

**DEVELOPMENTAL-BEHAVIORAL PEDIATRICS AT STANFORD**  
**Tips for Parents in Challenging Times**  
**Frequently Asked Questions from Parents to our Team**

*Question: Sometimes my child gets very, very upset. It seems it can happen very fast. What should I do?*

Answer: Try to figure out why the child gets upset.

- Stay calm. Think about what happened just before your child became upset. Think about how you responded. Can you detect a pattern?
- It may be that this behavior is quite typical for your child. In that case, if you use strategies like timeout when your child misbehaves, you can use these approaches now. Here is a link to a website to remind you about how to use time-out as a function of your child's age:  
<https://healthychildren.org/English/Pages/default.aspx>
- Of course, your child's behavior may be very different while we shelter-in-place. The entire family may be in close quarters for long stretches. Your child cannot go to the playground or get together with friends. Routines are upended. You may find that you yourself are short or irritable.
- If your child's upset is unusual or more frequent or extreme than usual, try to understand what is making your child upset.
  - It may be worry or confusion. Consider whether you should reassure or comfort your child.
  - It may be loneliness. Consider whether you should let your child know that you understand the challenge of staying home.
  - It may be that your child senses your worries. Consider a frank conversation about the situation without increasing the child's concerns.
- You might want to teach your child different strategies for calming down. You can do the exercises below with your child

*Question: What kind of strategies might help my child calm down in the moment?*

Answer: Breathing exercises

- Activities that encourage deep breathing can be really helpful. Children who are able to count may like to count breaths to 5-10 in order to relax their minds and bodies.
- It can be very helpful to pair the breathing with a physical activity. For example, try an approach called "starfish breathing." Spread out the fingers on one hand like a starfish. As your child takes a deep breath, move the index finger from the other hand up the side of the thumb. As the child breathes out, move the index finger from the other hand down the other side of the thumb. Repeat going up the side of the index finger taking a breath in and moving the finger down the other side of the index finger, taking a breath out. Continue until the child has traced all of the fingers on the first hand. If 5 breaths in and out on one hand is enough, you can stop. Sometimes you might want to use the second hand, for a total of 10 breaths in and 10 breaths out.
- Children may do well with belly breathing. Have the child place both hands on the belly. Breathing in, encourage the child to notice that s/he has expanded the

belly with air. Breathing out, encourage the child to notice that the belly is emptying and going flat. Continue for as many breaths as you need.

- You can also use an external device such as a timer. If you have a sand timer, flip it over and have the child take deep breaths as s/he watches the grains of sand fall. Alternatively, use digital timers on a smart phone, tablet, or computer. Timers come in handy and can be used to set limits on other activities besides timeout.
- Another approach is to make a glitter jar (instructions below) that can be used while taking calm-down breaths. The child shakes the glitter jar and takes deep breaths while watching the glitter settle to the bottom. Encourage the child to sit and watch, breathe deeply, and notice how his/her body feels as s/he takes the breaths. Draw attention to how the body feels from head to toe.
- You can also use the glitter jar as a makeshift timer—shake and turn over while your child races to finish an activity (i.e., getting ready for bed, brushing teeth, etc) to see if s/he can finish before the timer is up—or before the glitter settles on the bottom!

How to make a glitter jar:

1. Take a small plastic or glass jar with a lid (such as a Mason jar) and add  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of distilled water into the jar. (Distilled water has no contaminant and helps keep the jar mold free)
2. Pour  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of glitter glue or clear glue into the jar. (With these measurements, it will take about 2 minutes for the glitter to settle in the jar).
3. If desired, add 1-2 teaspoons of extra glitter
4. Fill the rest of the jar with distilled water
5. Use a hot glue gun to squeeze a ring of glue around the lid of the jar. Put the lid on the jar and secure with the metal ring.
6. Shake the jar well to fully mix the ingredients!

*Question: My child seems to be running out of things to do. Even after I suggest an activity, he cannot stay on task for more than a few minutes. What should I do?*

*Answer: Try to extend the time your child spends with each activity or try new activities.*

- You can expand on the current activity. So for example, with a drawing activity, ask your child to do more than 1 drawing. You can ask your child to draw himself, then each person in the family, then draw a family portrait, and finally, a picture of the entire family doing something they like to do together.
- You can also ask the child to do 2 or 3 unrelated activities in a row. It might be helpful to make up a visual schedule with each of the activities. For example, the first activity could be drawing a picture, the second activity could be looking at a picture book, and the last activity could be building a toy or object from the picture or the picture book. You might want to use a timer for each activity.
- Find activities that you have been wanting to do. Make the time to try them out as family activities. For example, do a baking or cooking project. How about a simple craft project?
- Singing together may be fun. Have you tried family karaoke?

- Reading together is always good. Maybe you can ask the child to act out what you read. Make the costumes. Put on a play. Maybe draw the story.

*Question: My child seems to need a lot of attention. She wants to show me what she is working on after every little step. I cannot seem to get anything done with the constant interruptions. What should I do?*

Answer: Consider why your child may need more attention at these times.

- Your child may feel very worried or very lonely. Acknowledge their feelings. Address their concerns.
- You can try to reframe the behavior. Reassure her that she is doing a wonderful job. You can tell her that you would like to see the final project and that it should be a big surprise.
- Encourage her to wait after each step and keep going on her own until she feels that she is done. Then she can finally share her final project with you—make it extra special by covering it up, doing a countdown, and unveiling!

*Question: My husband and I are both working from home and we live in a very small space. It feels like we're on top of each other! I want my kids nearby so I can keep an eye on them, but how can I keep them in a slightly separate space so we can actually get things done?*

Answer: Working in small spaces can definitely be a challenge. It might be helpful to divide physical space into smaller spaces with boundaries. Make it fun for the kids.

Here are a few ideas:

- Drape a large sheet over a table and have the children create a play space underneath.
- Use chairs or the back of the couch to drape a sheet to create a tent or other enclosed space.
- Dedicate the child's bedroom or part of the hallway as a play space. For example, during astronaut play the hallway could be the mission control center.

*Question: My child generally does well with the activities I have suggested. However, by the end of a long day even she gets tired of the same activities. I want to reward her for a good day but am running out of ideas.*

Answer: Consider simple ways of switching up the rewards.

- You might want to make a "reward jar." Sit down with your child to think of fun activities that could be end of the day rewards together. Write each 1 down on a slip of paper, fold it up, and place in the jar. Let your child pick a slip out of the jar at the end of the day for some special time together.
- Those special activities together, such as cooking, singing, or reading together, may be good rewards for completing chores or homework.
- Remember, time with you, uninterrupted, may be a potent reward. Set aside special time together at the end of the day. Consider increasing the time if the day has gone well.

*Question: Being cooped up inside is making my child stir crazy. Now that playgrounds and parks are off limits, we do not know how to help release all the energy. What should we do?*

Answer: Plan for physical activities indoors and outdoors.

- As you are deciding on activities for the day, Build in stretch and other physical activity breaks throughout the day.
- You could pair a stretch break or other exercises to fall right after each craft or other quiet activity.
- You can make a list of exercises or put them on slips of paper in an “exercise jar” to choose from.
- The family can do a short family exercise break, following along with a Zumba, cha cha slide or raijio taiso video on You Tube.
- Walking in the neighborhood together does not violate the shelter-in-place rules. Get outdoors. Consider taking photos or remembering sites for craft activities at home.