

Parenting during a pandemic: Creating space for mental well-being



Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents are still facing big challenges. In some places, schools haven't fully returned to in-person classes.

Where they have, the stress of last-minute quarantines when a classmate gets sick can leave parents scrambling to find childcare or needing to miss work.

It's a lot to handle, and that's on top of worries parents may have about their family getting COVID-19. Even in countries where vaccines have been easy to get, they aren't yet available for younger children. And some people have been getting breakthrough infections after vaccination.

If you're a parent who's feeling the everyday pressure of the pandemic, you aren't alone. What you're feeling is real, and it's normal to feel more stressed, sad or frustrated than usual. While you can't control the pandemic, you can try the following ideas for creating a mentally healthy home.

Demonstrate that it's OK to relax. If your home doesn't get cleaned on a certain day, that's OK. During stressful times, it's important to know how to prioritize. Staying mentally healthy is more important than achieving expectations that leave us stressed. At home and at school, make sure your family isn't taking on too much pressure. Yes, education is very important. But expecting perfection — or close to it — can lead to incredibly stressed children, teens and college students.¹

Let kids be kids. With some organized activities canceled and some kids being home more than usual, parents might feel pressure to keep their kids entertained. While baking cookies together or playing a board game is great for family bonding, you don't have to plan every moment. Studies show that it's important for kids to have undirected time. That's when they're being creative, pretending and finding other ways to entertain themselves.²

Look thoughtfully at misbehavior. When your child or teen is acting out, have empathy. Actions are often driven by emotions, and they may be feeling sad, angry or stressed. Instead of going straight to punishment, create a space where you can talk about feelings. If you are open about your own feelings, they may be more likely to share theirs. And you might find there's more to the story than a young person "being bad."³

Consider what young adults need. While some young adults move out after secondary-school graduation — to college dorms or their own apartment — others continue to live with their families. During the pandemic, staying at home became more common, with some colleges offering online-only classes and some young people losing their jobs and returning home. In the U.S., for example, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds living with their parents increased from 63% to 71%.⁴ For some families, being in the same home can be tough. What was once a child is now an adult, and figuring out how to evolve your relationship together takes open communication. Keep in mind that learning independence is important during these years. Give your young adult the space to be responsible on their own while clearly detailing your rules and expectations.

If your young adult is away at college, it's also important to support them emotionally while giving them space to grow. A study done before the pandemic showed that 85% of college students felt "overwhelmed" and, at some point during the year, felt that "things were hopeless."⁵ Given that college students have faced additional challenges during the pandemic, the need for mental health support is surely even greater. Make sure your young adult knows that the transition can be tough for everyone and it's common to struggle with a tough class or not find friends immediately. Tell them about resources they can connect with on campus or via your employee assistance program (EAP) if they need professional support.

Take care of yourself. If you and your family are home more than usual right now, it may be tough to get a few minutes alone. Even if it's just a walk around the neighborhood, it's important. When you can't leave your kids, try meditating in a nearby room or enjoying a long bath or shower.¹ Help your kids learn self-care too. Explore what makes them feel better when they're stressed and find ways to seek calm.⁶

Emotions like stress, sadness and frustration are common during the pandemic — and anytime, really. But if you find they're impacting your relationships or work, it may be time to seek support. Reach out to your EAP. And remember that you're doing your best, and that's enough.

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