

NATION

'We're all stressed out': Parenting in a pandemic puts additional stress on families, children

Rick Jervis USA TODAY

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Each night, Paula Madrid's 7-year-old daughter, Chloé, refuses to go to bed quietly -- a new rebellion hatched since the family sequestered themselves in their New York City apartment to avoid the coronavirus.

"Everyday, there's something going on that wasn't happening before," said Madrid, a clinical and forensic psychologist.

In normal times, Madrid would discipline Chloé and enforce the bedtime rule. But times are far from normal.

"We're all stressed out," she said. "We all have the right to express frustration. It'll be unfair to behave as if nothing has changed."

Parents across the U.S., like Madrid, are grappling with how best to balance being empathetic with children during a crisis with disciplining

for bad behavior, as experts closely monitor the well being and mental health of children amid the global pandemic.

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The U.S. death toll from the coronavirus climbed to 5,316 on Thursday, as more communities across the nation moved to self-isolation in their homes. Meanwhile, new unemployment claims soared to 6.6 million, bringing heightened stress over the pandemic into millions of homes across the country.

More yelling and spanking at home as stress grows

A recent study by the University of Michigan found that the outbreak is already taking its toll on parents. The online survey of 562 adults, released Tuesday, showed that a majority of parents -- 52% -- said that self-isolating and financial worries were getting in the way of their parenting.

Other findings include:

- A majority of parents (61%) reported shouting, yelling and screaming at children at least once since secluding to their homes.
- About 1 in 6 parents reported having spanked or slapped their children during the crisis. Eleven percent said they had done this multiple times.
- About 19% said they were screaming more and 15% said they had

increased their use of discipline during the pandemic.

As children stay home from school in the weeks and months to come, they'll have less adults to report any physical and mental abuse, said Shawna Lee, associate professor of social work at the University of Michigan and the study's lead author. Educators are often the main source of reporting child abuse, she said.

"My concern is that kids are actually suffering and there's no adults there to help them out and intervene," she said.

Though different from past crises, the coronavirus outbreak could impact children's health similarly as past hurricanes and other natural disasters, said Irwin Redlener, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University in New York City and president emeritus and co-founder of the Children's Health Fund.

Anxiety can contribute to depression in children

Disruption in normal routines and anxiety over outside threats could often lead to anxiety and depression in children, he said. Long-term studies of how children responded to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 2018's Hurricane Harvey in Texas and Hurricanes Maria and Irma in the Caribbean showed some students had problems at school months after the disaster, behavior changes and even medical problems, such as increased rates of asthma, he said.

Some signs to look for in children include: Drastic changes in behavior or aggressive behavior, noticeable change of sleeping habits or prolonged

fits of anger or crying, Redlener said.

Parents will play a key role, as children look to their parents to decipher the crisis, he said. "Children need their parents to look and act as if they're adapting to this new reality," Redlener said.

Despite the challenges, children and families can emerge from the coronavirus crisis with a sharpened ability to adapt to trying circumstances -- a skill set they'll have for life, he said.

"Children have a natural resilience," Redlener said. "They may come out of this with skills they may not even know they have but that could have a positive impact on the rest of their lives."

Children are resilient

Stephen Cozza, of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland, said those most affected by the pandemic will be children who have a family member become ill or killed by the virus or those with preexisting mental health conditions. Older teenagers may also stay up later than usual at night and absorb frightening information about the pandemic on the Internet, leading to increased anxiety, he said.

Overall, however, children tend to emerge OK from traumatic events, he said.

"By and large, children tend to do better over time," he said. "If the adults are doing well, if they're managing well and framing the situation for children, it's much more likely the children will do well."

One of the first steps a parent could take to bring calm to their homes is self-care, like allowing the kids a little extra TV time so they can take a long bath or taking a break from daily cooking, said Catherine Pearlman, a clinical social worker in Southern California and author of "Ignore It!: How Selectively Looking the Other Way Can Decrease Behavioral Problems and Increase Parenting Satisfaction."

Parents should pick their battles

Creating a daily schedule and getting kids involved with household chores also helps, she said. Parents should pick their battles while in self-isolation. While some behaviors, such as cursing or hurting others, may be non-negotiable, parents could be flexible on other things, such as more screen time, said Pearlman, who also posts pandemic parenting tips on her blog, The Family Coach.

"It feels better to overlook a few things, to not have to discipline everything that shows up in front of us," she said. "It takes the stress off."

Madrid, the New York psychologist and mom, said she involves her daughter each night with setting their daily schedule for the next day. Chloé thrives on it, she said.

Madrid, who specializes in trauma and has helped past victims of hurricanes and 9/11, said parenting in the pandemic is challenging, even with her years of experience. Still, she's confident the experience will be an overall plus to families across the U.S.

"In the end, most people will thrive and do well," Madrid said. "This will be a learning experience. And they'll use it for years to come."

The American Academy of Pediatrics posted 10 tips to help keep calm at home during the pandemic. Find them here.

Jervis is an Austin-based correspondent for USA TODAY. Follow him on Twitter: @MrRJervis.