



TRIPLE P GUIDE

Supporting healthy relationships and managing disagreements during COVID-19

The stress of COVID-19 is a challenge as many families have been spending much more time together due to physical distancing restrictions. Family members can easily irritate each other when living in close proximity for long periods of time without a break.

This can lead to arguments and conflict over things like disagreements about parenting, the allocation of family responsibilities, housework, money, working and schooling from home, internet access, unhealthy habits (smoking, drinking and substance use), and lack of personal or couple time. All of this means we may not be managing all our usual day-to-day challenges well. It is important that children are buffered from adult concerns as much as possible. This guide is designed to help parents support each other's parenting efforts, to strengthen teamwork and to find ways to manage their feelings and resolve their differences in a constructive way without escalating into harmful conflict.



Be mindful that it is harmful for children to witness unresolved adult conflict

Children are sensitive to all conflict. They are affected by hostility between parents even if they cannot understand what parents are angry about. Children also learn from watching how the adults around them speak and act. As all families have disagreements, it is

important that children can learn how these differences of opinion can be calmly discussed and resolved. They can learn how to respect each other's opinion and sometimes agree to differ. This way children learn how to work together, negotiate and have healthy debates as they develop their own opinions. However, it can be harmful for children and young people to witness hostile arguments and conflict between adults, particularly when it is ongoing or not resolved. It is especially tough for children when the disagreement or conflict is related to the children themselves.

In challenging times like these, it is common for disagreements to arise as people are feeling stressed and short-tempered, so if there are difficult things to discuss, it is best to wait until there is time to reach a resolution. While it is important to try and avoid having conflictual conversations when children are likely to hear, simply putting off heated conversations to a later time (like when the children have gone to bed) is also problematic. Try to manage your own emotions so that the conversation is as calm and constructive as possible.

www.triplep-parenting.com





Increase positive everyday communication

We can all fall into habits such as thinking and talking negatively. The way to build a relationship up is to speak calmly and respectfully to the other person, and do things that show you care for them. Make time for a casual chat about what has happened during the day. Listen and be supportive. Let them know you're there for them. You can't control how other people think or act, but you can control the way you do. Keeping your voice quiet and composed can help you stay calm and feel in control. If you're losing your cool, walk away and take some deep breaths until you calm down.



Tune in to triggers that increase the risk of conflict

We all encounter situations and interactions (triggers) that increase our risk for becoming frustrated, impatient, irritable or angry. For example, when you have had a few nights of disrupted sleep, it is likely that you will feel more easily annoyed or impatient with other people. When our levels of these emotions increase, we are more likely to speak and behave in ways that might lead to conflict with others.

With COVID-19, we are facing many more potentially upsetting triggers than usual, such as financial worries or the added responsibility of supervising home schooling. This means we are at greater risk for feeling emotions that end in conflict with others. This is predictable and – in such an unprecedented and challenging situation – it is to be expected. By paying attention to the triggers that leave you feeling frustrated, impatient, annoyed or angry, you can tune in to the emotions they provoke in you. Awareness of the trigger will help you begin to be mindful of the way you react.



Identify thoughts that make you angry

Once you have begun tuning in to your feelings of frustration, impatience, annoyance and anger, ask yourself what it is that you are thinking or saying to yourself in your head that is making you feel this way. You may notice that in between the trigger and the emotion is the way in which you are making sense of the trigger. What you are thinking about the situation. For example, imagine a parent who has spent the day trying to work from home, while also caring for their 3-year old son and supervising their 8-year old daughter's home learning. Their partner arrives home from work at the store and mentions how exhausted they feel. For the parent who has been home all day, this simple comment becomes a trigger as they think to themselves — *I'm the one who is exhausted. I've been home all day with the kids, trying to do my own work, play with our toddler and teach our daughter. You have no idea what it's like!* Feelings of irritation and resentment rise up, and they may then roll their eyes impatiently and sarcastically say — *Poor you, I feel so sorry for you.* An argument or some form of conflict seems likely from here.





Talk back to unhelpful thinking

Let's consider what the first parent is saying to themselves. Some of it is accurate. They have been home all day trying to do all those things. Other parts are either not helpful (turning it into a competition about who is more exhausted) or incorrect (assuming their partner doesn't understand how hard it is). It is best to assume the other person has positive not negative intentions. If the first parent identified what they were saying to themselves that was causing them to feel so angry about their partner's comment, they might be able to 'talk back' to their own thoughts. This might look like them taking a deep breath and saying to themselves — *OK. We're both allowed to feel exhausted. We should give each a chance to understand what the day has been like.* Catching unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with more realistic and positive self-talk can help you stay calm and prevent unpleasant emotions from building up.



Be assertive not aggressive

Tune in to your own voice tone and think about how it sounds to others. You might think you are asking for something calmly, when actually you sound angry and demanding, particularly to someone who is also stressed and irritable. To get through the current COVID-19 situation as calmly and constructively as possible, try to

make an extra effort to be assertive about your needs, but not aggressive in how you ask for something or talk to others. For example, saying *I can't stand this, I need some time to myself!* in an angry or aggressive way could make the other person defensive or upset. In contrast, saying, *I'm getting really stressed and I need to take some time out for myself,* is assertive and could help the other person understand your needs.



Avoid the escalation trap

The escalation trap refers to a situation when one person raises the intensity of their opinion or request to more of a demand or aggressive power assertion (through their voice or body) to force the other person to back down and agree. It is a trap because the person who escalates gets rewarded for escalating by the other person giving in to them. The person who backs down is rewarded because the unpleasant escalation of emotion stops, at least temporarily. This kind of interaction is very risky, can become a habit, and can become a form of family violence. The key to avoiding getting caught in the escalation trap is for the person who is becoming aggressive to recognize that that they are becoming upset or annoyed and to actively calm down that emotion. The other person should assertively request that the discussion is held at a time when they are both calmer and can talk about the issue without raising their voices.



Delay difficult conversations at high-risk times

As escalation traps are more likely at high-risk times, like when someone has had no sleep, or is drinking or under the influence of drugs, try to avoid having difficult conversations that can lead to escalation at these times. You may also need to delay discussing a difficult issue if voices are becoming raised — *I'm getting a bit worked up and I think I need to take some time to cool down before I can talk calmly about this.* Suggest another time when everyone is able to actively listen and hold the discussion calmly — *Is there a time that is good for you to discuss this tomorrow?* This can often take the heat out of the conversation as everyone has had a chance to calm down, and leads to the best chance of resolving issues and avoiding anger and conflict. It also protects children from watching adult conversations escalate with very little chance of resolution.



Hold problem-solving discussions at times when things are calm

You can hold a problem solving discussion with your partner, or the whole family, to find the best solution to an issue. A problem-solving discussion is particularly useful when three simple ground rules are observed:

1. Only speak when you have the 'floor' (hold something that indicates it is your turn to speak, like a speaking stick, a pillow or a piece of paper or card with the word FLOOR written on it). The floor is passed from one person to the next. When you do not have the floor your job is to simply listen, without interrupting, and try to understand what the other person is saying.
2. Keep the discussion brief and focused on only one problem at a time.
3. Define the problem and then brainstorm as many solutions you can think of. Select the best idea or combination of ideas and try out the solution. Review how it goes and refine the solution as needed. You can do this at another problem solving discussion.



Reach out and seek help

If your relationships are causing you distress, be prepared to seek professional help. Ring a help line or speak to your doctor about getting a referral to a mental health practitioner experienced in dealing with relationship conflict. If you feel unsafe and fear violence from a partner or family member, contact a domestic violence support line or the police for immediate assistance.

Get more tips and strategies online to help during this crisis: triplep-parenting.com



Matthew R Sanders, AO, PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist, Founder of Triple P, and one of the world's leading experts on parenting.



Karen MT Turner, PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist, foundational co-author of Triple P, and an expert in innovative parenting support in diverse communities.



Vanessa E Cobham, PhD — is a Clinical Psychologist and an internationally recognized expert in child and adolescent anxiety and posttraumatic mental health (specifically disasters).

© 2020 The University of Queensland