household. You may find your co-parent to be unusually cooperative, as I’ve seen occur with parents whose children suddenly suffer a crisis or serious illness. Or you may need some assistance establishing common routines (which your children will need) or establishing communication channels that you haven’t needed before. For example, many coparents have established the habit of having each parent communicate independently with their child’s teacher, to decrease the need for direct interaction with the other parent. With schools closed, that option may not be available for a while. Nevertheless, many professionals can offer practical tools for exchanging educational information without conflict. Other strategies and community resources are described below and at the end of this article.

Assemble a toolkit for managing stress and frustration. The stresses associated with the COVID-19 crisis are impacting everyone. Many stressors are predictable and not entirely avoidable, but you can plan for them. Some simple preparations may help you manage these stressors and defuse frustrations before they become overwhelming. Just as you have first aid supplies at home for cuts and bruises, you can assemble a toolkit for managing stress. Engage

¹ Please see [Seven Guidelines for Parents who are Divorced/Separated and Sharing Custody of Children During the COVID19 Pandemic](#)

your child in putting this toolkit together, as it will provide a good opportunity to discuss the fact that this situation is difficult for everyone and to share your predictions as to what the “tough spots” may be. Headphones for each member of the family are extremely important, as these make many other options possible. (They do not need to be expensive.) Add some specific tools for de-stressing. There are a number of free or low-cost stress management and relaxation programs available online. Some are geared for adolescents and children. (A list is provided at the end of this article.) Consider adding a couple of home-made “coupons” that your child can “trade in” for a break from homework, some extra screen time to play a game online with a friend, etc. Add a list of your resources and their contact information – medical providers, mediators, therapists, even a friend to whom you can vent (with the door closed and both you and your child wearing headphones). Other items for your toolkit may be more individualized – does someone use a stress ball? Put it in. Add a couple of bottles of Bubbles – blowing the biggest bubble you can promotes the kind of deep breathing that physiologically reduces stress. If you are involved with a professional, that person may be able to help you identify items for your toolkit and discuss it with your child over remote video.

Establish a routine and set up your space for it. Children need structure. Schools establish routines so that there is some predictability to the day and children know what’s expected. That doesn’t mean that you can’t break the routine occasionally or plan a different activity, but establishing a predictable structure and expectations, at least for the part of the day that would normally be consumed by school, can be helpful to children who are already dealing with the destabilization caused by the schools closing and the interruption of activities and social relationships. If your school district is streaming classes, that schedule may determine when children need to be at their computers – unfortunately, many school districts aren’t yet well set up for online learning, so the scheduling may be left to parents. Set up an area of your home where your child will be doing schoolwork and make sure that all of the required materials are there. Schedule some breaks, perhaps even including some opportunities to connect with friends via video chat. Make it a point to empathize with the frustration, loss and loneliness your child may be feeling. It’s also a good idea to consult with your coparent about the schedule, or at least share what you are doing. While the routines between separated households are rarely identical and don’t need to be, some general consistency may be helpful to both of you and to your children. If you’ve had difficult relationship with your coparent before, it’s easy to assume that cooperation won’t be forthcoming. But both of you are dealing with a large hole in your child’s schedule and relationships, and with the stress of what is likely to be a long emergency. If you don’t think such a conversation will work well one-on-one, consult a professional who can do remote videoconferencing.

Be Creative with Educational planning. You probably already know what kind of learning your child finds interesting or boring. Few teachers of young children rely solely on lecture and worksheets – those who do aren't particularly popular with children. But as schools struggle to ramp up online learning, adding interesting variation to their methods may not be a high priority. Fortunately, many free and low-cost resources are being made available by both private and nonprofit entities, ranging from children's activities in local newspapers to educational films and interactive experiences. A few of the available sources are listed at the end of this article. Group chat and videoconferencing programs, some of which are free or low cost, can be used to set up group experiences for learning. For example, some programs will allow you to stream a film or complete an activity within a group video chat, or have several children watch the same film and then come together to talk about it. Your children are missing their friends and most parents are struggling with the same issues you are – reaching out to them can save strain on all of you, particularly if you take turns finding resources and having discussions with your kids. This is another area in which outreach to your coparent may be helpful. Are you better at language arts? Is your coparent better at math? Encourage your child to reach out to the other parent for help with schoolwork that the other parent can be helpful with. As the AFCC and AAML have noted, generosity at this difficult time is something that judges will look for later – better yet, you may begin to establish a foundation of trust that will allow you to narrow the issues that require a legal process.

Make time for exercise every day. Stay-at-home orders have reduced the available options for exercise, although going for a run or bike ride on your own is still possible. The opportunities available for your child are even more limited. If you own any kind of electronic game system, many programs are available that require movement. Exercise programs for adults are relatively easy to find; children may respond better to something in a game format and are often particularly fond of active games in which they can outperform adults. If you have any kind of exercise apparatus at home, find out if it can safely be used by children. If not, ask your child to help you find an active game or two, online or through your cable or game system, that they could enjoy (or tolerate) playing with you once a day. Older siblings can also be helpful at finding something that will work. It's best to make such exercise a regular part of your day, as that aids stress reduction, teaches healthy habits, and avoids the medical and psychological side effects of reduced activity. A few sources are listed at the end of this article. You may need to try a few to find one you like, engaging your child in the process. It's helpful to set the expectation that exercise is a necessary part of the day but your child can have a role in choosing the program or kind of exercise.

Find a way to help. The lessons children learn during this difficult time aren't limited to their schoolwork. They will see how well their parents are able to cooperate, whether parents appreciate their social relationships enough to help them share time with friends online, and

what their parents model for them in terms of self care, managing stress, and self-control. They will also learn whatever you show them about caring for other people. They can't control the spread of the virus or stay-at-home orders but doing something for others can make a valuable contribution and help them to feel more empowered and effective. If there is a safe opportunity for volunteering in your community, great. But helping others does not require violating social distancing rules. Perhaps an organization that you are already part of, such as a community or religious group, is already establishing food delivery services for those who cannot leave their homes. Community messaging programs like NextDoor or city message boards may provide opportunities. Is there an older family member or neighbor who your child knows? Engage your child in calling that person to see how they are doing, offer to add their shopping list to yours, or even to connect with them online and send pictures or have a brief chat. Perhaps a group they are already part of, like a scouting troop or team that is now inactive, can organize a fundraising drive or other activity. Many are already doing so. Involving children in something larger than themselves may both help the community and help both of you feel better.

Ask for help if you need it. Although this situation can feel like each person is alone, we are all having a common experience. It isn't easy on anyone and no one will handle it perfectly. Caring for yourself emotionally is easiest with a little planning, but if you are feeling overwhelmed, reach out to someone. It may be the best gift you can give your child.

Free and Low-Cost Resources

Stress Management

[18 Tips on How to Cope with Children During Quarantine](#)

[Free Mindfulness Classes for Kids](#)

[Go Noodle Movement and Mindfulness Videos](#)

[Free Guided Relaxation for Kids](#)

[Mindfulness-based stress reduction \(adults\)](#)

Educational and Learning Resources

[Two Player online games](#)

[PBS Kids Online Games](#)

[Teachers' Favorite Free Learning Websites for Kids](#)

[Sesame Street Online](#)

[Scholastic \(games and activities divided by grade level\)](#)

[Cool Math \(math games for kids 13+\)](#)

[Cool Math \(math games for kids 13 and under\)](#)

[Disney Jr. Educational Games](#)

[Learning Games for Kids](#)

[Free Teachables worksheets and activities \(pre-k – 8\)](#)

Free Activities/Fun Ideas during Quarantine

[50+ Easy Indoor Activities for Kids](#)

[NPR List of Free Activities/resources during COVID-19](#)

[50+ Activities for Kids](#)

[Virtual Storytime](#)

[125 Ideas to Keep Kids Entertained During the Coronavirus Crisis](#)

Exercise Resources

Adults

[Core Power On-Demand free classes \(30-minute and 60-minute classes\)](#)

[Yoga for Uncertain Times](#)

[OrangeTheory Fitness Uploading Free Videos Every Day to YouTube](#)

[25+ Fitness Studios and Gyms Offering Live-Stream Workouts During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#)

Children and Families

[YMCA Free Workouts and Resources for Kids](#)

[Online Physical Education for Kids](#)

[Yoga for Kids Ages 3-5](#)

[ZUMBA for Kids \(additional link\)](#)

[Family Fun Cardio Workout](#)

General COVID-19 Resources

[CDC General Website for COVID-19](#)

[Great Resources about COVID-19 and Ways to Keep You and Your Family Healthy and Active](#)

[National Association of School Psychologists on Talking to Your Children about COVID-19](#)

[American Psychological Association \(APA\) Advice for Newly Remote Workers](#)

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network Resources re COVID 19](#)

[CDC on Handwashing](#)

[NPR Comic on COVID-19 for Kids](#)

[Action for healthy kids: Resources for Schools/families during COVID-19](#)