

A Work in Progress: Family Resilience & COVID-19

The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is presenting families around the world with unique challenges. Many families must make significant changes to the daily patterns, arrangements, and rhythms of their individual and family lives. The great task is to adapt in a way that meets all family members' needs while recognizing that this is a work in progress.

“Family resilience, the capacity for a family to weather and even thrive during adversity, depends on a family’s ability to balance stability and flexibility in changing circumstances,” says Andrew E. Roffman, CSW, clinical assistant professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone and member of its Child Study Center. “This work in progress calls for an attitude of ‘we’re all in this together,’ and ‘let’s do the best we can.’”

This kind of togetherness is different from the average weekend or family vacation. “The anxiety

and uncertainty of the current situation add further stress to the changed dynamics families are having to cope with,” Roffman says. Currently, families are facing much more togetherness than they are typically used to.

Work on Your Parenting Relationship and Provide Constructive Dialogue

“While this is an ongoing task for most families, it is especially important now,” Roffman says. In these changing times, parents should anticipate that their relationship needs both attention and intention. “The attention should be put toward the realities of the new circumstances and the need for parents to have constructive dialogue about how to adapt,” he says.

Dialogue is a process in which both parties have the freedom to set out their thoughts, concerns, and ideas and have these listened to respectfully. “While the immediate goal of such a dialogue is to solve a problem, the more important goal is to strengthen the relationship,” Roffman says. “When partners feel listened to, respected, and affirmed, they also feel loved and cared for—this creates a positive climate of trust and mutual support.”

Parents should schedule time to meet regularly—Roffman suggests at least once a week—to talk about parenting and family life. “The regularity of these kinds of talks can reduce conflict because both parties can depend on having time to talk deliberately and intentionally about what is important,” Roffman adds.

Parents can use this process to address such things as house rules, which may include using respectful language when speaking to one another, cooperating with household chores, or taking turns with shared household resources. “House rules are somewhat like the mission statement of a company: if they are too general, they can seem meaningless; if they are too specific, they can begin to feel overbearing,” Roffman says. “Discussions of house rules can involve all family members, including fairly young children.”

Establish Routines and Structure

“Daily routine and structure are essential with everyone at home,” Roffman says. “And parents should take the lead in this while inviting input and feedback from their kids.”

Helpful practices include having a schedule for each family member; having a brief morning meeting each day to go over everyone's schedule and to review how yesterday's went, with a focus on what went well and what needs improvement; and working out space arrangements for who does what, when, and where in the home, and how (such as with or without screen time).

“The more people involved and the smaller the living space, the more challenging this might become,” Roffman says. “While structure is essential for the productive aspects of everyone's lives, don't forget to include breaks and fun.”

Address Sibling Issues and Conflicts

Sibling conflict can be challenging at the best of times—it is quite normal, but it can also have a negative effect on family life. “During these times, expect that your kids will have disagreements with one another,” Roffman says. “This may be understandably intensified by all the ‘togetherness’ as well as the greater potential for anxiety in the family.”

Parents should recognize that they may get pulled into sibling disagreements and that you

may want to take sides for many reasons. However, taking sides should be avoided unless really necessary.

“Instead, consider a house rule that siblings are expected to resolve their disagreements maturely and independently,” Roffman says. “To foster this, give positive feedback when siblings successfully handle conflict themselves. For example, if your kids are able to work out a difference in terms of who gets to watch their favorite show, praise their actions and consider rewarding them.” If siblings cannot resolve their differences in a mature way, consider having a consequence for everyone such as reduced screen time.

“When parents are overinvolved, siblings do not take ownership of their relationships and can use sibling conflict as an attempt to garner parental attention,” Roffman adds. “Parents can remind siblings of the expectation that they work things out and remove attention from their children’s disagreements.”

An important exception is when a child may have more challenges with behavioral control or has

the potential to be dangerous to another child. “In these situations, parents need to intervene, but should do so in a calm but firm way and refrain from shaming or blaming,” Roffman says.

One model to try in situations that require intervention but are not dangerous is for the parent to attend first to the mistreated child, Roffman says. “This withdraws attention from the other child who will then see their parent validating and soothing their sibling.” Later, and in private, the parent can then address the behavior of the sibling who did the mistreating.

“While it is sometimes said that extreme times call for extreme measures, these times call more of what we know works—the basic ingredients of parenting and family life: prevention, collaborative problem solving, constructive dialogue, and maintaining a positive emotional tone to family life,” Roffman says.

The last ingredient does not mean that everyone should be sunny and positive all the time. “That would be unrealistic, especially now,” Roffman adds. “What it does mean is that everyone’s feelings matter and can be taken seriously.”

Parents set the emotional tone for the family, which means they need to take good care of themselves and support each other. Single parents should draw on their support systems of relatives and friends.

“Family resilience, and the ability to weather and thrive in difficult times, means balancing the dual tasks of maintaining stability through schedules, rules, and structure, and adapting flexibly to the needs and demands of a changing set of circumstances,” Roffman says.