


Coronavirus Parenting: Managing Anger and Frustration

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We know we're not supposed to yell at our children. But parents are very stressed at the moment, and frustration and anger are inevitable. Overwhelmed with everything you've been asked to do, you find yourself losing your temper at kids who aren't on their best behavior either. But when your circumstances aren't normal, your parenting won't be normal.

Right after many schools and workplaces were closed, there was a push for parents to see the coronavirus crisis as an opportunity, not to waste this extra time with their kids, says Stephanie Lee, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Parents were encouraged to organize their kids' closets, work on their math skills, etc., but realistically, that's just absurd. It's more important to just get through this and manage the best you can in a less-than-ideal situation."

It's time to lower our expectations. You won't be able to do as much as you usually can as a parent, employee or partner. Instead, experts recommend focusing on you and your children's emotional state and strive to maintain positive family dynamics.

"If you do nothing academically and just focus on your relationship with your children, then it will be time well spent," explains Rebecca Schrag Hershberg, PhD, a clinical psychologist and parenting coach. "Kids can't learn if they're not feeling safe and loved. If there's a strain in the connections at home, and it feels very tense and miserable, your child's brain isn't going to take in what they're learning because they're stressed and angry. Your relationship is the precursor for everything else falling into place."

There are so many parenting struggles at the moment, and staying calm isn't always easy. Here are ways to manage some of the most challenging issues.

You're doing a lot of yelling

My kids were at each other's throats all day. Around 3:00 p.m., they were screaming at each other again, and it hit my Very. Last. Nerve. With my palms pressed tight to my ears and angry tears, I started screaming at them!

"Let's be honest," says Dr. Lee. "It's not as though parents didn't yell at their kids before. But since things are more stressful right now, parents need to be extra conscious of their own big three: diet/nutrition, activity level and sleep. They impact our mood, as well as our ability to problem solve, stay calm, concentrate and focus. If any of those things are really off, which is likely right now, it can have a major impact on your ability to be your best self."

When you do lose your cool, Michelle Kaplan, LCSW, a clinical social worker at the Child Mind Institute, advises that you wait to apologize until everyone has calmed down. Be honest with your kids and tell them if you're tired, hungry, struggling or overwhelmed. Apologize for your bad language and let them know you will work hard to do better. You can even involve your kids in some problem solving about what can be done differently next time.

Everyone needs your help at the same time

I feel like I'm a teacher, principal, cruise director, laundress, janitor, chef and servant all at the same time.

What parents are being asked to do is impossible, so you need to prioritize. Most importantly, make sure everyone is safe and their basic needs are met. Next, determine what you and your children can realistically accomplish daily, and then try to structure everyone's days so you're not overwhelmed. This may mean that each child eats and/or does their schoolwork at different times.

"A lot of schools are giving work that's unrealistic — it's just not going to happen, and that's okay," says Kaplan. "Teachers understand. Every family has to determine what is actually possible today. If it's only one out of the five things on the list, then that's fine. There will be a lot of trial and error as you learn what your kids need and how much you can help them."

You're throwing tantrums

I found myself in the middle of an attitude war with my mini-me four-year-old son. I was even sticking out my tongue at him, and not in a cute, light-hearted way. He did the same, and it continued longer than I care to admit.

I was trying to punish my son, but he wouldn't give me his computer. So I went into his room and took a stack of books from his dresser and threw them off, creating quite the commotion. He came bounding up the stairs, shocked by the noise. He was stunned. I used that moment to bolt downstairs and grab his computer!

Sharing your mishaps and even finding the humor in them is important, especially right now. But we know it's our job to model appropriate behavior. Once you begin to throw a tantrum, it's hard to rein it in, so plan in advance. For example, when you feel yourself getting upset, take some quiet time to yourself — even if it's just five minutes in the bathroom.

When you can, it's also helpful to be proactive about recharging. Scheduling small amounts of time to do things you especially enjoy can be a way to head off your own frustration before it starts. Try setting aside 15 minutes for reading, exercise, a creative project, or whatever else helps you feel centered. Remembering that this time is there for you can be a source of calm in especially challenging moments.

And sometimes you need to ask for help.

"Life isn't about how you manage Plan A, it's about how you cope with Plan B," Dr. Lee notes. "Right now, we're in Plan B, and we're almost at Plan C. We need to make sure that we're modeling the behavior we want back. But we should also model reaching out for help when we need it. The absence of pleasant activities makes it hard to be your best self when stressful events or situations occur. Think about who you regularly turn to. Can you call your extended family or schedule a Zoom happy hour with friends?"

Your kids can't sleep and they want to get in *your* bed

Once I put my kids to bed, I'm done for the day. I have no patience left, and I often yell at them when they can't sleep.

Sleep regressions are normal in times of uncertainty or a change in routine. Even with regular bedtime rituals and good sleep hygiene, kids of all ages may struggle to fall asleep — they need their parents more than usual right now.

"If we look at it from their perspective, we are their safe place," says Dr. Hershberg. "We are the person from whom they seek reassurance, and they may still need us after the clock strikes nine. Your kids want extra connections with you, and there's plenty of reason to shift habits and let them sleep with you if that feels okay to you. If not, think about how you can give them what they need. Maybe it's extra hugs and cuddles right before bed or giving them something special of yours to sleep with. Or, maybe it's promising to check on them every 15 minutes as long as they're quiet."

For children who are anxious, use this time to teach when to worry, which is never right before bed. Give them time to discuss their worries every morning or afternoon. Before bed, engage in positive conversations about great memories, things they like or what they plan to do tomorrow.

Your kids aren't technologically savvy

"I feel like I've become one of the jerky guys from my office IT department that always made everyone feel horrible for wasting his time with their inane requests."

Children are struggling to log on, use a mouse correctly, manage the various apps, or even send an email. Staying in your Zen space until they get it is difficult. Consider your child's position.

"If your kids don't know how to use the computer, it's the equivalent of you being asked to suddenly learn everything in Japanese without knowing how to speak the language," Dr. Hershberg explains. "And, the teacher is impatient because you don't understand their native language. We can have compassion for both. It's the same idea with you and your child — can you foster a spirit of compassion and self-compassion?"

To alleviate your frustration, set aside some time to review the technology together so you can teach your children the skills and programs they need. Kaplan recommends you also work through worst-case scenarios. Create a list of common computer problems and ask your child what they worry could go wrong. Create a plan of what they can do if the problem occurs, then write it down. Think of it as building independence.

Reduce stress by celebrating successes, no matter how small

No matter how someone tries to spin it, this is a difficult time. Even the parents posting color-coded charts and complicated craft projects on social media are struggling. Remind yourself that you're a good parent who is doing the best you can in a very difficult situation by celebrating the small victories each day.

"Make a daily list of what you did well," advises Dr. Lee. "Did we all get dressed or half-dressed? Did everyone bathe today? Did we get half of our work done and then go on a family walk? Those are all victories."

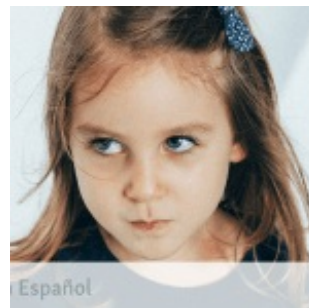
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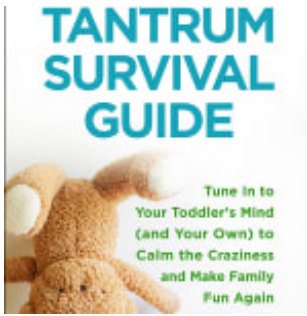
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