

Keeping families sane during these uncertain COVID times.

Published March 2020 by **Dr. Smita N. Naidoo, MD, MPH, FRCP(C)**
Clinical Faculty at The University of British Columbia

A global pandemic has hit. We are all inundated with information, and at times, at a loss on how to communicate the impact of this virus with our children. We are now two weeks into Spring break and feels nothing like it. The neighbourhood parks are closed off, people wear masks at grocery stores and stagger in line, all with an eerie uncertainty in the air. This does not feel like Spring break for most. As a child & adolescent psychiatrist, I have been inundated with questions from parents on how to deal with quarantine/isolation. Here is a summary of things I suggest for families to keep healthy and sane.

1. **Routine, routine, routine:** From the moment you wake up, you are regulating your inner body clock (i.e. circadian rhythm). It is important to anchor wake up and sleep times.



Keeping regular meal times is also important. Setting up a snack break where families can gather together can be a fun way to conglomerate out of our



rooms while creating a nutrition routine. As school is approaching to be on-line, consider scheduling "homework" time. Keeping aside 2-3 hours per day in the mornings can help simulate what "home school" will resemble.

2. **Practice physical distance NOT social distance:** The premise of keeping 2 meters away is how we can address this Public health crisis. However, it is important to stay connected socially. Having a "play date" or "sleep over" virtually can help our children to connect with their social networks. Choose a movie, watch "together" and even plan your snacks. Crafting via video chat and sending the completed project to another friend/family member can create a chain of creativity.

3. **Stay up-to-date within reason:** Choose one credible website and one credible news source on television. Dedicate only thirty minutes on each of these per day. By controlling your information to credible sources, you can focus on facts. Facts are easier to communicate to your children, and more palatable. Sites such as WHO, and CDC websites are good examples of informed and credible news. If you are overwhelmed with information, this will certainly transmit to your children.

4. **Journalling:** Never has humanity dealt with this before. Journalling is a healthy way to teach your children self-reflection and how to express their emotions. Make this a fun event, where there is "journalling hour." Families can gather in a common room, in a relaxed environment and journal in their individual diaries. Make it creative, by using pastels, paints and magazine cuttings.



5. **Body breaks:** It is no surprise that exercise is on the list to keep your family's sanity. Alternating between screen time and movement can be more motivation for youth. For example, for every hour of screen time, break it with 10 minutes of movement. This can be as simple as jumping jacks, working through a sequence of yoga poses, or even walking up the stairs a few times. Keeping your heart rate up for at least 20 minutes a day can be helpful to stay in shape, improve focus and decrease irritability.
6. **Chores:** Don't forget to create an atmosphere of helping each other.

Chores are vital for children to learn and master. It creates healthy boundaries between parents and their children and provides a sense of accomplishment. It also adds a level of "normalcy" during these trying times.





7. **Role model compassion & empathy:** Be thankful for what you have and express gratitude. Buy gift certificates at local stores who are in danger of a lack of business. Have your children choose a "reward" to work towards from these stores. Create thank you cards for your local hospital staff, and physicians. Make a fun handbook filled with colouring pages & crosswords for your local nursing home to keep elderly entertained. This can teach children to be part of the collective experience rather than an isolating event.

I wish you all a healthy and safe break. Stay at home and save a life.

Best wishes,

Dr. Smita N. Naidoo, MD, MPH, FRCP(C)