

Parental Stress and Child Safety

By Dr. Kate Doyle

Most New Jersey families have now practiced social distancing and isolation for ten days. As all our schedules have been obliterated and the outside world harbors a dangerous virus that fills our hearts with fear, everyone is feeling the stress. Adults and children are grieving their routines, independence, space, social outlets, physical activities, outings, religious practices and family connections. Many parents have lost their jobs. As a human race, we are suffering financially, emotionally and physically across the world. And then on top of this add approximately fourteen hours of awake time a day spent together in the same house. For most families, this is the most time we have ever spent together. This is an incredible amount of mental stress and the pink elephant in the room is that no one knows how long this social isolation will need to last.

At times when caretakers are experiencing stress, children are at higher risk for non-accidental trauma also known as child abuse. Many cases of abuse happen when a parent momentarily lost their control and acted out irrationally without an intent to cause serious harm to their child. These cases are devastating and horrible for everyone involved. **It is important to remember that any child (even your child) is at risk for harm when under the supervision of a frustrated caretaker.** From newborns to high school students, children are at risk for both physical, verbal and emotional abuse.

As a caregiver, it is imperative to practice self-care and find moments regularly in the day to relax in order to stay grounded and rational. **No caretaker is immune to the strain and challenge of caring for children.** Children can be entirely irrational. They can be loud. They are persistent. They can choose not to listen. Sometimes they are so out of control that they are unable to calm down to even hear you. They test boundaries. They lack a fully developed brain! Yes, no matter how precocious your child is, the brain does not fully develop until THE AGE OF TWENTY-FIVE-ISH. Isn't that astonishing? All caretakers need to prioritize a break for themselves for the safety of the children in their care.

Here are a couple of tips to ensure your sanity and your child's safety:

- 1) Take care of yourself. The stress of today's world is unimaginable. Make sure you are eating three meals a day, staying well hydrated with water, maintaining normal hygiene routines and getting a full night's rest. Also, stay in tune with your emotional health. Reach out to your support network to maintain your relationships and feel connected with the people you love.
- 2) Create space to have mini breaks in the day. If you are by yourself during the day, find a space the child(ren) can safely be left by themselves for a couple of minutes. For infants and toddlers, this space is probably their crib. For preschoolers and older children, this is probably their room or in the living room (undeniably in front of a screen). This safe space for your child should be used to ensure their physical safety while you temporarily create some physical distance to support your mental sanity. Sit outside their bedroom door or stand across the room where you can visualize the child. Take deep yoga breaths. Call a friend who will make you laugh. Play your favorite song. Say a prayer. Get a cup of coffee. Do whatever you need to do to relax. It is important to mandate multiple breaks for yourself.
- 3) If you have another adult in the home, create a safe word which tags out the current caretaker for a needed break without any judgement. The use of this word is your cue that you are at your breaking point and the other adult must assume immediate care of the child(ren) without

comment so that you can get prompt respite. This break will allow you to step away, breathe and regroup.

- 4) If you are really feeling out of control, you need to call on a trusted friend, family member or neighbor to assume immediate care of the child(ren). Do not feel ashamed. You are doing the absolute best thing for your child. If someone refuses, reiterate the child is at risk. While we are all currently practicing social distancing, most adults should be able to recognize that their actions could be lifesaving and they should get the child immediately. If you find yourself unable to find help, leave the child in their safe spot and call 911.

Finally, practicing gratitude within the home can help to transcend today's daily stress. Gratitude transforms perspectives in any situation and it holds a special power with children. If the stress in your home is growing, try to reframe your day on gratitude. Creating a joint list of things your family is grateful for, especially in times like this, can be very uplifting. Some families practice gratitude by having each member name something they are grateful for before eating dinner together. In the science of gratitude, it has been shown that intentionally practicing gratitude increases one's sense of wellbeing and level of happiness. And in times of scarcity and hardship, it is easier to be grateful. Happiness and gratitude help combat stress. Happiness and gratitude are also contagious. Wouldn't be it a beautiful thing if your appreciation for your family, your health and your time together was adopted by your child(ren)?

If you are concerned about your mental health, please contact your general practitioner. If you are worried about your child's mental health, please call PNP and set up an appointment with your child's pediatrician.

For more information, please visit these websites:

[American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents experiencing stress over COVID-19](#)

[HealthyChildren.org Positive Parenting Tips](#)

[HealthyChildren.org Tips for coping with a new baby during COVID-19](#)