

## **Managing Parenting Challenges of Social Distancing, Confinement, and Isolation**

Alan E. Kazdin, PhD

Yale University

We have learned by now that one of the best ways to protect ourselves and others from the coronavirus is to distance ourselves physically from people and to stay at home with only occasional outings for essentials. These practices translate to being confined to our homes all day and all night, sometimes without the ability to go out for a walk. The impact of confinement on our mental health can vary greatly based on all sorts of factors including the physical space of the home or apartment, the number of people in the home, their ages and ability to function independently, amount of caregiving that is needed, whether and how much home schooling is needed, resources for connecting with the outside world, and many other such factors. Many of us are not alone but have spouses, partners and relatives with us. No matter how much one loves the other people in the home, a little recess, privacy, and less intense togetherness might be welcome, even if only for a small part of the day.

For couples or single parents with children, there are additional challenges. The home now is the center for daycare, schooling, and some of the activities in which the children may have been involved routinely before confinement. Guess who gets to take these over? Yes, the parents, all the while trying to maintain their own sanity and poise through it all. I am writing to help parents in situations with children and adolescents. Here are some things for your consideration to manage the combined complexities of child-rearing, social distancing, and social isolation. These are interrelated and overlap a bit, but I separate them for clarity of presentation.

### **Tips and Useful Strategies**

**First do no harm.** The living conditions may be difficult. If there are any behavioral problems in the home, the first recommendation is to be sure not to make matters even more difficult. It is easy to make things a little worse, and by that I mean making it more difficult to get along with others in the home. In relation to child rearing, more reprimands, punishment, discipline, and similar attempts to control or regulate child behavior can easily backfire, that is, make the situation a little less tolerable and more tense. What is “more” well—since you are together 24/7, even though it may feel like 25/8, more is likely to be greater than the daily rate was when you and your child(ren) were not home all the time. In general, keep an eye on these actions that can fuel a spark or flame you are trying to extinguish. Ignore what you can when you can. The usual exceptions apply as we attend to matters related to safety and wellbeing.

**Lighten up on demands.** You may have standard requirements and many reasonable demands you make of your children—after all, the responsibility for teaching and raising them falls to you. Under these special circumstances, try to let little things go perhaps related to chores (e.g., such as not making the bed, not putting toys away) or other activities (e.g., texting with friends, being entertained online). The dilemma is that during routine times when we are not quarantined, you are trying to teach specific habits, values, and so on. They are important

but now is the time to ease up. You might worry that if you do not stay strict, the child will become a slacker who sits around all day. There is no slippery slope here. Now the value or priority shifts to managing isolation, keeping and building family relations, and maintaining harmony in circumstances that can be difficult for everyone in the home.

**Manage your own stress.** As the parent(s), do all you can to manage your own stress. The obvious reason is to help maintain your own sanity. But the less obvious reasons are two-fold. First, stress of a parent often gets passed on to the child. No one will necessarily realize this, but that stress can make everyone just a little bit more on edge and more reactive than they otherwise might be. Second, and related, stress or irritability in one's voice and perhaps facial expressions and gestures can increase noncompliance in the child if the child is asked to do something. Be sure to carve out some time for yourself as possible, perhaps after the bedtimes of children or during times children are napping or doing school work that does not require your involvement. The options are endless from following mindfulness or exercise on-line or another pastime. Stress management is more important than ever for you and for the ambience in the home.

**Connect with others.** Connect with family and friends regularly though one of the many options (Skype, FaceTime, Zoom). If you have coworkers/friends you were routinely connected to at the office or other place of work, connect with them. Connect with one or a few people every day, just to say "hi" or "ask what they are doing." These are often "lighter" contacts than the ones that might be checking on a relative who needs special caretaking or is not well. There are now more events one learns of online including having a meal together (e.g., via Zoom), watching a movie together (split screen to see the movie and the other people watching with you). It is endless what people are sharing together online in this way. Of course, these connections do not replace in-person activities, but they can be hugely important. Unfortunately, many people (e.g., in rural areas, some countries) do not have access to the internet.

**Do some light exercises together.** The primary goal is a shared activity and togetherness, not to get in shape, lose weight, or become trim. Exercise with those more ambitious goals in mind perhaps on your own if needed. With the child, it is intended to be light, fun, and in synchrony. Positive shared and bonding activities can help make the psychological climate and home ambience better. The effects of the activity are not merely related to the 10 or 15 minutes of the activity, but also the influence the tone of life in confinement. And that tone can translate to positive behaviors of the child outside of this context.

**Remember the power of modeling.** Your influence as a model on the child and in relation to the present home situation is great. You are a model for how to handle the situation and what to do under difficult circumstances. Modeling, also called observational learning, is subtle in the sense that children (and people in general) pick up ways of responding, styles, and reactions from the people around them without thinking about it or with knowing they are learning something. How you react to the news, to the situation, to the challenges of social isolation all make a huge difference in how your child thinks, feels, and reacts. Modeling includes what you say and do. Your reactions serve as a template for those of the child. For example, if you show flexibility on some of the rules, this is likely to model something very important for your child to experience.

**Good news.** End the day (hours before bedtime) with good news. That could mean no news from television unless you can tune into stations that present that. More generally, make sure the child's bedtime is not preceded by any arousing or disturbing activity. This is not easy—there is violence on television, violence of video games, and news about the virus and its victims that can induce fear and anxiety in all of us. And we know from research, child anxiety can be greatly increased by heavy exposure to troublesome news. Whatever your own practices of following the consequences of the virus, near bedtime would be the perfect time to suspend these. Social isolation and confinement are going on now—adding these other facets can increase anxiety and stress on the child. A pleasant brief view on YouTube or softly telling a story to your child as she or he is in bed would fit nicely here.

**Not-the-usual story time.** Take time each day to share a happy, fun story from the past. Each person can take a turn sharing a memory or you can take turns so there is one each day by one person. Ask the storyteller to describe the memory in detail: What is the best memory, family experience, time with a friend? What exactly did the person like? What was special? Who was there? What were you wearing? Was it sunny or raining? This is not just for children! You and your partner might do the same? Recount your first date or encounter; the first time you met the other person's parents, friends, etc. The criteria for this: must be a positive story or a minor social catastrophe where everyone was amused, and no one was hurt in any way. There are some equivalent activities such as going through photos from a prior vacation or prior experience in which they children were involved and can see past photos of themselves.

**Novel and new activities.** With your child, take on a new activity in which you learn something interesting each day. Let the child be involved in selecting the topic but give a menu to guide and help. You can start with topics related to a favorite entertainer, animal, the environment, cooking, or art. Or you can approach this by positing the options as a form of questions: How are deserts formed? Who invented baseball and what was it like then? How do trees communicate with each other? Why do turtles live for so long? How do you make bread? Who was Dr. Seuss? The goal is to select a topic. It would be good if the topic could be pursued for more than one day to develop interest and a little competence and expertise and to take pressure of coming up with a topic. Once a topic or theme is selected use a search engine or short videos and poke around the topic for about 15 or 20 minutes together. Make this fun where the information is teaching both of you rather than a situation in which you are lecturing the child. The how one does this is important but also depends on the age of the child. To the extent the child talks more and takes any lead the better. Try to do this each day (maybe all week days but take a day or two off) and try not to exceed what you consider the attention span (your child's or yours). The criteria for this: select a positive theme because one does not wish to add anxiety or fear to the situation. Also, select the same time on a given when you do this—structure is important.

If a learning-based activity is not your favorite, there are many other options. Do something creative and maybe seemingly odd but another bonding activity. For example, dress up as best as you can in your wardrobe so for a day you are in some makeshift costumes from a movie, book, animated cartoon character. This could be an activity just for the child, but the strength of this as a positive experience is for both the parent(s) and child(ren) to be involved too. Have dinner “in costume” and if you can make the menu to match all the batter. A related option, act

out a scene from a story the child knows from a children's book--of course many "classic" children's stories include scary scenes so be careful there.

**Routines and rituals.** Research suggests that routines (e.g., activities done at the same time) and rituals (what the activities are) have a calming effect on home life. This is not an excuse to structure all moments and activities. Be sure that some things are regularly scheduled—meals, bed time, time for internet, TV, or equivalent. Structure on many activities will create a positive collateral effect in your relationship and child behavior. There is a balance—a few structured routines and rituals are great: Regimenting the full day is as likely to cause more problems rather than allay them.

These routines can include play and private time. Parallel play can mean you are both in the same room or place but working on different tasks or activities. One does not have to be interacting but just being together is also very helpful for the home ambience. In addition, private time is fine to schedule or program. Unlike parallel play, private time is usually independent activities not in the presence of others. They give person away time. Call it a recess if this helps. Alone time is fine and even constructive. Depending on the age of the child, the usual monitoring is important (e.g., use of the internet).

**Affectionate physical contact.** Provide more physical contact than usual if you can. Affection verbal and nonverbal are worth increasing. A little more hugging and sitting next to each other with a task. These are comforting and have biological underpinnings to explain that. Another way to frame this, we are all experiencing "loss,"-time in activities with others, routines outside the home, and freedoms to come and go. Physical contact provides comfort and can be helpful whether the person talks about loss or missing something.

**Monitor your child.** Signs of anxiety and depression in children are often missed by parents—they can be subtle and often do not look different from having a bad day or night unless they are extreme. When looking for warning signs of your children, consider asking: Does my child worry a lot and talk about the worries more than usual? Is he or she having sleep problems? Does my child sit around and essentially does nothing?" Such reactions are readily explained by the isolation (from school, peers, activities, and the full range of rituals from getting dressed in the morning through returning home from school). We are all struck and influenced by the changes so react or think about consultation if there is an extreme situation. Look for departures from usual (patterns of eating, mood shifts not easily explained) and instances in which the problem (anxiety, depression) seems to be immobilizing your child.

**Adolescents in the home.** All the above points apply to adolescents but of course there are age adjustments. With adolescents, private time is likely not to be a problem, they may seek that naturally. We have learned over the years that even with all that time away, teens need (and want) family time more than ever. When selecting or doing activities, it would be great to have the adolescent take the lead on selecting options whenever possible. For example, if there is a shared activity online, not only have the adolescent select which one, but have him or her teach you or the family something. Place the adolescent in a role that leads rather than follows. If there is a "costume" night, have the adolescent generate options

## Other Resources

Hopefully, some of the above strategies and activities will help. There are other resources, two of which I mention here.

**Free online course.** I have devised a *free*-online course entitled **Everyday Parenting: The ABCs of Child Rearing**. (ABCs stand for antecedents, behaviors, and consequences.) The course is produced by Yale University and Coursera and is designed to provide concrete tools to help parents with the normal challenges of child rearing. I provide 20+ plus sessions on many different techniques and how they can be used in the home and at school. The overall goal is to provide parents with tools to address the challenges of child-rearing. Those challenges may be greater than usual considering our social isolation and confinement. The course is in English but has subtitle options in Spanish and Chinese  
<https://www.coursera.org/learn/everyday-parenting>

**Parenting website.** In addition, I have a website that is designed to help with parenting. On the website, look for Blogs. These are prepared in response to parental requests on all sorts of topics about handling issues in the home. Many topics are covered such as how to limit computer time, time out, developing compliance, homework, effects of punishment, and others. Website: [www.alankazdin.com](http://www.alankazdin.com)

\* \* \* \* \*

Source: A blog from <https://alankazdin.com/blog/>