

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Challenging Times Call for a Change in Behavior

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As we rang in the New Year, few of us anticipated that within a few weeks our lives would be turned upside down due to a potentially deadly virus. Life in the midst of a pandemic has altered virtually every aspect of our lives. One area of particular impact is our life at home, and our day-to-day activities. Schools are closed and learning has moved completely online in many cases. Offices are closed and working parents are either finding a way to make working at home "work" or looking for new ways to support their families because their work has shut down completely. Parks and entertainment centers are closed and we are told not to be within six feet of each other to remain safe from a novel virus. Everyone is looking for ways to accommodate these challenging and disruptive circumstances.

This is an article for people who have families living at home, and for those of us who don't. It's for those of us who interact regularly with children, and even for people who simply interact with others who care with children. Regardless, our relationships with others need to "keep going." We need to stay connected in appropriate ways. And whether or not you have a family in your own home, or children inside the house, you may be called to reach out to someone in different or similar circumstances in which you find yourself—to help them.

For some, the time together at home has been an opportunity for family to reconnect and learn how to be together again after living for some time with everyone going their own way. However, for most of us, the situation has proven challenging and even scary at times. It is not just that we are unused to this level of "togetherness." Being together is not really the problem. Being together, and confined to a limited space, and dealing with the threat of an illness that threatens life day in and day out, and adding in the need to now effectively "home school" our children—all contributes to unprecedented stress.

No one wants to take that excess stress out on the youngest and most vulnerable among us—and yet, they are the youngest and most vulnerable. They understand the situation even less than we do. They don't know why they can't see their friends, or go to school or church, or even go to the park and play or invite the neighbors over to play in their yard. When children get bored and frustrated, they often act out and that acting out, coupled with the increased stress level for parents and guardians, can lead to an increased risk of abuse. And, where one type of abuse is present, other types of abuse can unfortunately follow.

Most domestic violence and child abuse of all types increase during times of perceived and real stress. There is historical evidence of this in data collected by shelters and child protection services following such things as major winter storms and earthquakes, school or office shootings, major job layoffs, and even extended illnesses in families. During and immediately after these events calls to report suspected child abuse or neglect and attempts to escape domestic violence situations rise dramatically.

Given this history, it is generally accepted by professionals that children are at even greater risk of abuse in the current circumstances. The situation is even more risky now as there is no school, no sports practice, no music lesson, dance class or religious education program. A great many reports of suspected abuse come from observant teachers, youth ministers, coaches and others who see children daily. In this pandemic, these observers can no longer see the bruises or the changes in attitude and demeanor that often accompany child sexual abuse.

Professionals are very concerned for the health and well-being of children during this time. Even parents who are not normally "at risk" of abusing children are dealing with extraordinary stress. Therefore, it is most important that each and every adult do things to reduce stress for families. For example,

- Pay closer attention to the actions, attitudes, and communication of children you come in contact with—in-person or online. Notice any dramatic change in behavior. Take note of an increase in aggressive behavior or a noticeable decline in a child's participation. Remember to report "suspected" abuse of a child and let the authorities investigate.
- Set up a conference call with other parents or a weekly (or even daily) zoom call that includes an opportunity to pray together, express frustration and stress, and share ideas for dealing with challenges. Reach out to parents who seem to be "at wits end" and lend a comforting ear.
- Find ways to engage with your own children and the children you come in contact with that reduce stress and relieve tension. Activities such as creating a neighborhood art show of children's drawings in chalk on the driveways, an animal hunt through the neighborhood looking for different stuffed animals hiding in the yards and gardens of neighbors, or planning a menu and cooking a meal together (or sweets!)—perhaps a dish that demonstrates a different culture. Invite the children to learn about and share information about the culture with others.
- Find ways to do things separately—so you can have self-care, too. Set aside time during the day to be alone and do something for yourself—even if that only means listening to music on earphones while preparing lunch or dinner. Or setting the alarm 15 minutes early so that you can have that cup of coffee before anyone else wakes up. It can be as simple as a bath or shower or a fitness class, even one online through a free youtube video. Take time to read a book for fun or watch a movie with your spouse—or with everyone.
- Find ways to let everyone share openly about what they are dealing with and ask questions about what's happening. Maybe take time at meals to share something new each person learned during the day. Don't pretend everything is okay when it is not. Help your children understand that challenging and disruptive times do not mean "doom and gloom" or "hopelessness." Making that clear for your children will clarify it for you also.

In times that are steeped in extraordinary stress, it takes courage, commitment, and creativity to deal with that stress in ways that avoid regrettable actions. Everyone is vulnerable in times like these, especially parents and children. Everyone is stressed and acting in unpredictable ways, especially parents and children. Everyone is feeling new, unfamiliar pressures, especially parents and children. Give yourself and your children a break and take time to find ways to reduce that excess stress, soften the environment, and reach out to others to help them do the same. If you don't have children of your own, please see about how you can reach out to assist and help the vulnerable amongst us—

1) Regardless of our role with children, what are ways that we can assist the vulnerable when we cannot be face-to-face, in person, with them?

- A) Find ways to reduce your own stress, so that you can be more available to others in need
- B) Pay close attention to behavioral changes, and ask what is wrong; be a listening ear to someone in need
- C) Reach out to others in your contact list, see how they're doing and if they want to talk or video conference
-) All of the above