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Helping Kids Survive When Home and Work Collide

Ages 3-12.... Wednesday April 22/20

By Barbara Burrows ©

Introduction

Friend with young kids clearly fantasizing about murdering you as you describe how boring isolation has been....



Brandon, MB – Sofie, your friend with two children under the age of 5, clearly spent most of last night's zoom call thinking of ways to murder you as you talked about how calm and uneventful isolating at home has been.¹

¹ <https://thebeaverton.com/2020/04/friend-with-young-kids-clearly-fantasizing-about-murdering-you-as-you-describe-how-boring-isolation-has-been/>

I bet many of you can relate to this story I found in The Beaverton. Pressures today are not what they were even a month ago. Times have changed. How are parents supposed to manage? There is no relief from being a full-time parent right now. How much can you take? This is the reality that is happening right now, that you must contend with day by day, with no end in sight.

Here are some quotes directly from parents:

“How many more days?”

“I’m worried about keeping my job; maybe I’m not working hard enough.”

“I have a conference call - I can’t have any noise.”

“Why does she think *her* work should take precedence over mine?”

“I wake up crying - this isn’t the kind of mother I want to be.”

“I don’t want to think about how much we’ve all been yelling.”

.....

Parents are resentful; children feel their parents’ resentment and feel worried. Physical distancing has changed everything. Children can’t see grandparents. Parents cannot access childcare when help is so desperately needed. Couples are fighting. We all have so many feelings that are hard to explain, and hard to cope with. Whose job is it to look after the children when both parents have demanding jobs? What if both parents aren’t available? How are single parents managing?

Another name for this presentation could be **RESENTMENT AND GUILT** because those powerful feelings play a big part in family relationships, especially now. When you worry then it becomes even harder to manage.

In “*Helping Kids Survive When Home and Work Collide*,” I am going to draw from the work of Bruno Bettelheim², Founder and Director of the Orthogenic School for Disturbed Children Chicago in the 1950s. Children from all over the USA were sent to this school when the treatment offered in their communities proved ineffective. He was the leading expert in childhood emotional difficulties at that time.

Some key ideas from Bettelheim’s include:

1. The more *real* parents are, true to their own feelings and values, the more secure both they and their children will feel.
2. There is a GOOD REASON for all behaviour.
3. Accepting and talking about strong feelings is the most effective way to discharge the tension that inevitably builds, particularly in times of increased stress.

² Psychoanalyst, Professor Emeritus of psychology at the University of Chicago and past founder and director of the Orthogenic School for Disturbed Children

You already do so much to help your children, even if it might not feel like it. Many times you help them - possibly with fears or worries - just by “being there”. Can you remember being scared as a child and feeling better just because your Dad was near? Or running to find your Mom if you got worried? Or maybe going to your parents’ bed in the night?

At the end of this webinar we will devote some time to sharing experiences – both positive and negative - because we gain something more than just new ideas from sharing; we realize that we are not alone. So many families are encountering similar challenges and knowing that we are in this together can help to calm anxiety.

The effects of increased stressors on families

You may not be aware of all that can happen with increased stress. You may not even be aware of your own or your children’s increased stress because our emotional defences protect us from those hard to manage feelings like guilt, shame, being distraught, etc. The body, however, cannot be fooled.

Adult changes due to stress include:

- a. Physical Changes
 - headaches
 - stomach/indigestion issues
 - muscle tightness
 - unexplained pain
 - racing heart
 - tightness in breathing
- b. Emotional Changes
 - feeling anxious
 - depressed
 - quick temper
- c. Behavioural Changes
 - insomnia
 - TV binge watching
 - turtling - more withdrawn and quieter
 - sleeping in
 - emotional eating

For a child, stress can lead to:

- a. Physical Changes
 - stomach aches
 - headaches
 - increase heart rate
 - trouble breathing
 - skin rashes
- b. Emotional/Behavioural Changes
 - bad dreams
 - change in sleep or eating patterns

- less impulse control
- irritability
- withdrawn
- clingy
- regression in learned skills (toilet training)
- wanting to sleep with parents.
- irrational fears

Why do we see these changes? Why is this important?

Emotions and new worries “stir” us up and create a sort of physiological energy. This energy needs to be discharged or processed and “mastered” in order for us to “feel OK” again.

When children have strong feelings, they may have trouble recognizing them, or they may feel guilty that they had “bad” thoughts, so they hide them. The guilt is hard to manage and can lead to undesirable behaviour. Often children will get into fights and misbehave, or they might try to “hold it in” but wind up having bad dreams or wetting the bed. Older children may talk about “feeling like a failure.”

Unexpressed emotions lead to many behaviour and health problems in both adults and children. The more we can “get it out in the open” in a reasonable and non- aggressive way, the better it is for all. Holding feelings in can lead to not only the physical, emotional and behavioural changes I mentioned above but can also create frustration for everyone in the family.

Talking things through can help children learn to regulate strong feelings in the context of loving relationships leading to reduced stress.

Parents are often unaware of how much they can help just by talking with their kids.

What can we do to help?

If we all tried to identify the most effective style of parenting to raise emotionally healthy children, we would probably recommend parents who are consistent, and in agreement, who don’t over-indulge their children, with everyone meditating together on a daily basis... or something like that :) But in fact, a study referred to in *The Good Enough Parent*³ indicated that **there isn’t any particular parenting style that is better than the other.** Very strict parents raised emotionally healthy children and very lenient parents did as well. But these polar opposite parents had something in common. They both *believed* what they were doing was correct. When parents feel what they are doing is “right” they feel like “good enough parents”. Parents feel calmer and more settled. Children feel secure when parents feel secure. Their children identified with the solid confidence of their parents. This, in turn, helped children to develop their own sense of worth.

Children gain the most benefit when we do things our own way, the way that feels *right according to our conscience.*

³ A Good Enough Parent by Bruno Bettelheim Published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1987. Distributed by Random House Canada

There are *no right answers that work 100% of the time*. But I would like to share some tips and ideas that may help you in working through inevitable problems.

Right now, with everyone under increased stress, it is *not* the time for punishments. Children need their parents' to help them manage strong impulses that lead to poor behaviour. They need to understand *why* they are so upset and misbehaving so they can find a more appropriate way to behave. In this time of increased stress, if parents are able to calm down, children will gain strength from the parents (as you did when you were young if you sought your parents out when scared) and the children will calm down.

Find the solution that works *for your family*, according to their own value system. Being *real* is what works best rather than taking advice from relatives or teachers or sometimes even professionals who may not know you well.

Parents, who draw on their own creativity and observations to find solutions get “good parent” feelings and this sustains them and helps them be more patient with their children.

I will give some examples of how this works. Here are several areas to consider.

1. The Relationship

Many parents have discovered children become calmer when they focus more on their relationship.

Example: A mother was at her wits end with her 8-year-old who was uncooperative and especially nasty to his 4-year-old sister. She had given him time-out consistently for this behaviour and was discouraged that his behaviour wasn't getting any better. As a therapist I wondered whether a “time-in”⁴ would work any better, explaining that I thought he might be hating his sister because he believed she was better loved (and because of the boy's difficult behaviour, likely was). This might be more than he could tolerate. The mother decided she'd try a “bagel date”. After her daughter went to bed, she and her son went to the kitchen, toasted bagels and spent 15 minutes together – just them - every night. Guess what? The little boy started enjoying his sister a whole lot more and hugged her spontaneously one day when she greeted him after school. And guess what else? The mother started liking her son a whole lot more, and she *wanted* to spend more time with him because he was a great kid. Better yet, she felt like a good mother because they were back on track. She found her own solution that worked and felt deep love for both of her children again.

2. Too much pressure

Like the fictional mom in the Beaverton story, listening to how amazingly well your friend is doing - homeschooling, working from home and cooking great dinners - can discourage (and infuriate) anyone!

⁴ [Time-in Parenting: How to Teach Children Emotional Self-Control, Life Skills, and Problem Solving by Lending Yourself and Staying Connected – Otto Wieneringer](#)

As parents, we are quite vulnerable - even without a global pandemic - and it is easy to feel like you're doing a lousy job. It's easy to feel competitive. Sometimes it's hard not to lose your temper with your spouse or yell at your kids. You think if only they would do better, you could do better too.

Pressuring ourselves and our children to work harder or do a better job can feel like the only way forward sometimes, but it is likely to be counterproductive.

Here are two examples of unhappy consequences of asking "too much" of a child.

Example #1: A 3-year-old was very uncooperative and very angry. Her mother came to my classes wanting to know what to do about her child's bad behaviour. We explored when the child's behavior was the most difficult. It came to light that the mother expected her daughter to help set the table. When asked why, she said her mother expected her to help with a lot of tasks and she thought her daughter should as well. I gently asked whether she *liked* having to do so many chores when she was young, and if it generated loving feelings towards her mother. She was able to see that she hated these chores and realized she also felt resentful. This helped her ease up on her daughter. The child's behaviour improved. The little girl was angry, as was her mother before her, to be asked to do chores "because" her mother "thought she should". Children generally do not feel angry when asked to do chores when parents genuinely need help. Usually they feel proud to be able to make a significant contribution. They *hate* when parents boss them and *make* them do work they have not agreed to. At the same time, it helps children when they *do* learn to *look after themselves* and to eventually help others as well. Start with self-care tasks such as teeth brushing, then move to dressing etc. After self care, you can move to putting laundry in the hamper and making their beds. Whatever you are trying to teach your child, first do it *for* them, second do it *with* them, third *stand by and watch them admiringly* and hopefully the skill will be developed so they can do it themselves.

Example #2: Another mother in my class found it difficult to admit that her 3-year-old would hit her in the face, refuse to kiss her, reject all the mother's efforts to express love. The mother felt terrible to be rejected by her daughter. She felt like a failure. I assured her there was a "good reason" for this behaviour. The mother left class, apparently wondering what the child's "good reason" might be. She returned next week feeling very happy. She couldn't wait to explain that her daughter had been loving and affectionate and they had a really good week. She felt terrific but also a little embarrassed to admit that she had figured out what was making her daughter angry. She was making her learn to play little songs on the piano. She was delighted at her daughter's giftedness and wanted her to get a "head start". The effort to make her daughter achieve the mother's goal backfired as it often does. Children get pleasure and genuine self-esteem when they achieve a goal they have set for themselves, but rarely like to have to achieve to meet their mother's needs or perhaps a mother who is delighted to "have a bright child" and wants to demonstrate this to others. This was another creative solution that left the mother feeling so much better.

3. Be truthful – even about difficult things.

In all kinds of circumstances, people justify saying things that are not true to protect someone else's feelings. Parents don't tell children about a trip to the doctor or dentist because they do not want to worry them. An important idea to consider is that the anxiety that we experience prior to a difficult experience is what helps us find a way to face our fears and feel prepared. Thinking, talking, even

dreaming are all mental processes that can help us get ready to face something difficult. Children do far better when they know as much as possible about what they must face.

This holds true for COVID-19. Children cannot help but hear certain things. Find out what they have heard. Talk to them about the facts. Stress that this virus is generally not a danger to children or their parents, although you may be miserable if any of you get it. Explain it is more dangerous for grandparents but emphasize that very few people die from it. Most importantly, listen to their worries. You might check in regularly on this topic. Children may be worried that you or their grandparents will die. Be clear that is very, very unlikely and everyone can do something to help stay healthy.

4. Who's the boss?

Help children understand parents have to be the boss of some things; children can be the boss of other things and some things neither parents nor children can control.

There is a simple game you can play as a family to illustrate this.

You'll need 3 waste baskets or buckets; #1 is what children can be the boss of; #2 is what parents are the boss of and #3 is when nobody is the boss. Every family member gets a pile of scrunched up paper balls to throw into the baskets they think best matches the clue. In turn, each person says anything they can think of ... for example Daddy's car or Sunday picnic or the city of Vancouver.

Each person decides "who's the boss" and throws their paper balls into the basket #1, #2 or #3.

Daddy's car is something parents are the boss of, a Sunday picnic is something the kids could be the boss of, and the City of Vancouver is something nobody is the boss of.⁵

This game generates discussion of why sometimes parents must be the boss; what children can be the boss of and some things nobody can change – the weather for example or the Covid-19 restrictions. There is much dissension in families around "who is boss" and this game helps children think about it to reduce "you aren't the boss of me" resentments.

Some parameters that have proven helpful in families:

Children are the boss of when they go to sleep. Parents are the boss of when they go to bed.

Children are the boss of what they eat; parents are the boss of how many treats are allowed each day.

Children can be the boss of whether or not to wear warm clothes in winter; parents can be the boss of making sure the hats, mitts, extra jackets are in the backpack so if the child has misjudged, they won't suffer from cold.

As much as possible, children should be the boss of their own bodies. This applies to deciding if they are hungry or full, whether they need to go to the bathroom or whether they are tired. This even applies to medical procedures. Children, when they have time to face think about difficult procedures, and have enough parental support, generally can manage the most difficult procedures. To apply force, for example, holding a child down to get a needle or stitches can jeopardize parent child relations in serious

⁵ [Building Emotional Muscle - Strong Parents Strong Kids - Jack and Kerry Novik](#)

ways. A trip to the hospital without being prepared can be traumatizing and can also lead to eating, sleeping, behaviour and learning problems in future.

An example: A four-year-old child woke up screaming every afternoon after every nap – and had done so every day since an operation he had had 9 months earlier when he had come out of the anesthetic screaming and unable to calm down. Eventually they discharged him before he was ready to leave the recovery room because his panic was so great. I didn't know how to help. Had the mother asked me before the surgery, I had all kinds of things to suggest. She could let her child know how many needles he was going to have to have and when, when his mother would be allowed to stay with him and when he would be alone, how the doctor would "put him to sleep" but it wasn't really sleep, it was different. He wouldn't be able to feel anything but waking up is different and it can feel weird and scary when you can't quite "wake up" and keep falling back to sleep. I explained all of this but said I had no idea how to help her after the fact. I said I'd consult with a colleague to see if I could offer anything more the next meeting. On my way back, I felt terrible when I realized that I had forgotten to check further. Imagine my surprise when the mother couldn't wait to tell me "how much what you said helped". Dumbfounded, I asked what I had said. She told me she sat down at naptime to try and talk with her child about his hospital experience. At first, he became very agitated and ran around the bedroom blowing a whistle to drown out her voice. She managed to calm him and said she had something especially important to talk with him about. She said she was deeply sorry that she had not explained what going to the hospital was going to be like. She said she knew that he was scared and did not know what was going to happen. She said she was very, very sorry that she didn't do a better job of helping him with that experience and she was never going to leave him frightened and alone again. From that nap onward, he no longer woke up crying.

5. Accepting Strong Feelings

Did you enjoy the opening, humorous example as much as I did? Freud discovered there is unconscious meaning in jokes. We can enjoy what is actually true without feeling the overwhelming guilt we would experience if we were aware of our hostile thoughts. (We *do* have murderous fantasies towards people who enrage us, but unless you've spent a good long time in therapy, you will not know it. We can enjoy thinking about this mother's wish to kill though this joke and definitely "get" it.)

"Strong feelings" can be unexpected, uncomfortable, even disturbing. It's understandable that, in many cases, we push those feelings down in order to "get on with it". In fact, you will know how being really upset about something can interfere with your day and your work. We *have* to push much of what has upset us in life out of our minds, or we couldn't function.

So why would anyone *want* to know about these horrible upset feelings? Because being able to express and accept strong feelings can benefit your relationships, your family, and your health.

a. Feeling Terrible

I have found in my practice, almost universally people feel "bad" if they have bitter, selfish, angry, jealous, hostile, or shameful thoughts. It is difficult for the conscience to differentiate between *thinking* and *doing*. People feel ashamed of these feelings. Therefore, often, they try *not* to feel these emotions. Yet talking about strong feelings brings relief and discharges tensions. In fact, that is how

people get better in talk therapy. They access the “horrible” thoughts they’ve repressed, and when they can get them out in the open, they understand their “good reason” for feeling that way. Once able to know about and think about this, they come to understand *they are just thoughts*. This is called “working through” when they realize they haven’t *done* anything wrong and in fact, come to understand others would feel the same way in similar circumstances. Thus the guilt, which weighs us down when we carry what we believe is horrible, is reduced and they are freed up.

Two-year-olds have no trouble letting us know when they hate us and want us gone. Their conscience is not yet developed enough to make them feel guilty. However, most of us, when we hated our parents, were either punished “for this bad feeling” or told that it wasn’t nice to we hate. We also felt badly when we hated - we were furious and likely wanted to be rid of the hated person. So, we were trained very early to put very real feelings aside. Did we hate less? Of course not. We simply managed to be unaware of what we were thinking and feeling. Feelings we are unaware of do not disappear. They are stored in the body. They can lead to headaches, temper flare ups and all kinds of other problems (see the stress list above.)⁶

When we require children to stop expressing their anger and hatred towards parents or siblings, it does not go away. When there is no outlet for their strong feelings, there can be all kinds of repercussions. Children may become:

- very shy and clingy (afraid of their hidden wish to hurt who they hate)
- sad and unhappy (guilty for unknown wishes to hurt)
- anxious
- unable to engage in play (preoccupied with shameful feelings)
- bored
- restless and uncooperative
- aggressive and hurtful (repressed feelings cannot be controlled and break through)
- overactive (ADD, ADHD) when unable to manage the energy from their feelings

The difficulties that arise from unexpressed negative emotions are too numerous to list. Dr. Gabor Mate, a Canadian Physician from Vancouver, in his book “*When the Body Says No - The Cost of Hidden Stress*”⁷ explores the links between many illnesses and unexpressed emotion, including cancer.

b. Parental Help

Everybody knows children need parents' help when they are anxious and scared, but they also need their parents' help when they are furious, and out of control. It is the time parents most feel like punishing because they too feel they are losing control. Naming what is happening may help you and your child calm down. You might say, “You say that you hate me right now and I feel pretty upset with you too. Let’s try and calm down. Maybe we can talk about what is happening later. I need to go to my room until my mad feelings simmer down a little. What do you think will help you feel better?” This approach doesn’t ask anybody to deny or repress strong feelings. It acknowledges the emotions, respects how strong and real they are but at the same time conveys the message that they are manageable and will subside. It offers hope to the distraught child rather than leaving them feeling guilty and “bad”. It helps them understand that parents also have feelings that are difficult to manage.

⁶ The Body Keeps the Score Bessel Van Der Kolk P 164

⁷ When the Body Says No – the Cost of Hidden Stress. Gabor Mate

c. Typical Advice

I feel the typical parenting advice to tell children “I love you but don’t like what you are doing” is short-sighted. It leaves children feeling like the “bad ones” with perfect parents who are always calm. And it isn’t true. We *don’t* love our children when they are hurting their siblings, destroying our things or hitting us in the face. In fact, we may hate them at that moment. And that’s okay too. It helps our kids when we can be real.

d. Not a time for consequences or punishment

Acknowledgement of true *negative* feelings in a non-aggressive way on the parents’ part will help children feel less guilty and help them recover to reasonable behaviour again much faster. It will also help parents feel better to not have to pretend they are not upset. However, as much as distraught parents may feel taking away every privilege and cherished thing the child has, **THIS IS NOT THE TIME FOR CONSEQUENCES OR PUNISHMENT**. It does nothing to help the child regain equilibrium and the emotional stability that will help them do better next time. Contrary to popular belief, punishment does not “teach a lesson”. It weakens the child’s self-esteem, makes them feel separate from parents and angry and bitter. Feeling unloved, it is often more difficult for the child to do “better” the next time.⁸

e. Making Amends

After an upset, when both parent and child feel better, they can think about what has happened, whether amends need to be made or what will restore good feelings all around. Fixing things broken, and taking responsibility for getting things right again, is highly therapeutic. It helps children feel hopeful and less guilty, if parents approach this supportively and not punitively.

f. Death Wishes

When kids are furious with their parents, they want to get rid of them! They want them to die. They feel like killing them. In the fairy tales, when the wicked witch or mean giant dies, this expresses the child’s unconscious wish to kill the “bad” mommy or daddy. There is always a good mother/father figure as well – a queen or fairy godmother or kind king - and this is the good mother/father, who always lives. There are similar fairy tales in all languages and these stories are beloved, in part, because they express these universal wishes to kill the parent when hating and then restoring the good parent again when love returns.

Death wishes can terrify children because they have vivid imaginations and believe they can make things happen. If parents are observant, they will be able to see when a child is experiencing these death wishes and then can help them with their rage. Children need help seeing these are only thoughts, mommy (or daddy) is fine, and even when you wish to get rid of mommy or daddy (or your brother or sister) you can have those big scary thoughts and wishes, and nothing bad happens. With this approach, children need not hide these wishes and do not have to cope with the increased inside energy that comes when strong feelings are repressed.

These (unknown) wishes are especially difficult when children hear that people are dying with COVID. Children may become very anxious, fearful their aggressive thoughts could harm their beloved parent.

⁸ These ideas are explored further [in Barbara Burrows Parenting Magazine](#).

More than ever, it is helpful to try and talk about rageful feelings, listen to children if they scream “I wish you were dead!” and help them articulate what has made them so angry. If parents can help the child calm down, they can point out the child’s huge angry feeling didn’t do any damage at all - and the hated parent didn’t die. My guess is you are seeing little of this overt anger right now and more anxiety/symptoms because it is just too scary to wish your parents dead in these troubled times.

Inside Helper

The Hanna Perkins Children’s treatment center in Cleveland had published this children’s book to help children understand they have an [“inside helper”](#).

Conclusion

I hope in this presentation I have been able to demonstrate your greatest resource as a parent is you yourself. Talking things through with your children in your own way is an invaluable resource and will help your children immeasurably. I have focused on how much parents can do to help children by “being” themselves – with all their shortcomings and faults and trying not to fudge on the truth, acknowledging their own and their children’s strong feelings. This is what Bettelheim called “a good enough parent”. He, and other psychoanalysts before him, found children did better with “good enough” parents than parents trying to a perfect version of themselves. Parents who are able to accept the inevitable mistakes they make, their character flaws, and the days they are unable to be the kind of parents they would like to be, can also accept their children's imperfections.

Drawing heavily from the work of Bruno Bettelheim, I have touched on the following ideas:

1. The more *real* parents are, true to their own feelings and values, the more secure both they and their children will feel. Children don’t do well with mechanical perfection. They need human beings around who can both succeed and fail – a “good enough parent”
2. There is a GOOD REASON for all behaviour.
3. Accepting and talking through strong feelings is the most effective way to discharge the tensions that inevitably builds, particularly in times of increased stress.

This idea of talking things through with children and *helping* them behave themselves rather than punishing them for misbehaviour may be a new concept. For additional resources you can read through past issues of [Barbara Burrows Parenting Magazine](#) where these ideas are explored and stories from parents who were able to turn difficult situations around by searching for the “good reason” are shared. You can also find numerous articles for parenting from birth to age 5 at [Hanna Perkins Child Development Center](#). This talk will be posted on my website and I will make a copy available if anyone would like it.

I want to end this presentation by saying I know from my many years of working with parents how much parents do to help their children - usually without even realizing. I hope, as you’ve listened today, that you’ve thought of something you do for your children that you hadn’t realized would be helpful and that has made you feel like a “good enough parent”.