



# How to Look After Children's Wellbeing in Quarantine

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COVID-19

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- For children, what matters most right now is having structure and emotional stability at home.
- Spending a few weeks in quarantine is unlikely to have long-term consequences, so long as parents make space for little bursts of learning each day.
- It's alright to relax our expectations for ourselves right now.

Being cooped up in quarantine puts a lot of pressure on parents, and makes it difficult for child care providers to lend a hand.

Many families are feeling stressed, and understandably so. We're relying a bit more on the time-savers we might otherwise wince at. There's lots more screen time, hasty quesadillas for dinner, and flexible rules on bath time. And that's okay.

Still, it can be hard to shake a guilty feeling here. Will these days at home have long-term consequences for our children's development and wellbeing? How can we best look after them right now?

To get some answers, I called up [Neal Horen](#).

Neal is the Director of the Early Childhood Division at Georgetown University's Center for Child and Human Development in Washington, D.C. His background is in clinical psychology, and for the past 20 years he has specialized in mental health and emotional development during early childhood. Like

many of us, he's also figuring out how to work from home while caring for his own young children.

Last week, we connected for a conversation about how parents and child care providers can best support the little ones while we're in quarantine.

## **Prioritizing emotional health**

Right now, parents are feeling the pressure to keep up with children's regular lessons, activities, and learning plans. But according to Neal, what's most important right now is making sure children are feeling secure, and developing those core emotional skills.

Young children have a fundamental need for predictability and structure in their daily lives. This consistency, Neal explains, is foundational for children's emotional development. It's much easier for children to organize themselves, manage their expectations and regulate their emotions when they know what's going to happen in their day. You might think of it as a framework for emotional growth.

"I'm not focused so much on your academic readiness by the time you get to kindergarten so much as your emotional readiness to be around other children and adults, your ability to solve problems and how you control your emotions," Neal says.

Providing this structured, responsive, consistent caregiving is important whether there's a pandemic or not. But especially now, Neal believes, giving children a foundation of emotional stability should take priority over focusing on academic readiness.

“I don’t think people should be concerned that our children are going to fall behind tremendously, so long as we take advantage of opportunities to work on language skills and cognitive development in our everyday activities,” Neal says.



## Providing daily structure

Each child learns at their own pace, and this process is very dependent on individual families. A few weeks of home learning is unlikely to hurt anything in the long run, so long as children are receiving *some* form of learning activity each day.

This means that parents don’t need to worry about giving children eight dedicated hours of instruction each day. What’s more important is being realistic and consistent about what we want to be focusing on.

Make room for little bursts of social interaction, play and learning

with your children each day. Read a few pages of a book together, play with LEGOs, or get outside for a quick game of tag. These can be 10- or 15-minute activities — but Neal points out that they should be regular enough that children aren't left alone for hours at a time.

For most families, having an hour-by-hour schedule for each day is unrealistic. Instead, Neal recommends dividing the day into blocks. Give children a general, reliable idea of when they'll eat breakfast, when they'll go outside, when it's time for lunch, and when they'll have some quiet time for a learning activity. This way, they can organize their day and manage their expectations around it.

“What anybody can do is ask what kind of structure you can make for your children, and how responsive can you be,” Neal says. “We're not quite sure where the end to this is, but we'll do what we can right now. As we go, we'll have to re-evaluate what to do and what our needs are.”

## **Giving special attention to infants**

In the case of infants and toddlers, having consistent structure and stimulation is even more important. The developmental difference between a three-month-old, a six-month-old and a nine-month-old is more pronounced, and requires more careful support from parents.

Neal recommends parents of infants and toddlers pay closer attention to developmental milestones, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics' [Bright Futures](#)

[Guidelines](#), or some similar guidelines set out in the UK guide [What To Expect When](#). If it means working remotely with your child in your lap or just being in the same room together, parents should set aside as much time for their infants as possible right now.

## **Looking for everyday learning**

Language skills and cognitive development don't need to come from a classroom. There's a lot of learning to be found in our everyday activities around the house — it's just a matter of making those lessons clear to the little ones.

Clearing the dishes or putting toys back after playtime strengthens children's pattern recognition, and gets them used to daily routines. Baking brownies involves mathematics as you measure out cups of flour, builds motor skills as you wield a spatula, and explores simple science as you watch how adding an egg changes the batter's consistency.

What's important here, Neal says, is that parents take the time to point out these lessons.

Talk children through activities as you do them together. While you cut up a melon for a snack, explain how it splits into halves and quarters. When you put food in the refrigerator after dinner, explain why it keeps it from spoiling. Talking through these concepts helps children find lessons in everyday life.





## Relieving pressure on parents

Right now, we need to be realistic about what we've got the bandwidth to handle. It's completely okay for parents to relax the rules a bit. Child care providers can help ease the pressure by reminding families that they don't need to be operating at 100 percent.

"Parents feel awful for letting their child watch more than the 'recommended amount' of screen time, and that's not helpful right now," Neal says. "The truth is it's okay. No child that I know of has ever been locked up in a psychiatric facility because they watched three hours of television during a pandemic."

Get in touch with the families at your child care setting to offer reassurance, and some resources to give families a bit of structure. Send along [some simple activity ideas](#), or just write to parents for a quick wellness check.

## Monitoring children's mental health

We don't know when we can go back to child care, see our grandparents, or go on a trip. For young children, Neal explains, this uncertainty can stoke anxiety.

Little ones can have trouble recognizing anxiety and stress in themselves, or expressing those feelings to others. It's especially important that parents and caregivers keep an eye on their children's behavior right now.

"What I think parents can do is ask, who is my child, temperamentally?" Neal says. "What were they like before all this, what did they like to do and not like to do? What am I asking them to do, and is it reasonable and developmentally appropriate?"

Neal suggests the following indicators of stress and anxiety could signal a need for closer care and attention:

- More emotionally vulnerable — Crying more easily or more often
- Experiencing sleep disturbance, or changes in sleep patterns
- Significant changes in appetite
- Regressive behavior

For more resources on understanding children's behavior in the early years, you can [download our expert guide here](#).



## How child care providers can help

Child care providers can still help children and their families from afar.

“For childcare providers, I’d say one thing that’s critical is keeping in mind how important they are,” Neal says. “When I think about the child care providers that my four children have had over the years, these people are family to them.”

Children form strong emotional bonds at their child care settings, making friends with their peers and attaching to the adult caregivers. Right now, children will be missing those familiar faces.

If there’s a way for you to stay in touch with your setting’s children, do that. Send a text message, a recorded video or a voicemail to tell the children you’re still here, and you still care about them. If you need a platform to do so, [Family’s free software](#) gives you all the tools you’ll need.

You can help parents manage realistic expectations. Send along one-page activities, [host remote activities](#), or ask families to read a book for ten minutes. You’ve still got a great ability to offer instruction, socialization, and support to your families.

At the same time, be realistic and open about your capabilities. Depending on your situation, this degree of support might not be an option for your setting. In that case, communicate that with parents. Be transparent about your circumstances, and clear about how often you’ll be available.

But above all, Neal says, take heart in how important you are to the children in your care, and do what you can to keep that relationship going.

“It’s especially critical right now for child care providers to keep in mind the impact they have on children and families, and to know how much they mean. Anything they can do to stay in touch goes a long way.”



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