

PARENTING DURING CORONAVIRUS: HELP YOUR FAMILY STICK TOGETHER AND WORK THROUGH TOUGH EMOTIONS

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When COVID-19 (coronavirus) first ramped up, two weeks at home with my husband and kids sounded exciting, cozy — a great way to reconnect. But now that the timeline is extending, it just seems like an overwhelming challenge. One question seems to be at the top of our minds for adults and kids: How are we going to make it?

As a mom and licensed counselor, I get it. That first weekend, my family came through the door weighed down with schoolwork and work-from-home tools; we were ready to put on our game faces and get busy. But one honest look into each other's eyes told the real story: The truly heavy loads in our backpacks and briefcases were questions, worries, and unfamiliar feelings.

Before we could set goals, routines, and fun activities for the weeks ahead, we needed to unpack the burdens of our hearts. We needed to remind each other that we are going to make it. My family is, and so is yours.

The main message every family member needs to hear right now is simple: You're not alone. We'll get through this together and we can come out the other side even stronger than when we went in.

Give the following suggestions some thought as you parent during coronavirus, navigate uncharted territory, and nurture peaceful, unified hearts.

Activity: Stick Together

Remind each other of your family bond and reinforce God's truth: "One person could be overpowered. But two people can stand up for themselves. And a rope made out of three cords isn't easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12, NIRV).

1. Have everyone race out to the yard and choose a small tree stick or twig. (No yard? Bamboo chopsticks, wooden popsicle sticks, or blunt-tipped shish kabob skewers will work!)
2. Come back in and sit around the table or in a circle on the floor. Ask each person to break their stick into as many pieces as they want, then set the pieces in the middle of the circle. (Help your smallest kiddos so that splinters don't spoil the fun.)
3. Have Mom or Dad bundle all the pieces and tie them together with string, yarn, ribbon, craft pipe cleaner — whatever you have on hand.
4. Starting with the youngest, let each family member try to break the bundle into smaller pieces.

It's nearly impossible, right? The analogy is obvious: Alone, you can easily break. Together, you're stronger. Stick together.

Decide as a family where to display the stick bundle so everyone can remember your connection to each other and the Lord. Kids (and adults!) benefit from tangible reminders of abstract ideas, especially in times of stress and anxiety. You might even consider repeating the activity so every person in your household has a stick bundle reminder.

Guide Your Kids' Emotions

As a counselor, I can say with absolute certainty that children experience a wide range of emotions that require caring, careful attention — and that's on a "normal" day. Add in media hype and misinformation, long-term separation from friends, possible illness, fear about Mom or Dad's job and parents could be in for rough ride.

What can you do as a parent during coronavirus? Yes, talk to your kids about the coronavirus calmly and with age-appropriate facts. More importantly, listen.

Ask them what they're experiencing, what they've heard, what they're feeling inside, and try to see it from their perspective — especially young kids. Young kids are gonna really feed off your own emotions.

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Some children, whether 4 or 14, worry that a question is "dumb" or that Mom or Dad will think less of them or make fun of them for asking. Make sure your children understand that they can talk to you about anything. Keep an open-door policy and prioritize their questions and feelings. If you can't talk right away, schedule a time with them later that day — and make sure you keep the appointment! This is key as you try to parent during coronavirus.

Remember, too, that kids need help to interpret and handle their feelings; it's a learned skill. Looking for some pointers?

- Listen to our broadcast [Helping Children Understand How They Feel](#) with Josh and Christi Straub.
- [What Am I Feeling?](#) It includes a pull-out feelings chart for the wall.
- Take a look at the free online booklet written by our Counseling team: "[Parenting in the Midst of Tragedy](#)."
- Borrow skills from Navy SEALs:
 - 1) Just breathe.
 - 2) Use mental rehearsal.
 - 3) Chunk the fear.
 - 4) Use positive self-talk (which, for Christians, includes prayer).
- Keep in mind that faith can grow in hard places — even for kids.

Stay Connected With Your Spouse

My husband and I realized that an open-door policy wasn't just good for the kids; we needed it for us, too.

Check in with your spouse every day. Maybe it's first thing in the morning before you log in to work and set up the kids for learning. Or maybe it's at the end of the day. Maybe it's during baby's nap. It might be a longer discussion about finances, or it might be a quick, kind word and caress as you pass in the kitchen. Just make the time to connect.

Give each other space and grace to be honest about emotions and questions. Share insights from your personal devotional time. Pray for each other individually and together. See this season as an opportunity to grow closer to your spouse.

Guide Your Own Emotions

Let's be realistic. How can we help our kids control their emotions and reactions if we're not paying attention to ours?

It's like the airline attendants direct us: If oxygen masks become necessary during a flight, put on your own before helping others. Why? Without oxygen, we would quickly lose consciousness. So if we don't make our own mask the priority, we're no good to anyone else.

Mom and Dad, you're in a unique position: You're trying your best to protect and shepherd your children while battling your own fear and anxiety. It's important that you identify and work through your emotions in a healthy way so you'll be prepared to walk with your children through their feelings.

Does that mean you have to successfully stare down every fear before you can encourage your kids? Not at all. Instead, it means you turn to God in humility and ask for His wisdom. It means you acknowledge your frailty, your need, your dependence on and trust in God, and your interdependence with family and friends.

You don't have to parent during coronavirus alone. Name one or two friends you can reach out to. My husband benefited from calling a male friend for accountability and support as he leads our family during this time. And that convinced me to make a go-to list of fellow moms who I call and text for shared advice, empathy, and prayer.

Remember Who is in Control

In wildly changing days on this earth, in upheavals of human emotion, we can find comfort and peace in the everlasting love of our unchanging God. None of the news headlines catch Him by surprise. He's just waiting for us to call on Him.

Have mercy on me, God. Have mercy on me. I go to you for safety. I will find safety in the shadow of your wings. There I will stay until the danger is gone" (Psalm 57:1 (NIRV)).

Parenting during coronavirus can be challenging. As you and your children keep your focus on Christ and find ways to support and encourage each other, you are going to make it.

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