

Parenting During a Pandemic: Strategies for Sustainability

As a clinical psychologist and parent, I have heard and experienced the struggles of trying to parent, homeschool, and remain sane while coping with the ever-present uncertainty of our new lives. There is no guidebook about how to parent during a pandemic, but I've translated a few cognitive-behavioral strategies that have been demonstrated to be helpful during this trying time.

What is Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a treatment that focuses on how thoughts, feelings, and behaviors interact. Understandably, moods and emotions can alter how we think, and behave to either perpetuate or alter our moods and emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. For example, imagine you are in a supermarket and see your friend at the next register, and wave hello. Your friend doesn't respond, finishes checking-out, and leaves the store. If you were feeling down, your brain might interpret your friend's behavior as dismissive, and a sign that s/he is not happy with you in some way. That may cause you to avoid your friend, which may cause more problems in your relationship and reinforce your initial interpretation of the interaction at the store. Taking a different stance, consider the same store circumstance, but your mood is okay. Your brain may take the lack of response as simply your friend didn't see you, or was preoccupied in some way. That thought may not impact mood, and may lead to a behavior that serves to support your friendship, such as texting your friend to see if s/he is okay. In short, CBT examines objective data in a situation, to determine how rational is one's subjective interpretation of an event. This treatment has been demonstrated to be effective for a variety of psychological presentations, lending itself well to support parenting during a pandemic.

Cognitive Strategies

Perfect Parenting During Imperfect Times

Many parents describe the pressure to "parent perfectly" while sheltered in place. How can one expect to be perfect during imperfect times? We may create these expectations for ourselves, which are then reinforced by social media, but these expectations are likely irrational and unhelpful. I encourage patients to give themselves some grace, as this is a marathon, and not a sprint. Flexibility and self-compassion seem to go a long way during these times. That might come in the form of ice cream for dinner when you simply can't plan another meal, or watching the same movie three times in a day because it's soothing to you and your kids. Sorry, American Academy of Pediatrics! Though

given that these guidelines were created when parents had access to more resources, such as libraries, parks, schools, friends, etc., I'm not sure how well they apply to our current circumstances. Doing what works for you and your kids today might be as perfect as it gets right now.

Riding the Waves of Change...Or Stagnation

Just when you think you're in a routine, things change. It can feel like you're trying to learn to swim in a sea of chaos. In my work, I see parents going through weekly waves of emotions: overwhelmed, energized, exhausted, irritated, calm...you may know these yourselves. What has seemed helpful is being mindful of these waves. Our ways of living changed drastically in a very short period of time. Our brains are not used to this, so it will take time. Keeping this in mind for parents and for kids may help to ease some of the frustration of daily living. Even in typical times, many of us see how our kids may be super into a specific toy or food for a certain period of time, and then suddenly seem to lose interest. These changes may seem more intense right now, but being mindful of the normalcy of these and being flexible to these changes may serve parents well.

Was Today Awesome or Terrible?

It's common during times of stress for humans to have polarized, all-or-nothing thoughts. Our brains have developed to make quick evaluations of situations to determine our next moves. Although adaptive in an evolutionary sense, this process seems to go awry when stressed. Any parent could reflect on the day and deem it "awesome" or "terrible," though in reality is probably a mix of both. Trying to focus on the "awesome" you want to perpetuate and the "terrible" you may want to mitigate, may enhance flexibility and decrease the negativity one might internalize. Asking children, "What was awesome about today?" may serve to model and develop the cognitive flexibility to tolerate these stressful times. I'm sure we can all think of the things we wish went better, but focusing on those moments and not including the positive restricts the brain's flexibility to acknowledge good and bad, and may also inhibit the problem-solving processes necessary to promote more good.

Behavioral Strategies

Setting a "Sort of" Schedule

I recognize the mixed reactions the word "schedule" might evoke. Research has demonstrated the benefit of following a regular schedule on one's mood, as well as the overall benefit for kids. But let's be real, who wants to live feeling like

you're on a hamster wheel of life? That seems to counteract the flexibility I referenced earlier. Instead of a rigid, minute-to-minute schedule, I encourage the use of a flexible schedule. Meaning, certain times of the day are associated with certain routines, but the times in between are flexible. For many parents and kids, knowing the structured elements of the day are enough to ease stress and anxiety, but the free time in between allows for the flexibility to respond to the waves of change and stagnation we're all experiencing. For example, letting everyone wake-up and have free time until 9:00 am, then brushing teeth and engaging in a lightly academic task before selecting an activity of choice. A second anchor could be a routine around 12:30 pm with lunch and nap, then again around 7:00 pm for dinner and night routine. In between, the kids can choose the activities. An added benefit of this activity anchoring is that it challenges the brain to focus on specific elements in the day, rather than having to "make it" through the whole day, decreasing potential feelings of being overwhelmed. Going back to the marathon metaphor, it allows people to think of progress mile by mile, rather than the marathon as a whole.

Engaging in Value-Oriented Activities

Engaging in value-oriented activities is basically doing the things that make you feel good and like yourself. If that means going for a run by yourself, or connecting with friends over videochat or text, try to make time to do that in some way. It may give you the opportunity to connect with yourself in a meaningful way, increasing your emotional reserves to parent closer to the manner you wish to parent. Theoretically, you could do this with your kids, depending on their age and interest. If you're someone who values organization, having your kids sort their toys with you could be considered a value-oriented activity. The sorting may not last very long, but let's consider that as creating more opportunities to engage in value-oriented activities later. Maybe? Anyway, the point is that to take care of others, you first have to take care of yourself. If you don't, it's like expecting a car to drive without gas. Engagement in value-oriented activities may serve as the pit stop you need to keep things going.

Emotion Regulation Strategies

Normalizing Needs

We all have emotions and needs, that's part of what makes us humans and not robots. Speaking to your emotions and needs not only helps to communicate what's driving your actions, but also normalizes them to your kids. Saying to a child, "I'm overwhelmed right now, I need a minute of quiet," does several

beneficial things. First, it enhances communication of emotional experience. Second, it highlights your attempt to regulate your emotions. Third, it models how to identify and cope with difficult emotions. Lastly, it provides data to challenge unhelpful ways in which a child may interpret these actions, kind of like setting the record straight for your kids. Many parents suggest that using this approach actually increases the likelihood of children responding in a manner that helps the situation.

Grounding

Grounding is practice that increases present focus. What's neat about this strategy is that you can implement it while playing with your kids, or your kids' toys. Think of kinetic sand as an example. I encourage parents to describe their experience interacting with the toy in as much detail as possible aloud to their child. Something like, "Wow, look at this green kinetic sand. It looks like one big clump but if I lift it up it almost looks like it's melting. I can see all the different grains of sand. When it reaches the surface below it barely makes a sound. I can see it coming back together, but it's not as smooth as it was when it was in a big clump but not as textured as it was when it was falling." Or, you can describe aloud what your child is doing – young kids love that. An example might be, "You're picking up the yellow block and putting it sideways on top of the red block. Now you're taking the green block and putting it on top of the red. It looks like you're making a tower. Now you're taking your truck and driving it towards the tower."

I encourage parents to try these cognitive, behavioral, and emotion regulation strategies. Strategies may work differently for different days, different situations, and with different kids, so don't give up on them if they don't work the first time. I also recommend the following sources that provide additional support:

Busy Toddler (<https://busytoddler.com/>)– great activities to keep young kids busy at home with basic supplies. She is a wonder with cardboard boxes and painter's tape, making activities very approachable. She also does a great job with normalizing the imperfections of parenting.

Movement Labs (<https://movement-labs.com/>)– a formally trained biologist turned fitness coach focuses on promoting physical health and emotional wellness while challenging incorrect information portrayed in social media. She does great "pauses" to help de-stress throughout the day, while validating the stresses of parenting. Very helpful stuff.

FACE COVID (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmvNCdpHUYM>) - a relatively brief video demonstrating strategies to cope with COVID-related stress and uncertainty.

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