‘The calm before the storm-off’: Nurturing your child’s health and wellbeing during homeschooling due to self-isolation.

Author: Dr Anna McKinnon

With the advent of the COVID-19 crisis in Australia, parents have lost their jobs, family homes are under threat, and many families are crammed in together under the one roof. As if this isn’t enough emotional stress to last a lifetime – parents are now responsible for homeschooling their children.

Making the crossover from parent to teacher is not an easy one – and can lead to fights, tears, and the inevitable ‘storm-off’. There is just something about a family member correcting you over and over again that, let’s be frank, can trigger you right to your core.

Your child’s emotional health and happiness are paramount right now. In my clinical work as a child psychologist, certain themes are recurring this week – children are scared their parents are stressed, worried about grandparents, disappointed they are not able to see best friends, and they are upset activities are being cancelled left, right, and centre.

It has also really started to sink in for children that their parents are now their teachers for the foreseeable future. There are some positive reports, but I’ve also been hearing:

- ‘It’s annoying’,
- ‘I can’t stand it’,
- ‘I know she’s trying to help, it’s just so frustrating when she tells me what to do’

My advice is to take the homeschooling process gently. Nurture your child’s health and wellbeing and the schoolwork side of things will follow.

In your child's eyes, you are their parent and not their teacher despite this new role. So, how do you create an emotionally healthy learning environment for your child in the midst of this crisis?

Here are my top tips:

1. ***Create a school and wellbeing routine with lots of breaks.***

Develop a daily roster incorporating education and other activities that shares some parallels with a typical school day. For example, prepare your children's lunchboxes and have set lunch and recess breaks. Make it a priority to incorporate regular and frequent happiness breaks (i.e. activities boosting wellbeing).

2. ***Develop a set of homeschooling rules collaboratively with your children.***

Always follow through with the homeschooling rules, but be understanding and sensitive when limit setting with children. Ensure problems in the school day don't impact family time in the evening as this is critical to nurturing your child's growth right now. Also be mindful of the role that stress and anxiety could be having on behaviours.

3. ***Create an harmonious, distraction-free space & limit technology.***

Remove all distractions from the study space and limit access to technology not required for learning. You might use timers, movement breaks, sticker charts etc. to help your child get tasks done.

4. ***Ensure children are not overworking.***

Children are currently dealing with huge changes in their lives, and it is an important time for them to feel the love and connection of their families. Don't focus on making sure your child works themselves to the bone as this additional stress could become too much for them to manage.

5. ***Help your children to understand that your feelings about them are not dependent on their talents and abilities.***

If you appear over-invested in your child's learning during the homeschooling process, a child may start to believe that your love is contingent on he or she being smart enough. Only discuss school during school hours, make minimal fuss over grades and performance, and avoid comparisons to siblings or other family members.

6. ***Teach children about the power of mistakes.***

Understanding the benefits of mistakes is critical at all ages. Help your child understand that mistakes are a critical part of learning and they will be more likely to embrace your feedback. There are some great resources. For

younger kids, my personal favourite is this Class Dojo series of 5 episodes on building a growth mindset.

7. ***Try to get on the child's level to understand his or her issues.***

If your child is responding badly to your attempts to educate, understand why they are feeling this way and help them understand. For example, often these responses are coming from a place of fear and insecurity. If this is the case, you might work on developing (with your child) a set of visual coping statements for your child to read each day.

8. ***Ask your child for their thoughts and ideas.***

When introducing topics to your child, ask for their thoughts and ideas rather than just instructing what to do. The one-on-one nature of educating at home gives you the chance to think creatively outside the square to foster an independent, individualised learning style that can be adapted to your child's needs and abilities

9. ***Give your child space***

When giving instructions, check your child's understanding, and then give them the space to work through tasks independently. Be around to help your child as needed, but don't get in their way.

10. ***Use different mediums for instructions and feedback***

Use writing, whiteboards (drawing), audio and video recordings (TikTok, Explain Everything) to help teach your child. These different mediums help keep your child engaged by changing it up, and they can enhance learning (depending on your child's learning style). They also help when your child needs space from you (yes, a parent's voice can often be quite grating for a child after a number of hours).

11. ***Encourage your child and use specific praise.***

Praise your children without labelling. Avoid statements such as 'you are great' and 'you are so smart'. When children are told that they are smart, they can form an identity that is based largely on being smart, fostering fears of failure and unhealthy approaches to learning in the future. Instead, praise your child for their efforts ('you worked really hard at the Maths problem).

Give praise when it is due as children are remarkably adept at picking up when praise is insincere and they become less trusting of your praise if they feel it is not genuine.

12. ***Look after your mental health.***

It can be a challenge to help others when you are struggling. Try and take breaks and time outs whenever you can. Make sure that you don't miss out

on your early morning exercise. If you are still struggling, then seek advice from your GP as to whether counselling is appropriate. Free telehealth psychology services are now available from many private clinical psychologists around Australia at no out of pocket cost to parents during this stressful time.