

Maintaining Your Family's Mental Health During School Closures

On Tuesday evening, after eleven days of being stuck at home, unable to see friends or extended family, our eight-year-old son broke down in tears. For over an hour, he alternated between uncontrollable sobbing and managing to share short sentences about his feelings. The trigger? Sitting next to me on the couch when his little brother, our three-year-old, snuggled between us.

This unprecedented time has forced our entire family to adjust to a new normal. My three children — boys aged 8, 5, and 3 — are now constantly together. This constant togetherness was creating intense feelings that were simmering under the surface, which I, as a mom, hadn't noticed.

Taking a few minutes each day to check in with our children can have immeasurable rewards. Building a vocabulary around emotions will help children learn to identify and express their feelings more appropriately. Find opportunities to talk with your older children about their emotions. Ask how they are feeling, acknowledge their feelings, and model empathetic responses. If they respond with "I'm fine," help them articulate their feelings by suggesting words they might be struggling to find. For example, "I wonder if it's disappointing and lonely not to see your friends regularly?" or "Playing with younger brothers all day might feel overwhelming. How about you?"

Younger children, with their limited vocabulary, might not be able to express their feelings in words. Instead, they may act out physically. As parents, we need to learn to read their body language. Hitting or yelling might indicate frustration or anger; sulking and storming off could mean disappointment. Naming these feelings for even our youngest children helps them develop problem-solving skills for the future.

I have noticed my children wanting to be physically closer to me more than usual. Instead of sitting next to me, they want to be on top of me; instead of having a conversation, they clamor over each other to be heard. It took stepping back and viewing their behavior differently to realize they were seeking care and comfort. What I initially saw as annoying behavior was actually a plea for love and guidance. To see this, I had to let my own guard down.

Focusing on my family's mental health is crucial right now. We've tried to build in more one-on-one time with each child, even in our tight quarters. We've created opportunities to get outside and hike or ride bikes while maintaining social distance. Quiet time, where everyone disconnects from technology and chooses a book or quiet toy, or takes a nap, is now a regular part of every afternoon. Video conferencing with extended family helps keep us connected, and family movie or game nights help reduce stress. At the end of each day, my husband and I take some time to sit on the couch and binge-watch something on Netflix.

These times are tough. Talk to each other. Find comfort in one another. If limited by space and distance, find ways to thrive within those constraints. Focus on your mental health — whatever that means for you.

Infants

Art, Music and Movement: Singing and Moving with Your Child

Start by singing a familiar song, and let your child know that you'll be singing some new songs too. Choose another song that reflects your child's interests (e.g., if your child likes animals, sing "Old McDonald Had a Farm"). Keep the songs simple by singing only one verse and saving the hand motions or actions until your child has heard the words and melody several times.

Kids will engage with:

- Listening to and singing along with familiar songs
- Exploring vocal pitch

After singing the song a few times, add some motions or actions. Practice the motions first (limit to two or three per song to start), and encourage your toddler to copy them before adding the words. You can add more motions once your child is familiar with the words and original actions. Accept your child's level of participation, whether they are simply observing, trying some of the actions, or singing some of the words.

Invite younger children to sit close to you so they can hear your voice and watch your movements. Observe how they respond to your singing (e.g., gaze at you intently, clap their hands, or make sounds). Comment on their attempts to sing and move along with you.

Communication, Language and literacy: Encouraging Your Infant's Speech Development

Kids will engage with:

- Making verbal sounds, such as cooing and babbling
- Saying or singing a single word

Notice when your infant is content and making attempts at speech. Set aside all distractions and get ready to have a "conversation"! When your infant starts cooing, respond by imitating their vocalizations or by talking (e.g., you might say,

“You have a lot to say. Will you tell me some more stories?”). Model conversation patterns by pausing occasionally, giving your child time to observe your facial expressions, think about their next move, and formulate a response. Respond to their changes in vocalization when they use different inflections.

As your child grows older, they may begin babbling, which sounds more like speech. When this happens, repeat their sounds and then introduce new ones. For example, if your child makes the /m/ sound, face them and repeat, “Ma, ma, ma, ma.” You can introduce a new sound, like /b/, and repeat, “Ba, ba, ba, ba,” giving your child a chance to respond. Even if they aren’t ready to imitate the new sound immediately, they will start making new sounds in the coming months as their speech develops.

You might also introduce a few simple signs for frequently used words, such as "more," "all done," "eat," or "drink" (look up American Sign Language [ASL] websites to find these simple signs). Just as your child won’t begin repeating words right away, they won’t imitate signs right away either; they need time to see, hear, and practice using the signs. However, you may find that infants will sign some of these common words well before they can say them.

Early Math and Discovery: Exploring Scents with Your Child

Gather materials with pleasant smells, such as lemons, apples, empty spice containers, flowers, and a variety of foods. Be creative! You might also have nice-smelling soap or candles around the house that would be perfect for this activity.

Start by bringing an object up to your nose to smell it first, then gently place the item near your child’s nose. Observe if your child picks up an object and brings it to their nose and mouth. Note if your child shows any preferences for or aversions to different smells.

As you go through this activity, talk to your child about what they are doing and smelling, using both familiar and unfamiliar words. Describe what each object smells like to you and if it reminds you of anything. Share your observations as you smell each one.

When your child begins to lose interest, let them know you will smell one more item before moving on to the next activity!

Kids will engage with:

- Smelling and reacting to a variety of food items
- Observing the natural and physical world around them.

Others and I: Observing Your Child’s Attention and Movement

Kids will engage with:

- Turning toward or away from objects or people
- Being persistent in moving toward things.

Notice which toys, objects, and sounds catch your child’s attention. For instance, young infants might turn their heads toward a bottle, while older infants might reach for a brightly colored stuffed animal that jingles when shaken. Also, be mindful of the objects, sounds, and other sensory inputs that

your child might try to avoid, such as turning their head away from a bright light.

If your infant is not yet mobile, try holding a colorful toy that makes a pleasant noise about 10-12 inches above their face. You’ll know if your child can see and hear the toy because they might smile, coo, or kick their legs in excitement. Slowly move the toy from one side to the other, occasionally shaking it, and stop periodically to ensure your child is still tracking it. If your infant is mobile, place an interesting toy near them, ensuring they are aware of it. Encourage your child as they attempt to reach the toy by saying things like “Stretch just a little bit more!” or “You’re going to get it!”

As infants grow, they begin to creep along the floor, sit independently, and move into a crawling position. At this stage, position an interesting toy just beyond their reach. Over time, your child will show more persistence in moving toward the object. Once they reach the object several times, you might want to position it a bit farther away. Be aware of their reactions to this challenge, as they may become frustrated or lose interest if the object seems too far away. To keep them engaged, ensure they experience frequent successes and encouragement.

As your child progresses, they will start crawling, pulling to a standing position, cruising along furniture, and taking their first steps. An infant's natural tendency to move toward interesting objects can become dangerous if the items of interest aren't child-friendly or if dangerous obstacles are in the way; be sure to babyproof where necessary. Placing interesting and infant-friendly toys and objects around your child's play space will encourage crawling and cruising.

To further support your child’s development, introduce a variety of textures and sounds through different toys to see which ones they are most drawn to. Additionally, creating a safe and stimulating environment will encourage exploration and help build their confidence in their abilities.

Physical Development and Healthy Habits: Creating a Treasure Basket for Non-mobile Infants

For non-mobile infants, create a treasure basket filled with appealing materials—objects that are easy to grasp and explore. Consider including items like bean bags, cardboard tubes, rattles, brushes, and small toys. Place these items together in a shallow container and put it near your infant so they can easily reach in and grab anything that looks interesting.

Kids will engage with:

- Grasping a variety of objects
- Moving parts of the body

Observe which objects your infant reaches for and how they interact with them, such as passing them from hand to hand. Make observations out loud about what your child is doing, saying things like, “How about this one?” or “You grabbed the blue bean bag!” Pay attention to any preferences your child shows for certain types of objects or colors.

Allow your infant to explore the materials until they begin to lose interest, then transition to the next activity. To keep their curiosity alive, periodically switch out the items in the basket with new ones. This can help maintain their engagement and support their sensory development. Additionally, introducing items with different textures and sounds can further enhance their exploration and learning experience.

Toddlers

Arts, Music and Movement: Water Play with Spray Bottles for Toddlers

Kids will engage with:

- Mixing colors
- Noticing color change in the water

This activity can be done leaning over the bathtub or sink, or in the tub. Fill the sink or tub with a small amount of lukewarm water. Give your toddler spray bottles or soap dispensers filled with colored water,

and invite them to spray or pump water into the sink or tub.

Give your toddler time to explore the bottle and figure out how to squeeze the lever to make the water come out. If your child becomes frustrated, gently offer to show them how to squeeze it (they might need to use both hands). As your child sprays water on the walls of the tub or sink, comment on the colors and describe how the colors drip down the wall and what happens when the colors mix. Join in the play by grabbing another bottle or dispenser and adding to the colors on the wall. Be sure to trade and swap bottles if your child requests it.

To extend the fun, you can introduce different shaped containers for your child to spray water into, creating colorful patterns and shapes. Additionally, you can encourage your toddler to experiment with mixing the colors in the water to observe how new colors are formed, enhancing their understanding of color combinations.

Communication, Language and Literacy: Creating a Personalized Photo Book for Your Toddler

Before you get started:

1. Take and print pictures of important people (or pets) in your child's life, as well as pictures of items that are familiar to your child (e.g., a stuffed animal). The number of photos you use will depend on your toddler's attention span—four or five pictures for younger toddlers and a larger selection for older toddlers.

Kids will engage with:

- Looking at or pointing to familiar objects in photos
- Speaking one – two- or three-word statements about photos
- Responding to an adult's statement

2. Cut the cardstock to the desired size. Make the book larger to fit several pictures on a page or smaller to fit fewer pictures on a page. For younger toddlers, put one or two pictures on each page. Secure the pictures onto the pages with adhesive tape or glue and use a hole puncher to create two or three holes aligned on the left-hand side of each page. Secure the pages together with yarn, string, or metal rings.

3. Place a photo of your child (or children) on the front cover and write a title.

Introduce the new book at a time when you typically read to your toddler. Encourage your toddler to help turn the pages or hold the book independently. Give your child time to look at and respond to the pictures. Younger toddlers may simply point to pictures that catch their attention or use a single word or gesture to label a picture. Older toddlers may label pictures, begin using two- and three-word phrases to talk about them, and respond to your statements or questions about the pictures.

Pay attention to your child's cues to determine when they are losing interest in the book. If your child wants to continue looking at the book when it is time to move on, let them know you'll look at it one more time before putting it away. Assure your child they can look at it again soon. Additionally, you can rotate the photos periodically to keep the book interesting and engaging for your child. You might also consider adding new photos as your child's interests and relationships evolve, creating an ever-changing storybook for them to enjoy.

Early Math and Discovery: Encouraging Your Child's Mealtime Learning

Kids will engage with:

- Indicating more
- Using a number word
- Counting by rote
- Counting with one-to-one correspondence

Place a small amount of food on your child's plate or highchair tray, keeping more food in a bowl or on a plate on the table so they can see that more is available. Give your child time to pick up each piece

of food and eat it. Talk about the food you've given them, for example, "Your crackers are all gone!"

When their plate or tray is empty, young toddlers might indicate they want more by reaching for the bowl or plate of food or by making a vocalization. Ask, "Do you want more bananas?" You may want to repeat the word "more" and/or make the sign for "more" (look online for the American Sign Language image of how to sign "more"). Over time, if you consistently repeat "more" to your toddler, they will begin saying or signing "more" when they want more of something.

If your child has already moved beyond this developmental stage, count out loud (e.g., "1, 2, 3, 4, 5") when your toddler asks for more food as you place the items on their tray or plate. Over time, you will notice your child will begin using number words or start counting by rote. It's okay if they don't yet understand what each number means because experimenting with number words and rote counting is an important step in learning to count. Encourage your child's attempts at using number words and continue to model counting.

Older toddlers who have practiced saying number words will begin counting with one-to-one correspondence, starting with just a few objects and gradually counting to 10 or more objects. This activity isn't meant to be a "counting drill and practice" session; rather, it's meant to be an ongoing, natural process throughout mealtimes. The activity will draw to a close as the mealtime ends.

To further support your child's development, you can introduce simple addition or subtraction concepts during mealtimes, such as "If you eat one more piece, how many will you have left?" Also, involving your child in setting the table by counting utensils and plates can reinforce their counting skills in a practical context.

Others and I: Exploring Pictures with Your Child

To get started, gather a variety of postcards and magazine pictures of children, animals, and common objects for your child to choose from, handle, and look at. Consider putting these items into envelopes or slit boxes (like a mailbox) so your child can experience "opening the mail," just like you.

As you explore the different items, talk with your child about the pictures and listen to their responses. You might ask questions like:

- What is this person doing?

Kids will engage with:

- Enjoying reading materials
- Identifying what's happening in different photos

- How is this person feeling today?
- Why is the person in this picture doing that?
- How is this person like you? How is this person different?

Keep your questions open-ended, and let your child make their own observations about the different pictures. Their thoughts might give you helpful insights into their interests and provide inspiration for more activities.

Encourage your child to describe the scenes and narrate what they think is happening in each picture. Additionally, you can create a simple storytelling activity by asking your child to make up a story based on one of the pictures, fostering creativity and language development.

Physical Development and Healthy Habits: Creative Collage Making with Your Child

Kids will engage with:

- Moving parts of the body
- Being creative with different materials

Gather scraps of materials that are easy to tear, such as tissue paper, aluminum foil, and newsprint. Place them all on a covered surface where your child can easily sit and play. Provide glue for your child to use,

either a glue stick or liquid glue.

Encourage your child to tear and glue small pieces of the provided material onto a piece of paper or cardstock. As they engage with the materials, ask questions like, “What are you making?” and “What are you going to put on next?” Join in the fun by tearing different pieces in various ways and see if your child imitates you.

Make sure to display your child’s masterpiece at their height around the house! You can also create themed collages based on seasons, holidays, or favorite animals to keep the activity fresh and exciting. Additionally, take the opportunity to introduce new textures and materials, such as fabric scraps or leaves, to enhance their sensory experience.

Arts, Music and Movement Popping Popcorn with Your Child

Pop popcorn with your children. Using an air popper or a microwave popper works best because the children can see the kernels popping, but popcorn in a microwave bag is fine too. Discuss the steps in making popcorn and why corn pops. As you chat with your child, you might say:

- “Wow. I hear a lot of noise! What do you think is happening?”
- “How do you think those hard, yellow kernels turn into fluffy popcorn?”
- “What does popcorn feel like in your mouth?”
- “Look at the pieces of popcorn and find your favorite shape.”

Kids will engage with:

- Physical activity
- How one thing can affect another
- Spatial relationships
- Moving to music

Let the children help finish making the popcorn by dumping it into a bowl, pouring on butter, and shaking on salt. Once you and the children have enjoyed some popcorn, move on to the second part of the activity.

Spread out a bed sheet and ask the children to hold on to an edge. Pretend the bed sheet is a giant popcorn popper, and ask them to help you make popcorn. Place balls or rolled-up socks in the middle of the sheet. Depending on the type of popcorn popper they are familiar with, pretend to add oil or turn on the heat.

Play music quietly and help the children shake the bed sheet. Start shaking slowly, mimicking popcorn getting hotter. As you shake with the children, talk about how the balls are moving. Use words like rolling, bouncing, and jumping. Incorporate directional words such as over, under, in, and out.

Play the music louder and have the children shake faster so the balls pop up in the air. When the balls fly off the bed sheet, encourage the children to put them back on.

When you and the children start to get tired, slow the shaking and turn down the music. Gradually reduce the “popping” until it stops.

To extend the fun, you can create a counting game by having the children count how many balls pop off the sheet each time. Additionally, you can introduce different colored balls and ask the children to identify and sort them as they pop.

Communication, language and literacy: Fun Rhyming Activity for Car Rides

Kids will engage with:

- Rhyming
- Writing letters and words
- Building vocabulary

Next time you have bored children riding in the car, try this rhyming activity. Warning: In order to make this activity successful, you'll need to think of and say silly-sounding words. Tell the children that you are going to play a rhyming game — they will shout out a word,

and you will think of something that rhymes with it.

Listen for a word and then think of at least one word that has the same ending sound or that rhymes! If the children say “car,” you could respond with “bar” or “far.” You can respond with as many real rhyming words as you can, but what makes this game fun is when you say nonsense words. So, go ahead and say “bar” and “far” but keep going with “rar,” “zar,” and “nar!”

Keep going until your child tires of the game. To make it even more engaging, you can encourage the children to come up with their own silly rhyming words. Additionally, you can introduce themes, like animals or food, to make the game more challenging and educational.

Math , Science and Technology: Engaging Children in Laundry Help

Tell the children that there is so many laundries to finish, and you really need their help! Here are some fun options for them:

- Match all the socks and identify their colors.
- Categorize all the clothes into piles based on whose they are or the type of clothing (e.g., all shirts together, all pants together).
- Count the number of clothing pieces in the pile.
- Sort all the clothes by color.
- Count all the items that need to be hung up and get the same number of hangers, laying one hanger on each piece of clothing.

Kids will engage with:

- Building fine motor skills
- Following directions
- Colors
- Self-help skills

Have the children help carry the clothes to each person's room. Once they get to their own room, they can put their own clothes away. When the activity is done, your house will be cleaner than when you started!

For younger children:

- Younger children may have difficulty folding clothes and towels. Adjust your expectations and accept their efforts.
- Give younger children simple tasks that don't require much folding or precision, like pairing socks or putting underwear in a drawer. As they get older, gradually give them more responsibility.

For older children:

- Teach older children how to fold towels, roll socks, and hang up their own clothing. Once they've learned, they can be assigned these tasks periodically to help the family.
- Use this opportunity to teach older children about fractions by folding a towel in half, then in quarters.
- Teach older children how to do laundry from start to finish. Have them help carry the laundry to the washing machine, show them how to add detergent, and how to move the clothes to the dryer when the wash cycle is done.

Folding laundry may seem simple, but it supports a lot of learning! Take the time now to get children into a routine of helping. As they get older and can handle more responsibility, they will be able to do this job on their own. Additionally, you can turn this chore into a fun bonding time by sharing stories or singing songs while folding clothes together. This not only makes the task enjoyable but also strengthens your family connection.

Others and I: Planning the Day with Your Children

Kids will engage with:

- Learning about time
- Describing a sequence of events
- Making choices
- Taking initiative

Start this activity early in the morning before much of the day has slipped away. Sit with your children and discuss what you will be doing that day. Tell them they can help you draw a simple picture for each activity you will do together throughout the day, or at least for the morning. For example, you might

divide the morning like this:

1. Get dressed and get ready to go
2. Dance activity
3. Playtime
4. Eat lunch
5. Naptime

So, for this sample morning, there would be five pictures. Find a place to hang the pictures in the order they will happen. Tell the children that each time they start a new part of the day, they get to put a sticker on the matching picture. Let the children pick one thing they want to do during each part of the day. This might look something like this:

1. Get dressed – They can pick what they would like to wear.
2. Dance activity – They can pick a new dance to try.
3. Playtime – They can decide what they would like to play.
4. Eat lunch – They can pick one item they would like to have for the meal.
5. Naptime – They can pick the story they want to hear before they go to sleep.

Allow the children to put a sticker on the first picture and get ready to go. Continue through each part of the day. As you go, talk about what comes first, second, third, etc. Have the children discuss what is coming next and what they choose to do during each part of the day.

At the end of the day, review the pictures you drew to label each part of the day. Ask the children if they remember what they did during each part and talk about their day. Additionally, encourage them to express what their favorite part of the day was and why. This reflection helps reinforce the sequence of activities and the choices they made, promoting a sense of accomplishment and routine.

Physical Development and Healthy Habits: Cooking Together: Creating a New Favorite Food

Talk to your children about their favorite foods and share your favorites too! Tell them that you are going to cook a new food together, and maybe it will become a new favorite. Decide ahead of time what recipe you will cook with the children. Write out simple directions on a few index cards, such as:

Kids will engage with:

- Measuring
- Learning about healthy foods
- Sense of taste and smell
- Building fine-motor skills

1. Measure all ingredients
2. Mix in bowl
3. Stir
4. Bake in oven

Gather all the ingredients together and have the children wash their hands with you. With their help, begin making the healthy treat by showing them the directions on the index cards.

Granola Bars

Learning activities:

1. Peek into the oven every so often as the granola bars are cooking. Have children describe the changes they see happening.
2. Ask the children, “Why do you think the heat makes it change?”

Tools:

- Large bowl
- Mixing spoon
- Measuring cups and spoons

Ingredients:

- 4 cups Quick Quaker Oats, uncooked
- 1½ cups chopped nuts
- 1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
- ¾ cup melted butter
- ½ cup honey
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- ½ teaspoon salt (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Combine all ingredients; mix well. Press firmly into a well-greased 15½ x 10½” jelly roll pan (a simple cookie sheet works just fine too). Bake for 10–12 minutes or until golden brown and bubbly. Cool thoroughly; cut into bars or crumble for granola.

To enhance the experience, let the children choose some additional ingredients like dried fruits or chocolate chips to personalize their granola bars. After baking, encourage the children to share their new treat with the family and talk about what they enjoyed most about the cooking process.