

Homeschooling during COVID-19

Practical strategies for keeping your
family calm during social isolation.

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Wellbeing Aotearoa



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Supporting wellbeing
from the ground up

I'm not sure about you, but I find parenting difficult enough without adding a global pandemic, social isolation, and homeschooling, to the mix.



Homeschooling 12 and 9 year boys. So far, not so good.

I'm grateful that I can draw upon my skills as a trauma-informed positive psychologist to help calm the farm in my house. I've also turned social media to my favour. My hubby and I found this homeschooling schedule (to the right) and lessons on fractions via FB, both hysterically helpful¹.

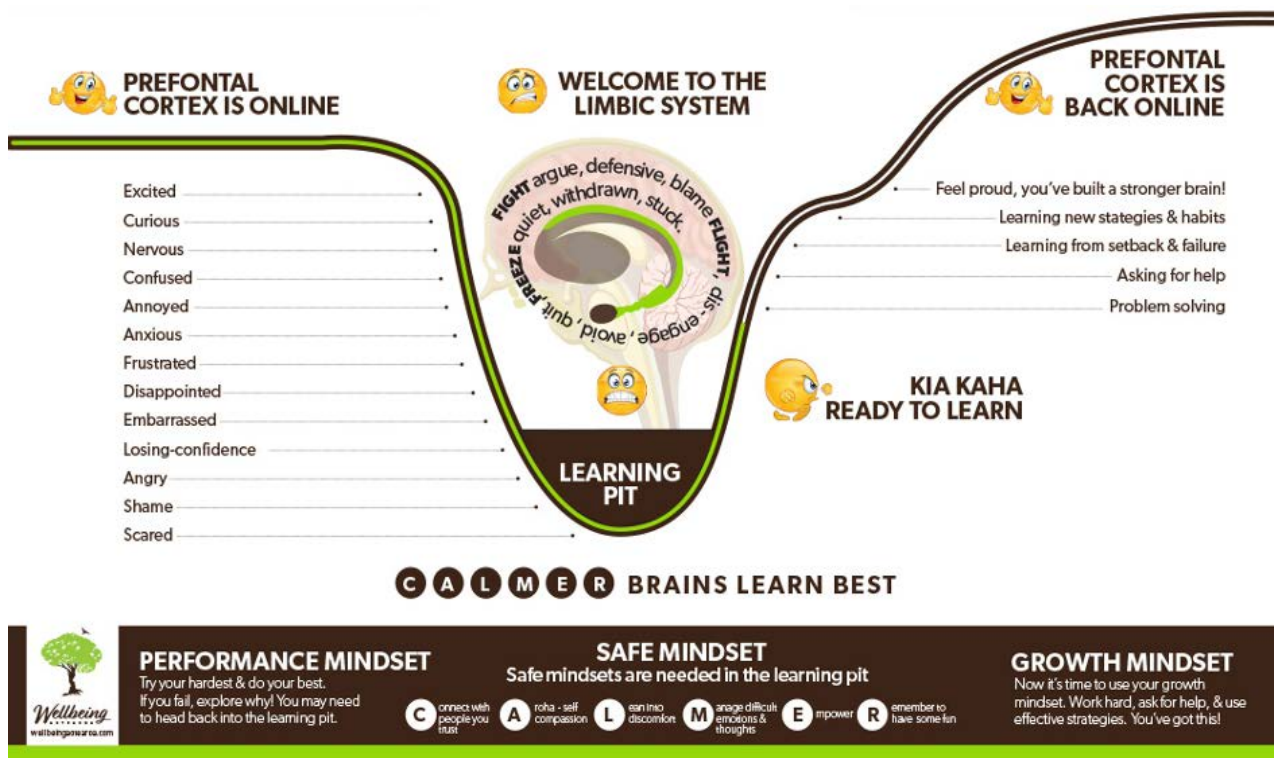
My Homeschooling Schedule

Post this to your fridge

- 9am: Home Economics- Learn how to make me a decent Coffee.
- 10am: Engineering: How to operate the hover and washing machine.
- 11am: PE- Carrying rubbish/recycling out to bins.
- 1pm: Chemistry- How to bleach and disinfect the bathroom.
- 2pm: Geography- Lesson in where the items you have strewn across the floor ACTUALLY live.
- 3pm: Orienteering: How to find wash basket.
- 3.30pm: Horticulture: Chopping Veg.
- 4.30pm: Science- Learn how hot water and Fairy liquid remove grease from Pans.
- 5pm: After School club: Go to your room with you ipad and be quiet!

Humour aside, it's been a strange week, and although many families are coping with homeschooling, others may not. I want to share with you insights as a trauma-informed positive psychologist about why learning may be complicated right now. I'll offer suggestions for family self-care and how to approach learning during social isolation drawing upon positive education. As always, I offer practical advice and provide links to online resources throughout the document.

The below infographic explains the impact of trauma, stress, grief, and anxiety on a learner's brain and the difficulties in maintaining a growth mindset with a stressed brain².



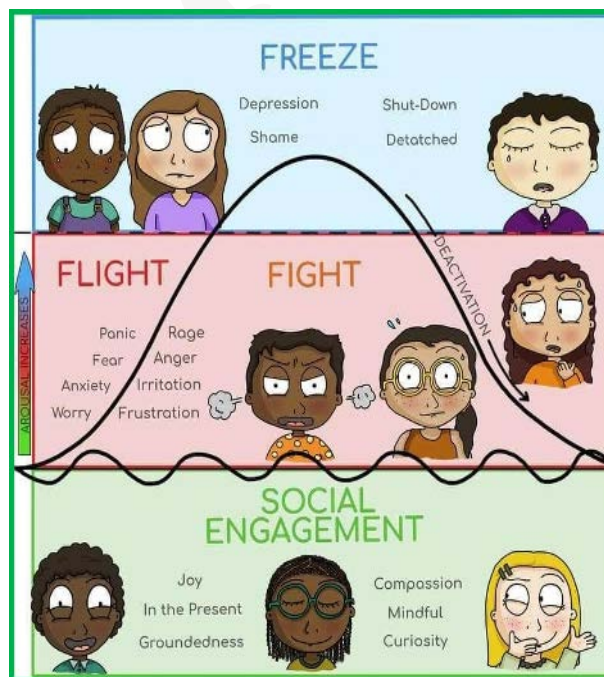
When a learner feels safe, calm, and has nurturing and positive connections with others, they are in an ideal state to learn and develop a growth mindset. C.A.L.M.E.R brains learn best because calmness brings the thinking part of the brain (prefrontal cortex) online. Learners can now engage a Performance Mindset, which is when learners use existing knowledge as scaffolding to extend their learning³.

Unfortunately, when a learner is stressed, the thinking part of the brain temporarily goes offline. For many students, this means that they can no longer access newly learnt information. The working memory in the brain pretty much shuts down.

Learners can become confused, annoyed, loose confidence, and ashamed that they can't learn basic things.

Traumatised brains sometimes masquerade as ADHD, ODD, and ASD⁴. New research indicates that some diagnosed mental health problems are the result of trauma exposure⁵.

Right now, most of us are stressed. The pandemic and associated media coverage have caused fear, changes in routine, stressed parents, disrupted sleep etc. The social isolation has disrupted play dates, birthday parties, and sports attendance. These experiences can activate the amygdala in the limbic system. The limbic system lies deep within our brain and creates the body's primitive stress (fight, flee, or freeze) response.



Child psychotherapist, Jeanette Yoffe, gives a brilliant explanation for children of what's happening in our brain when we are stressed⁶.

The stress response is great when a bear is hunting us. The hormones released (adrenalin and cortisol) help us fight the bear, run away, or play dead (freeze), which is great for survival. However, the stress response makes it very difficult to learn things not linked to our immediate survival. The brain shifts it's attention away from learning and towards protection.

The signs to look out for if your kids are stressed or anxious include⁷:

- Being more distracted than usual.
- Getting angry over small irritations or nuisances.
- Increased worry (e.g., my son became scared playing hide & seek when he couldn't find us).
 - Finding it difficult to make decisions (e.g., deciding what to have for lunch).
 - Not sleeping or eating well.

DID YOU KNOW?
Sheltered at Home Can Create Behavior Changes
POSITIVE PARENTING CONNECTION

YOU MIGHT NOTICE CHANGES IN SLEEPING AND EATING HABITS

YOUR CHILD MIGHT BE CLINGY AND SEEKING CONNECTION WITH YOU.

IMPULSE CONTROL ISN'T EASY WHEN THE BRAIN IS FULL OF WORRY.

BE KIND BE PATIENT TAKE A BREAK YOUR CHILD NEEDS LOVE AND SUPPORT, NOT PERFECT SCHEDULES OR PERFECT PARENTING.



When all things are going well, learning can lead to feelings of excitement, curiosity and growth mindsets. However, as soon as we exit our comfort zone and feel stress, we enter the limbic system. When you're stressed, it's hard to learn, and unfortunately, for many people, Covid-19 is causing stress. Covid-19 is also causing extreme reactions for a few people.

Certain people will exhibit extreme reactions to Covid-19 because the circumstances surrounding Covid-19 will trigger memories of previous times when they have felt a similar way (e.g., stressed, anxious, out of control, helpless, isolated, hopeless). We can get flooded with thoughts, sensations, emotions, images of the earlier times when we've felt that way. People who suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder experience these reactions often.

What learners need now is a Safe Mindset. Protecting and nurturing your child's mental health is the most important thing you can do for them right now. Fighting and stressing over school work is not worth it, and it's what teachers want. I found advice from one teacher on Facebook that I thought summed up the homeschooling well.

"My advice for any parents wanting to homeschool during the school shutdown – don't. It's going to be stressful. If things get worse you're going to be stressed, your kids are going to be stressed. Your kids might be scared of things they've heard or seen on TV. Arguing with kids to do work is not what anyone needs right now.

Instead, cuddle up together and read, read, read. Take turns reading. Read them your favorite novel (yes, you can read novels to kindergarten age kids). Do a puzzle. Build a fort. Bake. Watch TV together. Paint. Get out the Legos and build together. Set up a tent in your living room and camp out. Look at photos of when you were a kid. In other words, don't stress about them forgetting. Don't stress about homeschooling them. Just spend time together. Your kids won't learn much if they're feeling stressed. Though this is a scary time, it could very well be a time they remember as the best time in their life."

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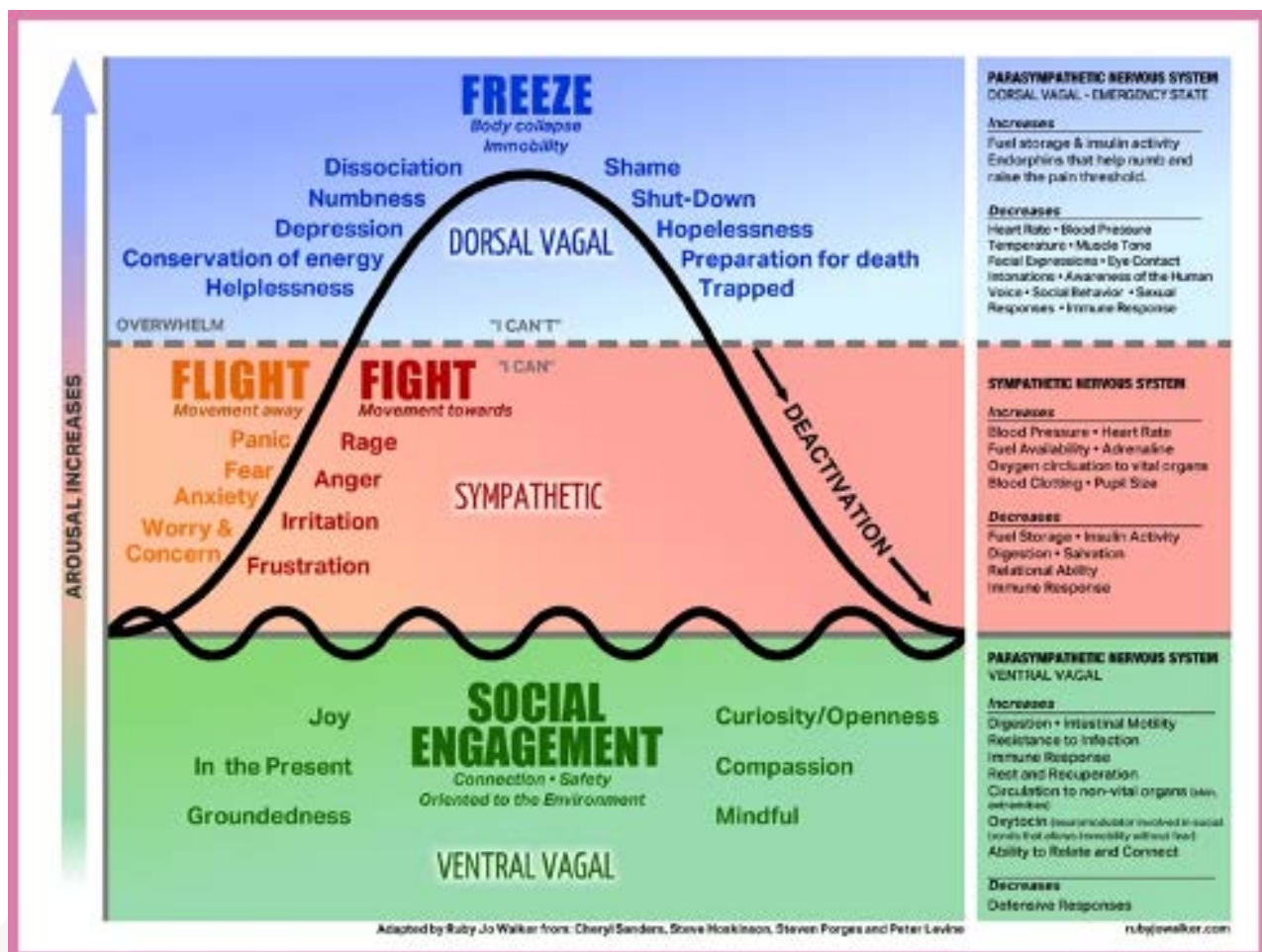
In my house, I'm going to set some S.M.A.R.T.⁸ homework goals that fit with our abilities & values. Remember, C.A.L.M.E.R brains learn best!! The best thing you can do for your kids over the next few weeks is to keep everyone calm.

Below I'll walk through the acronym C.A.L.M.E.R using tools and tips from a trauma-informed positive educational approach.

Connect with people you trust

The most amazing thing happens when you connect with people you trust. You engage part of the parasympathetic nervous system called the vagal nerve⁹, which shuts down the sympathetic nervous system (fight, flight, freeze). Positive connections promote Safe Mindsets. Safe Mindsets brings the thinking part of the brain back online, which is pretty much good for everything and everyone right now.

Activate the ventral vagal nerve, it's your best friend right now.



Keep connections within your bubble as positive as you can. Aim for more positive times than stressful times over the next four weeks. Connect with other loved ones regularly via phone, text, letter, or online. If you know of a neighbour living alone close by, consider giving them a call or writing them a letter. Everyone benefits from positive connections with people they trust as it calms our brains and bodies.

We're a social species, so our brains love social connections. Things go wrong when children don't have safe and secure attachments with primary caregivers¹⁰. The still-face experiment is a great way to learn about the critical importance of maintaining social connection¹¹.

If you are struggling to maintain positive social connections in your house at the moment, get in touch with someone you know who can bring some positive energy to your home. Have a look online to find online support; many community agencies and mental health professionals have gone online and want to help. We all need help from time to time, and the strongest people I know are those who can accept their vulnerabilities and know when it's time to ask for help.

Understanding dysregulation: How to Support a Highly Emotional Child

Dysregulation occurs when the brain responds to sensory input in a manner that triggers the alarm state.

When a child is dysregulated, it is harder to listen, comprehend, and cope.

Remember the Three "R"s

Regulate
focus on soothing your child. Make them feel calm, safe, and loved.

Relate
Validate their feelings with your words and tone of voice. "I know you're upset right now." "This is very hard". Focus on connecting with your child.

Reason
Once your child is calm, now it is time to talk about alternatives to behaviors while reinforcing limits you set before. You can reassure them you love them but that the behavior they're exhibiting is not ok.

Until a child is regulated, they are unlikely to relate to you (feel connected & comfortable). And until a child is related, they are unlikely to have the mental capacity to reason with you.

Aroha: practice self-compassion

Compassion is excellent for our brain. Abundant research shows the positive effects of self-compassion on our health and wellbeing, but also on our ability to be compassionate to others¹².

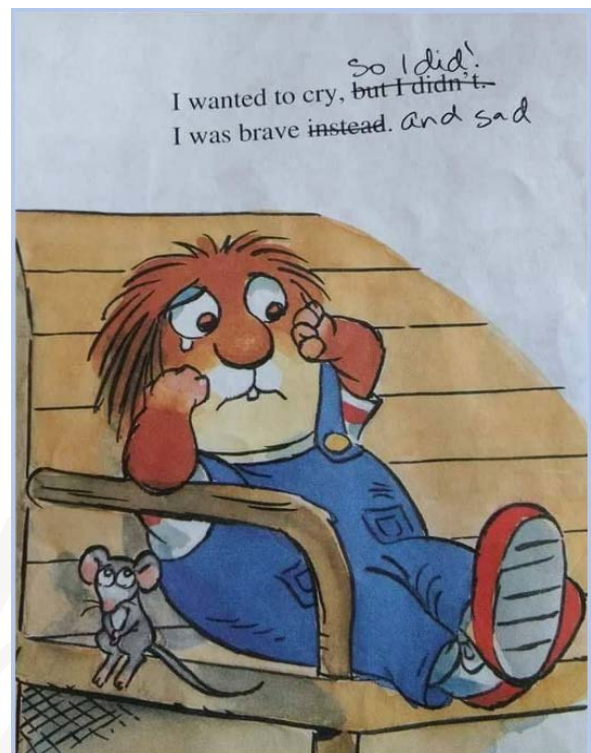
Kristin Neff is a leading researcher on the benefits of compassion and has loads of great physical and mindfulness exercises that you can practise¹³. You can even take a test to see how self-compassionate you are¹⁴. Loving-kindness and gratitude meditations can also put you in the mood for some compassion.

Lean into discomfort

Sometimes we get so caught up on making people feel better that we forget it's ok to be sad, mad, afraid, ashamed, fed up, or annoyed. These are valid and normal human emotions. We sometimes call them negative emotions, but they're not. Emotions are here to guide us. For example, if we didn't feel shame, then we would repeat the same behaviour over and over again. If we didn't feel anger, then perhaps we'd let people walk all over us. Or if we didn't feel fear, then we'd be, well, probably dead.

At times we need to lean into the discomfort of strong emotions. Help your child understand what shame looks and feels like in their body. Ask them how anger feels in their body, or if they notice how fear changes their thoughts? It's better to learn about emotions as a child; it can save a lot of heartache as an adult if you do.

I remember asking a client how they found their last session, to which they replied: "urgh, so frustrating, you made me talk about my emotions and feelings". What a terrible thing for a psychologist to do, we both had a big laugh.



Manage difficult emotions and thoughts

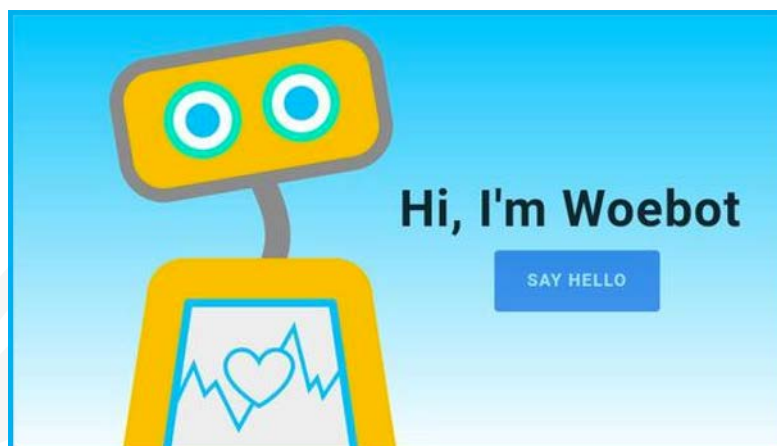
The ability to manage our emotions and thoughts is a big part of resilience¹⁵. The ability to identify how you feel is the first step in being able to manage your emotions. As our thoughts and emotions have a lot to do with how we behave, we must understand our inner world.

I would highly encourage you to use Woebot to help identify and manage emotions and thoughts. Woebot is an artificially intelligent robot that delivers Cognitive Behavioural Therapy via an app. He's hilarious, and some very clever clinical psychologists at Stanford University have designed him¹⁶.

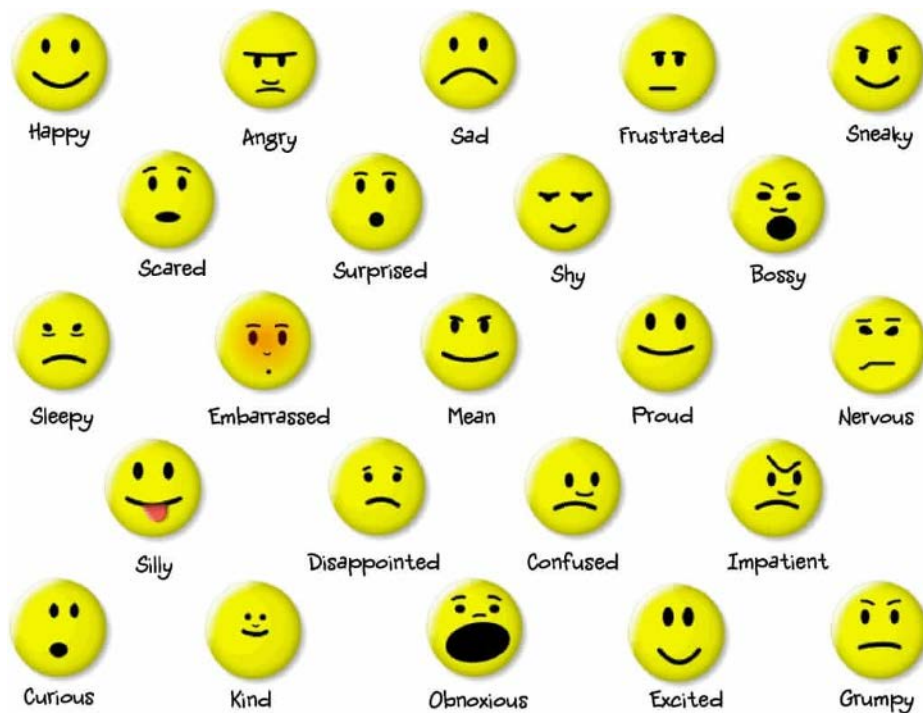
Also, talk to your children about how they feel. Adolescence can do this verbally, but children younger than 12 years-old may struggle. Emotions are still a somewhat abstract concept for younger children, and they don't yet have the language to verbalise how they feel. In this case, children can draw how they feel, or express their feelings through leggo. Emotions can be shown in colour too. I loved my son's description of anger when he was around 9 years old. He said, "anger is the colour red, and when it comes, it feels like a volcano erupting with lava going all the way down my arms and into my hands"—what a perfect description of anger.

If we can name emotions, we can tame them¹⁷.

I would also encourage you to watch Russ Harris' video on how to F.A.C.E C.O.V.I.D¹⁸⁻¹⁹. He teaches us how to respond effectively to the fear and anxiety around Covid-19. Anything Russ Harris says is solid, and I'm listening to anything he has to say!



I often say to my kids, “you’re getting bullied by your emotions”. I teach them how to unhook from heavy emotions, so they don’t react to them so much. I explain that reacting to emotions by throwing, yelling, hitting, blaming, etc., takes us far away from problem-solving and moving in the direction of our values and goals. So I teach them how to unhook from tough emotions then resolve what’s bothering them in healthy ways.




Empower

Brene Brown (The Power of Vulnerability)²⁰ reminds us that children are hard-wired for struggle as they arrive pre-programmed to be resilient. Under the right conditions (protective factors) they stay resilient throughout their life.

Consider empowering your children:


- Focus on what you can control (e.g., social isolation, playing with friends online, learning new exercise routines), not on what you can’t (e.g., playing with friends, wanting social isolation to finish, controlling the future). Again, watch and read about F.A.C.E C.O.V.I.D by Russ Harris to learn more about focusing on what you can control¹⁸⁻¹⁹.

- Be hopeful. We know humans prevail under terrible circumstances. Tony Ryan provides outstanding arguments for why children have reason for optimism in his book *The Next Generation: Preparing Today's Kids for an Extraordinary Future*, which is a really good read²¹.
- Setting up good sleep hygiene practices in your house. There has been lots of research demonstrating that we are chronically sleep deprived and it's causing enormous problems for our physical and mental health²². Sleep affects how we metabolise food, fight infection, learn, grow, process information from the day, and so much more. Although it's excellent that my boys are getting lots of extra sleep right now; I'm a bit worried that we're going to finish social isolation with taller kids.



Sleep and Health

2019, Pages 435-445



Chapter 32 - Sleep and mental health in children and adolescents

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Abstract


Mental health is of prime importance among children and adolescents, posing a significant disease burden during and across the lifespan. Mental health is affected by sleep in several ways. The present chapter summarizes extant research on the relationship between sleep factors, such as sleep duration and sleep quality, and mental health outcomes in children and adolescents. Overall, insufficient and poor-quality sleep is associated with worse mood and emotion regulation, as well as increased likelihood of developing a mood or anxiety disorder, and heightened risk of suicidal ideation. To address this important public health concern, we provide specific recommendations and suggestions for how families, schools, clinicians and public policy makers can improve sleep, and thus mental health, among young people.

POLAR.


SLEEP HYGIENE TIPS

Sleep plays an essential role in optimizing health and well-being. Conversely, inadequate sleep can cause a whole host of negative mental and physical side effects.

Incorporate the below tips and techniques to ensure you get a great night sleep and wake up feeling revitalized to take on the day!




GO TO BED AND GET UP AT THE SAME TIME EVERY DAY



This sets your body's internal clock to optimize the quality of sleep.

MAINTAIN A NIGHT-TIME ROUTINE




Winding down and learning to relax is an important part of preparing for bed.

AVOID ALCOHOL, CAFFEINE AND SMOKING




These stimulants disrupt your sleep, especially if consumed close to bedtime.

BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE




Exercise helps you sleep better. Schedule high-intensity workouts earlier in the day and avoid exercising too close (within 3 hours) to bed time.


INVEST IN YOUR SLEEPING ENVIRONMENT



A hot and uncomfortable environment or poor quality bedding will make it harder to fall asleep and may cause you to wake up in the middle of the night.



DON'T USE A TABLET OR PHONE IN BED




White or blue light interferes with the release of melatonin which provides the signal to sleep.

DON'T STAY INDOORS ALL DAY AND AVOID EXERCISE




Exposure to the elements help regulate your body clock.

DON'T EAT HEAVY MEALS BEFORE BED




Eating boosts your metabolism making it hard to fall asleep and also sleep well. However, don't go to bed hungry either.

DON'T GO TO BED WHEN YOU'RE NOT TIRED



This means you'll be tossing and turning and getting frustrated that you're not falling asleep.

DON'T NAP FOR TOO LONG OR TOO LATE



Keep afternoon naps short and avoid napping after 5 pm.

- Exercise is also a way to achieve a calm family. Half an hour of moderate exercise a day can metabolise stress hormones and stabilise your mood²³. Get creative. I plan to get my kids to organise an obstacle course that we can time ourselves doing. The fastest person receives a prize.
- Play to your values. Find out what's really important to you, your kids, and you as a family. We play the PAX Good Behaviour Game in our house so we know how to keep working towards our values (respect, peace, health, fun, learning). I'll post a youtube video soon about how we use the PAX game in our house²⁴.
- Get your kids to focus on how they can use their strengths to bring some positivity into your house and cope with social isolation in a resilient way. We all have strengths, and we should always be on the lookout for them. Playing to our strengths is far more energising and motivating than correcting our weaknesses²⁵. You can identify your strengths online – <https://www.viacharacter.org/survey/account/register> – for adults and youth aged 10-17. The Strength Switch is also a great book as it encourages and teaches us parents how to support our kids strengths more than correct their weaknesses²⁵.

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Remember to have some fun

Positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, hope, pride, love, awe, and inspiration have a way of calming the body, because they de-activate our stress response. I can't believe how many amazing things are happening around the world right now to increase social connection, increase positivity, and kindness. Social media is filled with good news stories and I'm getting heaps of great ideas about how to have fun with my family during social isolation. I especially loved the following story from Steven Tibbits, who is a psychotherapist in Australia. He posted his story to The Kindness Pandemic group on Facebook on 15 February 2020.

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The boy on the roof...

I came home to find my 5yo son on the roof of the shed. He's a climber so I wasn't too surprised. But was surprised that he was speaking to someone. I asked who he was talking to "it's my friends" he said. He'd met 2 girls who lived in the house next door, a 5yo and a 2yo. The 5yo girl was on the roof of her cubby house.

When we are in the backyard we hear this "Joshua, are you there". And he calls back "I'm coming" and scampers up the fence railings and onto the roof. And when we are in the backyard he calls to them "girls. Are you there?"

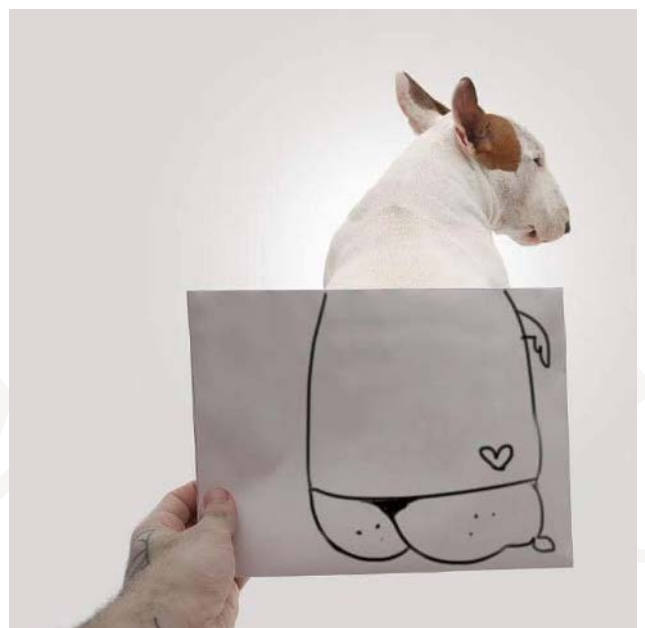
Josh will race inside and get some toy to show her, or some paper and crayons and they draw up there, he on our side, she on theirs, and have exchanged things, little gifts to each other, and sometimes she has bought him some cake. And josh comes in to see what he can share with his new friend... acts of kindness.

Now we need to put some restrictions on their interaction as the virus threat grows. No more exchanging gifts , or food, and ensuring distance. They'll still meet on the roof, talk, laugh, tell stories. And one day, soon enough, when all this passes they may be able to play together like normal times. Until now they seem content, so accepting of the boundaries of their rooftop relationship.

Remembering that us humans are a fairly resilient bunch will serve you well during the upcoming months. Stay strong kiwi families, we've got this.

"The greatest compassion is the prevention of human suffering through patience, alertness, courage and kindness."

— Amit Ray, Walking the Path of Compassion



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