

As optimism returns, a reminder that life after COVID-19 will be stressful for many

4 May 2021, by Stuart Wolpert

Life during the COVID-19 pandemic has been uniquely stressful for parents with children at home. For some parents, schools welcoming children back for in-person instruction—even for limited schedules in many cases—has provided a long-awaited measure of relief and cause for optimism.

But Bridget Callaghan, a UCLA assistant professor of psychology, said adjusting to life after COVID-19 could be stressful for many.

"Parents should be patient and not expect everything to go back to how it was before," Callaghan said. "Post-COVID-19 will be an adjustment."

A few months after the pandemic and stay-at-home orders altered life as we know it, Callaghan (pronounced CAL-a-ghin) began researching how [family dynamics](#) were being affected by the changes.

Some children have fallen far behind in their schoolwork, and COVID-19 has increased inequities between rich and poor families. Parents should realize the coming post-pandemic transition might be challenging for their children. Her advice to parents: Be supportive and reassuring, especially to children who have little other [social support](#).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, children Callaghan interviewed in mid-2020 expressed an overwhelming longing for social connections and a return to school. In addition, Callaghan observed that the children of parents who are more fearful about COVID-19 tend to have more fears and anxiety about the pandemic than the children of calmer parents.

"Parents are the lens through which children and teens experience the world," Callaghan said. "Parents are highly influential, even with teenagers

and even when they think they may not be."

Callaghan, who also is director of UCLA's Brain and Body Lab, is an expert in how early-life experiences influence interactions between physical and mental health throughout people's lifespans. She said the dynamics she has observed for the past 12 months only reinforced the importance of how—and how much—parents communicate with their children.

Her advice to parents:

- Be realistic but comforting. "Speak calmly and don't sugarcoat difficult subjects, but present things in a way that is reassuring," she said. "Avoid fear-based language, such as 'We can all die if you don't follow these rules!' Instead try something like, 'These simple actions will keep us safe.' The message and the behavior are the same, but how parents frame the message is very important."
- Don't forget to protect your own mental health. "If you're feeling stressed, you will probably convey that to your children," she said.
- Keep children on a regular schedule for meals, exercise and bedtime.
- A couple of times a week, check in with children about how they're feeling, and validate their responses. "You can say, for example, 'I really understand why you feel this way,'" Callaghan said.

Callaghan, who recently became a first-time mother herself, also offered a caveat: "Parents should be gentle on themselves. There is no one right way to parent."

Parents she interviewed shared common concerns about the stressful balancing act of parenting, overseeing children's schoolwork and managing their own job responsibilities while working at home.

"Parents disclosed feeling stretched thin, feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities, emotionally and physically drained, and worrying their [children](#) weren't getting enough attention," Callaghan said.

Marital tensions were another common stressor. Still, she said, many parents are finding reasons to be grateful during the most difficult of times—maintaining their own health during a pandemic, having supportive relationships, the availability of child care, their faith and more family time.

"Some families realized they were over-scheduled and were relieved to take a step back," Callaghan said. "They came to a realization about the importance of being together and many learned lessons about slowing down. COVID-19 brought many families closer together."

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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