

How to Address Family Conflict & Your Child's Behavioral Problems During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As we continue nationwide efforts to reduce the spread of 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19), many families are struggling to cope with the challenges of increased family time at home. Long-established routines have transformed overnight, and parents are strapped for resources, leading to an increase in family conflict and child behavior problems.

“While caretakers are under tremendous stress, kids are feeling the impact, too,” says Dylann Gold, PhD, clinical assistant professor in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Langone and member of its Child Study Center. “Unable to go to school or participate in activities outside of the home, children have experienced a significant loss. Even young children with little or no grasp of current events are sensing the anxiety of those around them and adjusting to new routines.”

“Kids cannot always articulate their feelings and are less developed in their ability to problem

solve,” says Jacqueline Smith, PsyM, a psychology extern at the Child Study Center. “Their stress can therefore show up as disruptive behavior, noncompliance, and tantrums.”

Despite these challenging times, parents can reach out to professionals to reduce the conflict at home and help children with behavioral problems work toward a new normal while homebound during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preventive Strategies for Parents

Addressing your child’s disruptive behavior is not only about responding to conflict—it’s also about proactive strategies to decrease the likelihood of challenges. These tools can have a positive impact on your child’s behavior by minimizing triggers that lead to tantrums and defiance:

- **Eat, sleep, and move:** The basics are more important than ever. Ensure that your child is maintaining good sleeping, eating, and exercise routines.
- **Make time for quality time:** When time and resources allow, try to join your child in play and leisure activities. This will not only help to

maintain a positive relationship, but it will make setting limits easier down the road.

- Catch your child being good. By calling attention to your child when your child is being a good listener or coping appropriately, you increase the chance that your child will repeat those behaviors in the future.

Parents should try their best to provide structure. “Kids do best when routines are in place and expectations are clear,” Dr. Gold says. “Predictability, especially given the current circumstances, can help your child feel a sense of comfort and safety.”

Ways to incorporate predictability can include creating a visual daily schedule that your child can reference throughout the day. When possible, get your child’s input on more flexible activities, such as asking “would you like to ride your bike or scooter today?”

Breaking down tasks can also be helpful, Smith says. “Breaking down complex tasks into more manageable steps can reduce frustration and prevent meltdowns.” Use a timer or alarm to cue

you and your child to the completion of an activity.

Offering your child a choice can also help instill a sense of control during this uncertain time.

“When options are available, let your child choose,” Smith adds. “Which pajamas he wears or where he does his quiet reading are minor decisions that can enhance his sense of control. Be clear upfront about which expectations are and are not flexible.”

Deescalating Conflict and Responding to Disruptive Behavior

“There is a lot for children to be stressed about right now,” Dr. Gold says. “If your child is upset but calm enough to engage in conversation, conflict can be defused by helping her identify her emotion and validating her experience, such as says, ‘It makes sense you’re feeling angry that you can’t have playdates right now.’”

Validation does not mean expressing approval of inappropriate behavior, Dr. Gold says. It means acknowledging the emotions that drive the behavior. Making your child feel heard can

diffuse conflict—like dropping the rope in a game of tug-of-war.

It is important to remember that your attention can be used as an effective behavior management tool. However, keep in mind that negative attention, such as scolding, can feed problem behavior. “If your child is engaging in minor misbehaviors like whining, try turning away and staying quiet. The moment he engages in an acceptable behavior, give a praise, such as ‘Thank you for asking in a nice voice! Yes, I will get you more juice.’” Dr. Gold says. “Remember that ignoring negative behavior works best when used with positive attention for OK behavior.”

Though harder for parents to do, ignoring can also help with most tantrums. “Try to resist feeding the tantrum by leaning in,” Smith says. “Instead, selectively ignore the behavior and return attention when your child begins to calm down.”

If your child is doing something you cannot ignore, like hitting siblings, you may want to create a positive reinforcement system. “As an example, for every activity she completes with

‘safe hands and feet,’ she can earn a sticker,” Smith says. “Five stickers at the end of the day amounts to a predetermined reward. For these systems to work, being specific and consistent is key. It is important to spell out the behavior you want so that everyone knows what it takes to get a reward.”

You will also want to choose a reward that you are able to give consistently and that you are willing to withhold if your child does not meet expectations. When rewarding safe behavior doesn’t work, other discipline strategies, such as temporary privilege removal or time out, may also be used.

Managing Your Own Behavior and Stress

To best take care of your family, you must first take care of yourself. “As they say on airplanes, ‘secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others,’” Dr. Gold says. “Not only will self-care efforts make you feel better, but the effects will trickle down to family relationships and child behavior.”

When you are stressed, you are more emotionally reactive—your boiling point is lower. “As such,

you can easily enter into a ‘coercive cycle’ with your child,” Dr. Gold says. “By managing your own distress, you are setting yourself up to better access your parenting toolkit in the moment.”

Start by creating a list of doable self-care activities that can be built into your new routine. These may be simple things like a 10-minute morning stretch or reading for pleasure before bed. Even brief daily acts of self-care can have a meaningful and restorative impact.

When to Seek Help for Your Child

“If you’ve tried several of the above strategies and your child is still struggling, additional support may be warranted,” Dr. Gold says. Evidence-based parenting books can offer more ideas. Behavioral psychologists and child psychiatrists may be available remotely to help tailor interventions to your family’s unique circumstances. Additionally, parents may consider pursuing their own treatment, if needed. Many helpers, like psychologists and social workers, are available and eager to support families remotely during this challenging time.

Additional Resources for Parents

Dr. Gold suggests the following books to help parents who have a child with a behavioral problem:

- *Parenting the Strong Willed Child* by Rex Forehand and Nicholas Long
- *The Explosive Child* by Ross Greene
- *The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child* by Alan Kazdin