

SURVIVING COVID-19

ENGAGING YOUR KIDS
WITHOUT GOING CRAZY

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SCHOOL IS OUT INDEFINITELY...

WHAT WE CAN DO

School is out very early... perhaps for a long time. If it seems as daunting to you and you are already looking forward to going back to work, you have come to the right place.

It takes some planning, but in this article, I outline key foundations to build on so you can not only survive this pandemic, but thrive. You may even be able to enjoy this time with your kids together!

Although we are not all trained teachers, there are also things we can do to support our kids' ongoing development, learning, and easy transition back to school.

I focus on building the structure of your day here, but I will be adding an article on specific activities you can do with your kids during this time.

STRUCTURE!

Unfortunately, kids can become overwhelmed if they have too much downtime and no structure.

Behaviours can explode and bad habits can become ingrained when structure disappears.

Structure is critical for many other reasons, including:

- Maintaining expectations
- Promoting positive behaviours
- Reducing stress
- Reducing boredom (and, as a result, annoying behaviours)
- Maintaining and promoting academics
- Maintaining and developing good habits
- Developing executive skills such as self-regulation
- Supporting self-confidence
- Building experiences of success
- Promoting cooperation
- Making the transition back to school easier
- Keeping everyone sane



SCHEDULING IS IMPORTANT

Just like in their normal school day, kids benefit from knowing how their day is structured. No matter what you do, planning and creating a visual schedule is essential. Have a calendar so kids know what to expect. Try to mirror certain things like snack and breaks (ideally an outdoor recess)!

When creating your schedule, include a daily success plan where your child has up to three things to focus on that can be easily achieved. Kids deserve to have fun too, so be sure to include fun activities in your schedule.

Involve your child in creating schedules. Kids have valuable input and will be motivated to follow the plan if they have say in it! Giving them opportunities to learn how to fill their time (sans screens) is also critical for self-regulation. Have a list or basket filled with activities your kids enjoy and can access during free time.

STICK TO ROUTINES

Kids have difficulty managing changes in routine. The best thing to do is to keep them on their normal routine - they are an important way to maintain structure. Keep the same routines you have established through the year and take the opportunity to build ones you have yet to establish! If they take meds, continue taking them. If they have a behaviour plan, stick with it.

The following are examples of key routines you will want to keep:



Morning routine

Researchers have told us time and time again that the brain functions best with consistent wake times. So, make sure your kids are getting up at the same time everyday. Establish a consistent morning routine once they are up. Leave the TV and electronics off - once they are on, it is harder to transition them to other things they need to do...

Bedtime routine

Similarly, it is helpful for your child to go to bed at the same time each night. Establish a consistent bedtime routine, such as having a light snack, dimming the lights, engaging in a quiet activity such as reading a book.

(FYI: baths are not great to do right before bed because they can actually be alerting, which is the opposite of what we want to happen!)

Dinner routine

Use this time to establish a consistent dinner routine if don't already. Dinner is an excellent time to strengthen relationships and create a positive social experience for all.



Diet

Healthy eating is still important because it affects self- and mood-regulation. Establish regular snack breaks and have your kids prepare them!

PS Researchers have shown that families who eat together eat healthier so you can hit both points in one go!

Chores

Expect your child to maintain responsibilities around the home. Scheduling specific chore times is helpful in promoting consistent routines and cooperation. Having pictures of what the finished chore looks like (e.g., a picture of their clean room or folded laundry) can help them know exactly what your expectations are.

Remember:

When you create a routine, be sure you post it for all to see. Clearly outline all expectations and timelines. Kids thrive on predictability.



ACADEMICS

LEARNING STILL NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Unless they are actively working on their schooling, most kids experience a slide in skills whenever they are away from school for even short periods of time. Structure, routine, and scheduling are important to avoid this slide in skills. Ensure you have academics as part of that schedule. Keep your kids involved – they can help establish the school schedule and maybe even be the teacher for part of the day.

Some of you may be fortunate enough to already have things to work on. However, you may have to do some planning on your own. Here are important considerations to promote your child's academic success through this pandemic and avoid the slide.

- Schedule set times for your child to engage in structured activities such as reading and math.
- Schedule core academics in the morning. Leave the afternoon for more physical activities.
- Schedule supplemental educational activities throughout the week. (Check out my ongoing posts about different ideas you can do!). Ideas include conducting science experiments and going on virtual field trips
- Most important, maintain your child's motivation to engage in learning activities. Find things that are interesting, that they can achieve success with, and that can foster their confidence. Make it fun, such as a reading challenge or fun math activities (math can be incorporated into anything, such as baking or adding scores in games).

MINIMIZE SCREEN TIME

Structure and routines become essential to ensure your child does not waste away their time (and brain development!) playing video games. While it may be easier on parents in the short run, too much screen time is deleterious on every level of well-being for our kids.

Too much screen time can be very addictive and makes it hard for kids to self-regulate and contributes to behavioural problems. I could go on but, most importantly, screens takes away from other important opportunities to learn and develop. It is also very stimulating and makes everything else boring. Then, it gets harder and harder for them to ever want to do anything else. Like school.

Setting firm boundaries is therefore essential.



Teach your kids about the effects of technology and create rules together. Establish computer time limits and create mandatory “no tech” times, such as at the dinner table and ban technology in the bedroom. Watch your own technology use and follow established limits you all agree to.

Consider using technology as reinforcement within behaviour plans (e.g., positive behaviours can earn screen time at a specific time of day) or after they have completed all other expected tasks. However limit the amount they do earn and use sparingly.

GET PHYSICAL!

Physical activity is essential. Kids need to get at least an hour of physical exercise every day, so encourage physical activities daily. Be sure to find activities they enjoy. Although we are socially isolating, we can still get outside, so take the opportunity to get out as much as possible. Give them their recess break outside – go on a nature walk or stroll around the block.



PROMOTE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS

Continue promoting positive behaviors and maintaining the expectations and consistency. Otherwise, you might find yourself in constant battles and negotiations. If you are keeping already established rules, be sure you review them again to ensure everyone knows what the expectations are.

If you decide to target new behaviors, be clear about what problem behaviors need to be changed. Then, give your child specific and explicit information about what is expected from them. Telling them to “be good” is vague and ineffective. State behavioral expectations positively (i.e., what kids should be doing instead of what they should not be doing). Post expectations in a place where everyone can clearly see it when it is needed.

When implementing behavior strategies the following suggestions should be kept in mind: Remind your child of the behavioural expectations frequently throughout the day.

- Create a reward system for positive behaviours. You may want to consider a token system where a small token can be earned frequently throughout the day and cashed in later for a larger reward at the end of the day or week.
- Kids often benefit most from frequent, immediate praise throughout the day for positive behaviours. Staying on top of what is going good to reduce problem behaviours.
- When offering praise, be specific about so they know what they did right
- Remember the 5:1 Rule: praise five positive behaviors for every one problematic behaviour

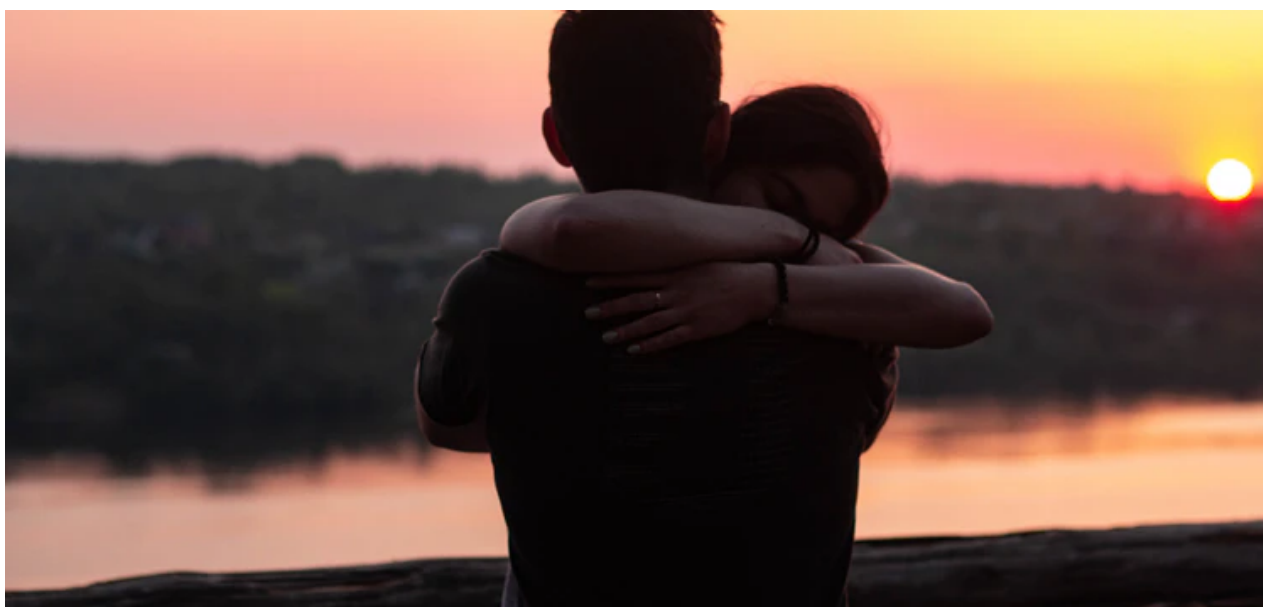


- Minimize nagging. Our kids receive so much corrective feedback at school, from friends, and at home. So, a nice break from constantly hearing all the things they aren't doing can be refreshing and reset their arousal levels and overall confidence. Pick your battles. Be selective on what you nag your kids about.
- Similarly, unless someone is getting hurt, ignore as many negative behaviours as possible to help kids learn that there are definite benefits to exhibit positive behaviour and nothing for acting out. (We sometimes inadvertently reinforce negative behaviours, even if we yell at our kids, so best to avoid that!)

RECONNECT


Although I know this is a stressful time for all, it may be a good time for us to pause the busyness in our lives, breathe, and reconnect with our kids.

Above all, love is the #1 most powerful ingredient to promote our kids success and well-being of our kids, so why not capitalize on that. Love promotes positive relationships, as well as positive behaviours, and motivation. This is the perfect time to reconnect with your kids.



Think of love as a verb – what can you do to show love? How does your child receive love the best? Be sure to do a minimum of one act of love each and every day! Maybe a special note under the door at night, a gentle back rub, extra cuddles at bed, or having a “yes” day (where you say “yes” to all they want to do).

Plan family activities through your day or week to promote positive experiences together. Have a picnic in a secret location, have a family game night, allow kids pick a family activity, look through baby pictures together, or even cook together! It doesn't matter what you do other as long as you have fun and love each other.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair hugging a young child from behind. The child is wearing a plaid shirt and a black headband. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery and a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, sans-serif font.

It takes time and dedication to foster nurturing relationships, but it can be done. The following are tools to enhance your relationships with everyone in your life (though I focus on your child here).

- Listen. Listening and validating others helps foster connection and harmony. If confronted with conflict, say things like, “I can see how that would upset you” or “good point” instead of responding defensively to reduce tension.
- Connect. Listening is the best way to connect. But, you can also connect by trying to learn something new about your child every day. We may think we might know everything, but you may be surprised! Ask about “favourites:” hobby, relative, food, tree, holiday, song, or animal. Come up with your own creative ideas. “If you could be the principal for one day, what would you do?” “Who do you admire and why?” “If you can only bring 5 items to a deserted island, what would you bring?” “If you could have any superpower, what would it be?” Become well known to each other.
- Choose the right place and time to bring up an issue. Hashing through a problem in the heat of the moment never brings positive results. If you absolutely need to talk about a situation, invite your child to chat when everyone is calm; otherwise, let it go. Start softly. How you raise an issue in the first three minutes of a conversation affects the outcome of the interaction. Instead of criticizing, state how you feel, the facts about the situation, and what you need to correct the situation. Even better, see if your kids have ideas on how to fix the situation.
- Support. We all seek support and your kids need it often. If you make a promise, keep it. If your child is having a bad day, listen non-judgmentally, ask questions (i.e., show interest), empathize, and always take his or her side. Don’t side with the enemy or say things like, “Gee, I can see why your friends didn’t want to play with you.” That’s not supportive and will only cause disconnection.
- Create shared meaning. Intentionally create rituals of emotional connection. You can ask one thing they are looking forward to in their day in the morning or debrief their day over dessert.
- Appreciate. Sincerely show appreciation for your child every opportunity you get

SLOW DOWN AND BE

Take this chance to reset for yourself. Our days are normally so jammed packed and rushed, this is the perfect opportunity to slow down, reset, and regain balance.

Every day pick one thing to do to focus on the present moment.

Perhaps sitting in front of a fire with a warm mug of cocoa and savouring its warmth and comfort.

Perhaps writing a list of all the things you look forward to in your day or a gratitude list of all the great things you experienced through your day.

Perhaps going for a walk outside and taking in all the sights and sounds around you.

Perhaps smiling as you watch your kids joyfully build a fort, completely involved in the bliss of childhood.





Making Happy Happen One Family At a Time
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