Caring for Children in response to the COVID-19 Lockdown
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Social distancing and lockdowns and the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) is changing family life for millions globally. For caregivers with children now out of school, juggling work and caring for children and perhaps loss of income, the stresses of caregiving may be increased. For millions of already vulnerable families around the world such as refugees or those living in low resource contexts, these challenges are even harder.

The information here aims to help you by giving some ideas on how you can help both yourself and your children get through the challenges you may be facing and stay connected as a family. You will probably find that you already use some of the ideas and approaches in this booklet. Caring adults help to protect children in difficult times, especially when they are able to be warm, supportive, comforting and to help children make sense of uncertain times. Family harmony helps to reduce children’s anxieties while keeping children safe. Encouraging good behaviour helps children to cope as well as possible. It also makes it easier for parents to keep them safe.

We must remember this is a temporary state, and we will get through it. How well we work together with our families will help determine the wellbeing of our children now and in the future, as well as their memories of this time.

We hope this information will be helpful for you in caring for yourself and the children in your care. We start by looking at what you might be experiencing, as we know that the
ways that adults feel can affect the way that they care for children. This may help you avoid negative approaches that could make you feel worse in the long run. We then talk about ways of helping children through showing love and setting limits.

While isolation can represent an opportunity to spend time with your children and develop your relationship with them, many caregivers will be experiencing conflicting feelings and priorities, as well as practical challenges. Take your time reading this booklet, and don’t try to implement all the ideas all at once. Remember to remind your family that they are your priority. Creating and maintaining good family relationships takes time and effort. This challenging lockdown period may offer you time with your child that you previously did not have. Try to remember when you are caring for your children that you are engaged in the most important work of all.

About you

What might you be experiencing yourself?

- As well as concerns for your own health, and that of your immediate family, you may well be worried about, and perhaps responsible for, vulnerable family members, friends and neighbours.

- You may find yourself checking often for updates on the current COVID-19 situation.

- You may fear losing your job or being unemployed after the lockdown ends.
If your income has been affected you may be feeling severely overwhelmed and perhaps depressed.

You may be feeling particularly stressed with juggling working from home while caring for your children and managing the household, especially if your regular support network is not there for you.

You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions. You may be feeling overwhelmed, irritable or anxious. Your sleep and eating patterns may be disrupted.

You may worry about how long this situation will go on and how you will cope with it in the longer term.

All of these things may affect how you get on with the children you are looking after.

**WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOURSELF?**

Recognise that this is a challenging time but one that you can manage. Accept the uncertainty of the times ahead. You have tackled other hardships at other times in your life. Use the skills and resources that you have. Try to keep hopeful and positive.

Recognise you are not alone in what you are experiencing or feeling. This is a global situation, there are millions of others feeling the way you are today.

Look after yourself as much as possible and try to rest when you can. If you are isolating with other adults, try to share child-care responsibilities throughout the day so each of you have some time to rest or work.

Try to establish and maintain structure and routines, such as regular bedtimes.
-Try to keep yourself occupied with regular chores, or work and activities with those isolating with you.

-Maintain any spiritual, religious or cultural activities that provide you with comfort.

-Avoid any negative coping behaviours such as excess alcohol drinking, online gambling or taking drugs. These will increase your stress levels and make your situation worse in the long run.

-Remember that looking after yourself will help make you stronger and more able to look after the people you need to care for.

About your child

WHAT MIGHT YOUR CHILD BE EXPERIENCING?

How children react to changes can vary depending on a variety of things, including their age. Here are some common ways children react when they are stressed:

-Some children may be very happy to now be home, to miss the pressure of attending school or to simply spend time with their caregivers. Others may struggle from the onset with disruption to their routine, the isolation from friends and worry about the future.

-Some children may be unwilling to participate in tasks such as chores or academic work. Remember that it is understandable for children to show stress reactions or problem behaviours when they are overwhelmed or their normal routine is disrupted.
-Some children may become unusually active or aggressive or shy, quiet, withdrawn and sad.

-Some children may become fearful, overwhelmed and anxious. This can cause difficulties in sleeping. Children may become clingy to their parents and frequently cry.

-Even children that are initially very excited to be home may at some point in the coming weeks go through phases of misbehaving more than usual and displaying some signs of stress.

**WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD?**

Many caregivers around the world will be excited to embrace this time with their children, spend quality family time with them and build happy memories for the future. For others this lockdown will be very challenging and managing caring for children while holding down other roles may be stressful.

The information below provides helpful tips and strategies for all families on how to get through this lockdown period. This information is suitable for children of all ages and you will know best how to adapt it to the age of your own child. In addition, there is a separate section below that deals primarily with caring for teenage children.

*Safety*

Strive to follow your local government guidelines on how to stay safe and help manage the spread of COVID-19. This will mean different things for different families across the world. For some this may mean not leaving your home except for picking up supplies
for your family, for essential work or care of vulnerable people, or for daily exercise.

For others with no fixed home, you will need to try to keep your family in one location when possible, minimising their contact with new people to whatever extent is possible for you.

**Providing warmth and support**

- Promise that you will do everything you can to care for and protect them. Tell them they are your priority.

- Try to be affectionate with your child by for example giving them hugs or holding their hand. Tell them that you love them. This will help reassure and comfort them and help maintain a positive relationship.

- Try to tell them often that you care about them. Being caring and telling children that you love them will reassure them and help to make them more confident.

**Giving praise**

- One of the most effective ways of changing anyone’s behaviour is by giving praise, showing that you have noticed what they are doing and that you like it. Noticing, warmth and praise helps to build good relationships between adults and children. It also helps children to learn the behaviour that you want to see. Children are more likely to do things when they know they will be noticed and praised. The strategies
described here work well for younger as well as older children.

- Children usually love to be praised by people they care about. When you praise a child’s behaviour you make them more likely to do the same thing again. If you praise a child for things that you want to encourage, it will increase the chances that they will behave in the way that you want to see them behave.

- If they do something and there is no praise, then they may be less likely to do that particular thing again.

- Look for opportunities to praise your child when they have done something good, however small it may seem. Something as simple as smiling, giving a thumbs up sign or drawing a smile helps to show that you are pleased with them.

- Make sure the child knows exactly what they are being praised for so that they learn what you want them to do. For example saying: “Thank you very much for picking those things up for me. You are a helpful boy” means that the child knows exactly what you are pleased with, and that you like this helpful behaviour.

- The child will learn best if the praise tells them exactly what you want them to do more of in the future. For example, “I’m so pleased to see you doing your written work independently”, “I am really happy to see you playing so kindly with your sister”.

- Try to give your child very clear instructions. Clear information helps the child to understand exactly what it is that you want them to do. If instructions are given using positive rather than negative words so that the child knows just what they are supposed to do, it is much more likely that they will listen and do as they are asked.
“Don’t put that there” is negative wording and can sound as if you are annoyed.

“Please put the cup on the table” is positive, and you can praise the child straight away by saying “thank you for putting the cup on the table” immediately if they do as they are asked.

- It can take time to get used to praising children often. For children who are not used to it, it can sometimes feel strange, particularly at first. It’s good to practice this on little things in day-to-day life to get used to it. Simply saying “I like it when you...” or “thank you for...” can make children much more likely to do as you ask.

- There are lots of ways of showing that you are pleased with the child, for example a smile, a pat on the shoulder, a hug or kiss, or special name.

- Keeping a chart that you can draw smiley faces on when your child behaves in a way that you want can really encourage them.

- It may not work straight away. Give your child time to get used to it, and keep on trying.

- Try to be patient with the child and not to criticise them for changes in their behaviour, such as clinging to you or frequently seeking comfort. The child is reacting to being bored, less occupied and maybe the stresses and changes that they are experiencing. Being patient and praising them when they are behaving in ways that you want will help them feel more safe and secure.

- Encourage the child to help you and other people, and praise and thank them when they do. Children are likely to cope better when they are able to help others. It makes
them feel needed and important.

-Speaking clearly to your child and giving clear instructions without being angry is really important. By practising this calm, clear and positive way of speaking to the child, he or she will pay attention at times when it may be essential they really must follow an instruction.

**Spending time together and talking**

-Spending just a few minutes paying attention to your child whenever you can will help them to feel more confident and less anxious.

-You may be very busy juggling working remotely from home or looking after several children, but perhaps you can spend some time playing together or having a chat. This will make a difference to how you and your child feel. If you possibly can, make a little quality time for each child.

-Sometimes, when no one seems to be listening to a child, the child may carry on trying harder and harder to get attention until someone will listen. For example, this may mean that they speak more loudly and perhaps shout for their caregiver’s attention. The child learns that by making more and more noise, they eventually get the attention they want. By paying attention to what they want to show or tell you as soon as you can, you will help them to feel confident and to know that you want to listen to them as soon as you can.

-If they are wanting your attention but you can’t give it straight away, make sure that the child knows that you will listen to them as soon as you can. This will also help them to be able to wait a little while for your attention. See if you can explain that you can’t
listen just now, and tell them when you will be able to give them your attention. This will make it more likely that they will talk to you when they need to, and when you can listen.

-Sometimes, when no one seems to listen when the child wants to say something, they may just give up, and not try to communicate so much. It is important that children know that someone will listen to them. Try to make time to listen to them and to understand. Ask how they feel about their experiences being isolated from friends and family or missing school and which experiences are most stressful and difficult to adjust to. You know your child best, and can guess the best way to help them talk to you when they are going through very difficult times. Making sure that your child knows that you want to listen is very important for them.

-Do not promise children things you cannot provide. Children need to know that you are honest and that they can trust what you say.

-Be open and try to give children accurate information about what is happening. Remember though to keep information at a level that the child can understand, and try to explain in a way that will not increase their fears.

-If you need someone to talk to, look for another adult to share your feelings with so that you can stay as strong as possible for your children. This could be someone isolating with you or you could call a friend or family member.

-Remember that they are children and try not to overload them with things you may be worried about, for example any financial loss you may be facing, or a sick family member. This may feel a big challenge but keeping this in mind might help you protect your children.
Encouraging good behaviour

We know that in addition to praise, attention and listening, there are a number of things that caregivers can do to help children to behave well.

First of all, it is very important to make sure that children know what is expected of them. Sometimes children misbehave because they simply don’t understand what it is that caregivers want them to do. It helps children learn to be more responsible when they know for sure what you expect of them.

There will be all sorts of practical things that you will want your children to do, like speaking politely, helping with chores, completing academic work or being gentle with other children. These are often referred to as family rules. You can help your child to learn by being really consistent in what you ask them to do and raise them for when they do these. Demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see through your own actions is extremely important. Children learn by watching the adults around them. Showing them the right way to behave will have a strong influence on them.

Family rules help to keep children safe and behave well. Drawing a simple list of rules for the household can help the child to remember them. Positive wording is very important in making sure that the child knows what you want to see, for example, “speak politely”, “complete your academic work every morning”, “be gentle” or “keep our home tidy”.

It can be useful to think of a small privilege if you introduce a new rule to your children and they try extra hard to do better on that rule. For most things you shouldn’t have to
give a privilege. They should do what is right because that is the right thing to do. But if there is a rule that they are especially having trouble following, giving a small privilege may help them try harder.

-Privileges could be things such as staying up later than usual one night, extra time with a game they enjoy, reading, or you take over a chore for them one day. A privilege should be something that doesn’t cost anything.

-When you need to tell them to stop doing something that you do want them to do, make sure you have your child’s attention and then tell them very simply what it is that you want them to stop, and what you want them to do instead. For example, you might say, “Stop shouting and speak in a quiet voice”. If the child stops what they are doing, thank them using a clear and straightforward comment such as “thank you for speaking quietly when I asked you to.”

-Explain to children and adults in the house that the changed situation makes it all the more important that everyone uses “kind words” (and/or “kind voices”). This can then be a useful phrase to remind both adults and children – if voices or criticism starts to escalate.

Fighting and aggression

One of the common changes that parents notice in times of crisis and change can be an increase in fighting and aggression. This is even more relevant in the context of children being expected to stay confined indoors for a long period of time due to the
COVID-19 lockdown.

This is a reaction to the changes that the children are going through, and the anxiety they may feel, but is upsetting and worrying for parents. The daily activities of the child and the way caregivers communicate with them can affect the way that they behave.

A good way of preventing fighting and aggression in the household is to have clear rules about what is and is not allowed. Writing these rules down, and discussing them with children is a good way of showing what the rules are. Saying what you want your child to do is very important. For example, rather than saying “no fighting” you could say something like “keep your hands and feet to yourself” or, instead of staying “no shouting” this can be positively worded as “speak in a quiet voice”. Keeping to these positive rules very carefully, and praising children for doing as they are told to do, helps children to learn how you expect them to behave.

Also, having a list of activities ready that combine academic work and play activities to keep children busy will help too.

When children are fighting, the first priority is to ensure the safety of the children. If children in your care are fighting, tell them firmly to stop immediately, and then tell them clearly what they should be doing instead.

It is very important for caregivers to be fair in the way that they use these approaches to address aggression between children. With older children, finding a time later on when you are both calm to discuss the fighting can be helpful. Understanding the reasons that they got into the fight should help to enable the caregiver to give appropriate advice.
Explaining your beliefs and what you value as important while your child is calm will help to build their understanding of appropriate ways to behave and react.

**Maintaining routine**

As things have progressed in such an unprecedented fast pace with the COVID-19 Lockdown, it can be difficult to keep household routines going. When you have a large family or are working remotely from home this may be even more so. However difficult life is at the moment, routines can be helpful. They can help to give you all structure in life. This sense of knowing what is going to happen can help children to feel more safe.

For example, try to keep to your usual family rising times, as well as your mealtimes, and bedtimes. If your daily activities have changed a lot then involve children in working out any new routine in a new a daily plan involving any learning based activities, or your daily exercise.

- Encourage children to do school-work (reading, maths, writing), even if there are no regular schools at the moment. This will help them to learn, and also keep them busy.

- Your experience with school work will be different for each family. In cases where children’s schools may be sending a lot of work home for your child to do, try to not get overwhelmed and instead make a timetable with your child that sets out when they will be working.

- Encouraging children to keep a diary, even only adding an entry every few days, in which they record their reflections and include the things that they have enjoyed. For younger children this could have a more structured approach. Such as “Today I learned
about . . .”, “Today I read/drew/made . . .”, “Today I tried . . . for the first time”,
“Tomorrow I look forward to . . .” . Older children might like to create a “Vlog” to
chronicle their time in lockdown. Make sure that you suggest this for themselves, rather
than sharing what they vlog on the internet without their permission.

Encouraging play

Play is important in helping children relax. It is also an opportunity for them to work
through past and current stress and experiences and to prepare for the future.
Encourage the child to play with you, their siblings or anyone else isolated with you
during this time. It helps maintain some normality in their lives.

-You can help your younger child’s development by finding moments to play with them.
Just finding a few minutes to play, or for older children, to talk with them, also helps to
build your relationship. When you play with the child, try to watch what they are doing
and show an interest, rather than trying to tell them what to do. Your child will
appreciate it if they can tell you what to do for a change! Let them guide you on how
you can help them in their play. Tell them what you like about the way they are playing.
For example, you could say “I like the picture you’re drawing. Tell me about it”.

Fears, anxieties and night disturbances

These are very common reactions for children who are experiencing something as
extreme as the COVID-19 crisis. Many children will be experiencing fears and anxieties.
Some children may initially seem very well but as the weeks progress my later become
distressed. This is understandable, particularly with the availability of information on the spread of COVID-19 and the death rate in their countries that many children around the world will have access to. Using the positive approaches that we have described can help to make children feel more confident and reduce their fears.

Warmth and praise, and providing as much safety and predictability as possible is very helpful for them. Fears and anxieties may lead to sleep difficulties such as nightmares and wetting their beds. Remember that it is difficult to control these and so it is important to take a gentle approach and not to make the child more anxious by showing that you find these night disturbances troublesome.

If they are wetting their bed, check for any obvious changes that you can make. For example, are they afraid to get up in the night if they need to urinate? Think through the evening and night time routines for changes which might help. Make sure that they have enough to drink during the day, as this can affect the bladder. Restricting drinks during the day may actually make them more likely to wet the bed. Keeping a chart of dry nights and praising the child for these may help.

Because of the situation, you may not be able to make promises for the future, but you can assure them that you will take the best possible care of them that you can and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe.

If you have serious concerns, do try to see if you can find advice from a doctor or specialist worker who can help.
Relaxation techniques

At a time of uncertainty, children are looking to caregivers for stability and reassurance that everything will be fine. Thus, it is important that children aren't adversely impacted by the daily stresses that adults might be experiencing during the period of isolation. Even though you are in lockdown this does not necessarily mean you are alone, you may still be able to reach out for advice or support if either you, or the children in your care, are facing any difficulties at home.

It is important that you spend time doing things that help you feel relaxed. To be able to care for your children appropriately, you must also spend time caring for yourself. For some people this could be by maintaining exercise, or spiritual, religious or cultural activities, for others it may be spending time in a room alone or reading.

The way you breathe affects your whole body, yet when you are worried and anxious your body may become tense and your breathing may speed up. You can use breathing techniques to help you to calm down when you are feeling stressed or worried. Slow, deep breathing is a good way to reduce tension, feel relaxed, and reduce stress.

To practice deep breathing you could try the following:

-Start by dropping your hands below your waist, and keeping your palms facing up.
Slowly raise your hands as you breathe in through your nose. Stop when your hands are about shoulder level. Slowly lower your hands as you breathe out through your mouth.

-The key thing you should aim for is to breathe deeply from your abdomen.

-Try practicing this for two to three minutes. The slower you do this and the more attention you pay to taking deep breathes, the more relaxed you should feel.
-Your children can also greatly benefit from learning these breathing techniques and using them when they too feel stressed or anxious. You may like to try teaching them and practicing deep breathing together.

-Avoid any negative coping behaviours such as excess alcohol drinking, online gambling or taking drugs. These will increase your stress levels and make your situation worse in the long run. The close proximity you may be experiencing with your children now may mean that they can see and hear what you are doing more than often. You may be their biggest influence in how they deal with this isolation period. Remember to role play how you would want your children to behave.

Caring for teenagers

All the tips in this booklet are applicable for caring for teenage children too. At the same time, it is important to recognise and accept that the teenage years often bring various emotional and physical challenges for children that should be recognised and sensitively dealt with. This helps makes caregiving teenagers easier and healthier.

- It is normal and healthy for older children or teenagers to want some time away from you. This can make this time especially hard for them and you. If it is safe and allowed for them to go for a short daily walk alone, then encourage this. Otherwise talk to your children about how they can have time out from family activities and tasks. Try to reach an agreement that they are happy with.

-Be understanding that they likely have a lot of access to news about the current COVID-19 through phones and social media. They may be feeling anxious about their health and their future. School closure for some may be a fun thing to start with, but
with time older children may become worried and stressed about how they will cope on their return.

- Older children may particularly miss their friends and independence. Allow and encourage them to phone their friends to keep in touch. Putting phones away some time before bedtime will help you ensure that they are getting the sleep they need.

- To avoid conflict between caregivers and older children, try to allow children to take control and responsibly of their learning or daily routine, and look for opportunities to praise them in how they are coping.

- Teenagers particularly need a stimulating environment to thrive in their learning and development. Do what you can now during this time to teach them how to safely take more responsibility around the home or living space. This could include teaching them how to prepare food and operate gas or electrical appliances, cook a meal for the family, or use tools to do house or garden maintenance work.

- Have realistic expectations of your children. There will be some good days and some bad days to come for all of you. Your teenager may push the limits you set. Try to react calmly and rationally if this happens. This may be particularly hard as you may already be stressed. Stepping away to cool down if you are feeling angry or frustrated and coming back to speak to your child when you have calmed down will help maintain a respectful and healthy relationship.

- Where possible, spend frequent small amounts of time with your teenagers—this can be just beneficial as longer periods that are less frequent. Maybe you could build some moment into your daily schedule where you try to fit some time in to just sit and talk with your teenager to check on how they are feeling.
Staying connected with friends and family

- Feeling isolated and far away from friends and family during the COVID-19 lockdown can be challenging for every family member no matter their age. Often reflecting that you are not the only one experiencing this struggle, but that millions around the globe are too, can help. One way to ease the loneliness of social isolation could be by connecting with friends and family using the internet, social media and our phones.

- You may try building set times into your daily routines for children to connect with their friends and relatives. This is also a great way to support vulnerable family members such as elderly grandparents who too may be feeling lonely.

- While the internet offers a wonderful means of connectedness, it is important to keep children safe online, and particularly during this period when they may be using the internet for longer periods. There are several ways you can support children in engaging safely online such as ensuring any computer that children have access to is kept in a shared space, rather than the child’s bedroom. For more online safety tips see (insert WHO/UNICEF link to infographic).
Managing working from home while caring for your children

A significant struggle now facing many caregivers is managing working remotely from home while caring for their children. This can be made more challenging with expectations that caregivers will lead academic extensive school-based activities in place of school. You may also be caring for sick or vulnerable adults.

-Maintaining a work life balance is very important so that you can both meet the needs of your work and that of your children. Accept that without the support of other available caregivers isolating with you to help with child care, it will be almost impossible to replicate the work conditions you are used to or the productivity and output you usually give.

-Begin by organizing your day and building a routine. Fit time within your work schedule for your children and all their needs.

-Explain to your children, even very young children, that though they are your main priority you still have a lot of work responsibly to maintain and that others outside the home are relying on you. Tell them you will appreciate their understanding and help in making this work for everyone.

-Inform your work contacts that you are working from home and embrace this arrangement as much as possible. Make child-friendly appointments. Try sending out a message to work contacts letting them know your work arrangements and that you are caring for children at
home. Remember the people you are working with are in the same situation. Keep your strictly formal meetings to a minimum if you can.

- Make sure you take frequent breaks from your work and use this time to do something with your children. This helps your productivity more by alleviating any family related stress or guilt you may feel.

- Cook family meals together, integrate your kids within your lunch breaks, children enjoy routines and keeping busy.

**WE HOPE YOU FIND THESE IDEAS HELPFUL**

Families around the world are adapting to the changes that are happening because of COVID-19. Parenting in new contexts such as the COVID-19 lockdown certainly can make things harder. On the positive side, isolation is an opportunity to spend time with your children and develop your relationship with them.

Acknowledging to yourself that you are in difficult and uncertain time can perhaps help you to find the moments when you are able to act on these tips. Remember that worries and anxieties are a completely natural reaction to the uncertainty and stress and additional workload you may be going through. So far as is possible, trying to reduce stress by helping children feel loved and cared for, listening to their concerns, keeping up routines and trying to build in enjoyable activities are very important things that you can do.

Accept the uncertainty of the times ahead and try to think of the next steps you will take when this lockdown is over and your lives take back their usual form. What would you like to build now with your children that you can take with you into the future?