



Helping Children Stay Upbeat While Stuck At Home

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Spring break, cancelled. Extracurricular activities and birthday parties, nixed. Academic competitions and sports championships, postponed, or possibly scrapped for the remainder of the school year. It's all enough to leave children and teens feeling disappointed, frustrated and very, very bored.

Children too young to understand what coronavirus and social distancing is all about may be confused by the abrupt change and not being able to play with their friends or visit with extended family and get hugs and kisses.

As is age appropriate, it is important that parents talk with their children and teenagers about COVID-19 and why certain changes in daily activities are necessary, according to Ashton Taylor, a psychotherapist with Henry Ford Health System. Parents should acknowledge concerns their children might express and reassure them that the changes in their lives are to keep them safe and healthy.

In this time of social distancing and now Michigan's recent stay-at-home order, parents must monitor the fine line between distancing and isolation, particularly for teens who may not be having face-to-face interactions with anyone, including their family.

While every teenager and every child are different, it is important for parents to build socialization into their children's day now that they are not in school or spending time with their friends.



ALL FOR YOU

“Schedule family dinner, game or fitness time into each day to get kids out of their rooms,” says Taylor. “You don’t want to push teens too much and flip their world upside down more than it is, but parents should not allow teens to stay in their room all day, every day. That amount of isolation is unhealthy and can lead to mental health concerns.”

It is very important to stick to a schedule and maintain established rules. Parents should establish times for learning, play and screen time. Maintain a schedule for breaks, meals and sleep too, so that when children eventually return to school, they don’t have to start over with getting into a routine.

Decreasing Stress

Families spending more time together than usual is an adjustment for everyone. Parents must remember to stay calm and care for the needs of the family but also to try to make time for themselves to rejuvenate their energy. Try some mindfulness and relaxation techniques when stress escalates, Taylor says.

Taylor offers these three specific tips for parents and children to decrease stress:

- **Get outside.** Even if it’s cold out, bundle up and take a walk around the neighborhood, while making sure you are practicing social distancing. Strap on your helmets and go on a bike ride. Get creative -- incorporate using school bleachers into your workout or set up an obstacle course in the yard. Getting fresh air and physical activity is very necessary.
- **Limit news.** Things are literally changing every hour and it’s very easy to get overwhelmed. It’s so easy to let that consume you. The same goes for kids -- be honest with them about what’s happening but limit their exposure to troubling news.
- **Have fun.** Make up for the canceled sporting activities by creating a family sports competition. Host a family talent show. Get dressed up and have a fancy dinner and dance party at home. Play board games. Work on an art project or puzzle together. Tailor your activities to your family’s interests and enjoy the opportunity to bond.

Managing Social Media

Something to also keep in mind is that social media and the internet can be a blessing and a curse. It keeps us connected with friends and loved ones during this time when we can’t physically be together. But parents will want to make sure that children and teens are not seeing things on social media or web sites that can create more fear or come from less-than-credible sources.

“I always tell parents that they need to be monitoring what their children are doing on social media and who they are talking to, and now more than ever because they have so much down time,” says Taylor. “It’s a matter of getting back to that structure and routine, for example saying, between 6 and 8 p.m. is their social media, internet or video game time.”

Parents should be a good role models for their children who pick up on what they see adults doing. Parents who are working from home should share with their children that they are going into the office or their room to work on the laptop for their job. “You want to avoid sending the message that you’re binge-watching TV shows all day or lying in bed emailing friends,” Taylor says.