

## Helping Families Cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic

We are all reading about it and listening to stories on the news. Our children are hearing about it too, and they are feeling the impact as they are kept at home and adjusting to new ways of learning. So, how can we stay happy and healthy as we hunker down and protect our families – and those most vulnerable – from COVID-19? Read below for some practical tips to help your family cope, and make the most of your time together, from family nurse practitioner and parenting coach, Dr. Erin Erickson, co-host of the weekly podcast *Mom Enough*®.

### I. Background: COVID-19 Pandemic & the Need for Staying Home

COVID-19 is the illness caused by a new coronavirus strain that has spread around the world. Initially, data suggested that people over 65 years and those with chronic health issues, such as heart disease, diabetes, and respiratory disease were at greater risk. In the Europe and the US, the illness is affecting younger adults too. Children, for the most part, experience minimal to no symptoms, but they can still spread the disease. Everyone can do their part by minimizing contact with others. While this has been referred to as “social distancing,” what is actually recommended is physical distancing. Avoiding physical contact with people outside of your immediate family is one thing we can all do to help protect those who are at greater risk from the virus. Mom Enough does not recommend social isolation – in fact, connecting with others electronically is a great way to cope during the pandemic. We also do not recommend staying inside all the time. There are many benefits to being outside; we just have to do so safely.

### II. How to cope with COVID-19

- **Maintain a regular schedule**

When times are uncertain, consistency can create a sense of security, especially for young children. Follow your usual bedtime and waking routines and try to create a schedule that works for your family while you are adapting to life without school, childcare or working outside the home. Engage your children in creating the schedule, asking them what kinds of things they would like to do during the day. Write down the schedule – or have your kids do this and decorate it. Post it in a prominent place, so you are all reminded of what you’re doing when.

- **Stay connected with friends and family, but not in person**

Not going to school or childcare is a big adjustment for children. They thrive on and learn from their social connections. Get creative when it comes to finding new ways to socialize. Explore new technology to find ways for your children to maintain friendships and social connections. A few ideas include scheduling a Zoom or Facetime story time with other children. If your children are old enough to read, then they could “get together” online with a small group of friends and each read their favorite book to the group. If you have toddlers, you could coordinate with other parents and each parent could read a book to the group. Teens might enjoy the new Netflix Party, which allows them to watch movies with friends. Grandparents might offer to call and read their grandchildren a bedtime story. While parenting and child development experts typically recommend limiting screen time, some flexibility during such unusual circumstances is okay.

- **Go outside**

While the playground may not be the best place to go given the potential risks for infection due to the virus surviving on surfaces for several hours or days, there are lots of other options. Visit a state park and go for a hike or explore nearby nature preserves. Easier yet, walk outside your front door and explore the nature right there. Ask your children what they see or set them out on a treasure hunt for supplies for a nature-based art project.

- **Minimize exposure to the news**

In times of crisis, it is normal to want to stay connected to what is happening. But, it's also important that we stay connected and present with our children. They need us during this challenging time. Keeping the radio or TV on with constant reporting on the virus can set us all up for significant stress or sadness. Set some limits in the house about how frequently you will check the news. When you do, see if you can engage your children in an activity in another room so the news doesn't frighten or overwhelm them.

- **Ask your kids how they are feeling**

Children are tuned in to their parents' emotions. Even if we don't tell them we are scared or sad about what is happening, they can sense it. Check in with your children and ask them how they are feeling. Reassure them that there are lots of amazing people doing their best to keep everyone safe. Let them know that children typically don't get sick from this strain of coronavirus. Share with them that you are following all of the rules to keep them and your family safe.

- **Keep calm together**

If you or your children are feeling worried or sad, there are many great tools available to help you. Practice noticing your breath or take a deep belly breath. Have your children imagine there is a balloon in their belly and invite them to fill the balloon up and then blow the air out. Check out helpful apps for both adults and children, such as *Insight Timer* (which has a free version with thousands of meditations), *Calm*, and *Headspace*. There are even many free meditations on YouTube. These tools can help you create some space from everything that is going on to keep calm and get back to what is most important for you and your family.