

THE CHECKUP

Getting Through, Making Memories and Being the Grown-Ups

You can't change the world, but you can help shape the way your children experience this and remember it. And you will. You're the person they need.

By Perri Klass, M.D.

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I'm not here to tell you what the "good thing" is about the coronavirus situation, because there is no good thing about a pandemic, not ever. That doesn't mean there won't be acts of heroism, because there will be, and heartwarming stories, because we'll have those too, and even — if we're lucky — moments of scientific brilliance. But we still have to get through the bad stuff. And getting through the bad stuff with your kids may be your act of heroism, your heartwarming story, and even your moment of scientific brilliance.

What I'm here to tell you, you already know, but even so, it's always a hard thing to hear, at any age: we — the grown-ups — have to be the grown-ups here. And for those with young children, especially those at home now for the foreseeable future with those young children, with schools and day care centers closed, with "social distancing" the order of the day, I want to talk about getting through, making memories and being the grown-ups.

First a disclaimer: I'm a pediatrician and a mother of three, but I'm not particularly good at spending long periods of time with young children — or elementary-school-age children. I like children, and I think they're interesting, and I'd certainly rather have them as my patients than adults, but I have always understood that I do not have what it takes to be even a decent day care teacher, or kindergarten teacher, or grade school teacher.

My kids had plenty of decent teachers, and not a few brilliant teachers, with all the energy and creativity and endless patience that I don't have, and I worshiped them with the grateful fervor of the parent who knew that she paled by comparison. And certainly we should all acknowledge how much

skill goes into doing these jobs well — and as we yearn for the world to start up again, maybe we'll spare some energy to do that.

But here's the thing — in addition to everything else that you are doing, if you are unexpectedly home with your kids right now, in addition to trying to work from home, and tracking all the worrisome news, and hoarding toilet paper (just kidding), not to mention looking up recipes for making your own hand sanitizer — in addition to all that, you are also making memories, and helping your kids lay them down.

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This is going to be an event that defines their childhoods. It's going to be a touchstone for the little kids whose schools have closed just as it is for the college students sent home when they expected to be spring breaking and senior springing. Decades from now, at their college reunions, this will be one of the things those students remember, what they hark back to, what they have in common.

It will be like the memories of where you were and what you understood on 9/11, or (for people my age) where you were and what you understood when John F. Kennedy was assassinated — but it will be more than that, because it will not just be about where you were and what you did at one defining point in time, but instead a memory of a long, strange interlude, when the world was interrupted. And heaven knows, there are many things about that future memory that are out of our control. So let me acknowledge the many levels of uncertainty, anxiety and catastrophic thinking that are gripping us all.

But parents have some power here. You can't change the world, and you can't change the larger story — but you can help shape the way your children experience this and remember it. So am I telling you that in addition to home schooling and wiping down all surfaces and serving nutritious meals, in addition to doing all that to the highest possible standard, you need to reach for something more transcendent? No, what I meant to say was that what is remembered, what turns out to be transcendent, may well be the times you let the standards slip, the times the rules get bent, the times things get a little, well, goofy.

There are helpful materials in circulation from the American Academy of Pediatrics on how to keep kids occupied, from Common Sense Media on teaching and learning and digital issues, from Reach Out and Read on reading with kids.

First, let's give the standards their due. We might as well aim high, but we need to be able to miss without feeling bad about it. Some of what I'm telling you, you already know, but it bears repeating.

Limit exposure to the news, for yourself and for your kids. As is always true with screens, it helps when parents practice what they preach. Don't get sucked in by the 24-hour news cycle, and of course, be aware that news can be coming through phones and computer screens. When they do watch, watch with them, talk about it, and this applies to older children and adolescents as well. Being alone with the news now is not good for anyone's well-being.

You know what I'm going to say about being home with school-age children. I'm going to tell you to plan your day, to keep some structures in place, to establish routines. I'm going to tell you that even if you relax some of your normal rules about screen time, you still need to try to be aware of what your children are doing and watching, and make sure that nobody's life becomes only about screens, though you absolutely shouldn't be beating yourself up for lapses. And yes, the more you can help children use those screens to feel connected with the teachers and classmates and grandparents they're missing, the better.

The screens are incredibly valuable for keeping us connected right now, but we all need breaks to keep us healthy. Remember some of the ways of passing time with children that reach back before screens: board games, charades, recitations. Consider a long but gripping book to read aloud in small increments.

But I'm also going to suggest something else, and this is in the making-memories department. I'm going to suggest silly family rituals, dumb jokes, and maybe even foolish-song-singalongs at the start of family online contacts. I'm going to suggest reading books that were beloved by small children to those same children when they're older. If you have the occasional ambitious moment, I'm even going to suggest creating a family diary (or calendar or video montage or storybook, depending on your proclivities) that tracks the small events of this time at home, recognizing that even if day by day not much is happening, it's still going to be a time that all these children will look back to all their lives.

So no, I'm certainly not saying that you should embark on some massive family educational endeavor (let's all learn Swedish!) or creative project (welcome to our family production of "Midsummer Night's Dream!") — or that you should feel inadequate if you don't. Most of us are never going to be the Trapp Family Singers — though if those of you who are would like to post the video, we'll certainly watch you in your dirndls and applaud.

I'm just saying that part of being the grown-ups, sometimes, is being willing to put ourselves out there a little and experiment with family patterns — to venture forth in the arenas where we feel least confident, to put into words the emotions and hopes and fears which make us shy and self-conscious. You know this, but I'll say it anyway: We need to tell the people we love how much we love them, and tell them often. We need to thank the people who are taking risks to keep us safe. Our children will see all of this, and they will remember it, I promise.

The Coronavirus Outbreak >

Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated April 11, 2020

- **When will this end?**

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: "How will we know when to reopen the country?" In an American Enterprise Institute report, Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McClellan, Lauren Silvis and Crystal Watson staked out four goal posts for recovery: Hospitals in the state must be able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization, without resorting to crisis standards of care; the state needs to be able to at least test everyone who has symptoms; the state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases

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