



PARENT TO PARENT



2020 Is Behind Us. Now What?

#REALTALK: COVID-19 and PTSD

The Lowdown on Pandemic Pets

Modeling Failure as a Parent



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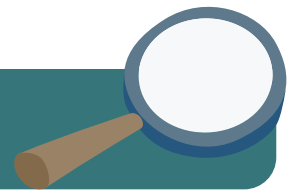
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OUR MISSION

Connecting a diverse community of families with the resources they need to navigate parenting in the city

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Parent to Parent contains articles and information straight from our NPN member community.

For information about editorial submissions, email: newsletter@nnpnparents.org

For advertising, email: advertising@nnpnparents.org.

We look forward to hearing from you!

From the Executive Director

Dear Members,

It's time to take a deep breath. First a cleansing breath to congratulate ourselves for getting through the last year, then an energizing breath to prepare ourselves for all of the hope and hard work that this year will bring.

We have so much hope for this year! A hope for health, safety, financial success, political peace, and racial justice. Also, a good night's sleep, an indoor playdate, the warm embrace of family and friends. All of these complicated, simple things.

Meanwhile, we continue to do the hard work of everyday life, big and small. As parents, that is everything from changing diapers to fixing the wifi to supporting our children's passions. For NPN, that means creating new resources, improving our website, embracing diversity and supporting a growing, inclusive community. This is good, hard work and like you, we are ready for it.

So bring it on, 2021! We are great at doing hard things. We are here with hope, support, and a community of incredible parents and we are ready for an amazing, exhilarating year.

Amy R. Johnson

Amy Johnson
Executive Director

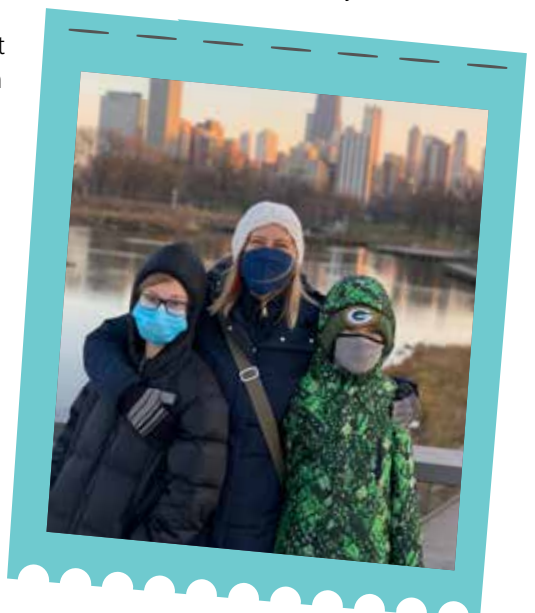


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OVERHEARD ON THE FORUM

Remember that time we panic-bought all the toilet paper in Chicago? (And for some of us, bidets?) Now that we're nearly a year into this thing, we asked the Forum: **What are the pandemic purchases you remember making way back last March that now seem laughable? And which have actually been useful?**

"FLOPS: The pool that we ended up returning because we couldn't easily get a permit for our unfenced suburban backyard; so many cans of chicken noodle soup that no one has eaten back when other canned goods were low at the grocery store; Saltines, because now my husband is addicted and eats a full sleeve of Saltines as a 'snack' every night."

"Things we bought that now seem silly: A gazillion Lysol wipes that we will probably never use. Way too much toilet paper. Things that have actually been useful: Edibles.

Adult bikes, which we did not have. Kids' roller blades. Desks. Electric pencil sharpeners. Portable speaker for doing workout videos outside. Subscriptions to workout apps now that we aren't going to the gym. A row of hooks for the entryway to hang masks and keys, etc."

"Pandemic panic purchases: Brainrich Kids indoor play gym (has yet to be delivered so we'll see if it was worth it), large crash pad, outdoor swing, small outdoor jungle gym, inflatable pool (used maybe 5 times before it got a leak, ugh), hand weights for me. I'm not even including the slew of home decor items I've bought because it's truly embarrassing."

"Purchase we didn't use: Lysol wipes, panic home-schooling supplies like preschool workbooks, etc. (Went back to daycare, thank god.) Best purchases: noise cancelling headphones, standing desk, tagalong bike. This summer: extremely overpriced (due to demand) inflatable pool for our tiny yard."

UPCOMING EVENTS

Visit nnpnparents.org/calendar for more great events!



FEBRUARY

23-26

Virtual Summer Camp Fair

nnpnparents.org/summercampfair

Our Summer Camp Fair is back! Find both online and in-person options for this summer. Spread over four days for your convenience, the fair includes live webinars on summer camp topics and raffles to win free weeks of camp! Free for members with RSVP.

APRIL

Virtual Developmental Differences Resource Fair

nnpnparents.org/DDRF

Celebrating 10 years of serving families. DDRF is your one-stop shop for schools, services and other resources that cater to families supporting children with developmental differences. The best part? You can browse our virtual exhibit hall from your couch.

MAY

Online Auction

biddingforgood.com/NPNparents

Mark your calendar for our annual Online Auction! Thanks to our networks and relationships all over town, we're able to gather tons of wow-worthy, family-friendly items (plus some special just-for-parents deals), all averaging 40% off. Browse, bid, and feel good knowing you've supported NPN!

ONGOING
EVENTS

New Moms Groups

nnpnparents.org/groups/new-moms-group

Especially with limited socialization outside the house, New Moms Groups are amazing and unique ways to meet other new moms! Connect with other new moms who face the many changes, challenges and joys you are experiencing as a new parent.

GROUP SPOTLIGHT

Expectant Moms Group, active since fall 2020

How did this group get its start?

This idea to form an Expectant Moms Group had been discussed for a while, and once we moved to a virtual world, we thought the time was right to make the group happen. It's wonderful to give expectant moms a way to connect with each other, and discuss their journeys and support each other.

What are the best things about this group?

The expectant mom camaraderie. To be able to share stories and hear how others are going through their pregnancies. The joys and the concerns. Bouncing ideas off of each other on how you are preparing for the baby. What are you reading? What are you purchasing? Is the Snoo worth it?

What's the best advice this group has shared to its members?

That you will never feel 100 percent prepared.

What are your expectations for the year ahead, and how can this group help?

Mamas-to-be can support and be a resource for each other long after their infant has arrived!

Know someone who'd make a great subject for Spotlight? Let us know! Write to newsletter@nnpnparents.org.

ASK A DOCTOR

NAVIGATING WINTER SPORTS SAFETY

By Anita Chandra-Puri, MD, NPN member since 2018

2020 was truly a very difficult year with regards to the coronavirus pandemic. There is a lot we know now that we didn't know at its start and still so much to learn. Scientists and medical researchers are working hard to develop therapeutic medications and vaccines to help protect us from the harms this virus can cause. Families everywhere have had to make sacrifices in their personal lives, work lives and the ways they enjoy sports and recreation, all the while trying to find new ways to stay healthy and active.

While spectator sports are an exciting pastime in the fall and winter months, we have all heard over and over again about COVID infections and spread amongst professional athletes. These individuals have made personal decisions about participating in these sports as it is their job. Sports participation at the student level is clearly a different issue. The American Academy of Pediatrics values sports and physical fitness in their guidance of healthy living and good mental health during this pandemic. The safest sports last summer were noted to be golf, running, baseball, and tennis — activities in which we're able to maintain distance and minimize sharing equipment.

Keep Following the Rules

The underlying guidance across all activities is the ability to maintain social distancing, perform good hand hygiene, and wear a mask when you can't maintain a 6-foot distance. For safety, masks may not be required in active elite level exercise, water sports, or where it poses a risk of getting caught on equipment, covering one's eyes, or choking. Each athlete should have their own mask, access to hand sanitizer, and their own water bottles and towels.

Recreational sports for young children can be challenging because mask wearing may be difficult to enforce. Competitive or high school level sports for older children pose additional problems because the severity of coronavirus illness in children in their teen years may mimic that in adults. New information about the effects of COVID infection on the heart poses even more concern.

Watch-Outs: Cardiac Conditions

The current recommendations by pediatricians and cardiologists include looking for signs of cardiac inflammation or myocarditis in athletes who had significant symptoms of COVID as part of clearing them to return to their sport. This can mean a minimum of a 2-3 week absence from their sport if they don't have any cardiac concerns, or of course much longer if they have significant cardiac compromise. It is recommended to be in touch with your healthcare provider before making the decision to return to sports.



Photo courtesy Anita Chandra-Puri

What To Avoid

During sports practice or games, athletes need to avoid huddles, high fives, handshakes or fist bumps. They shouldn't share any food or drinks with their teammates. Cheering each other on should be limited to when they are greater than 6-8 feet apart and they should always use a tissue when spitting or blowing their nose.

Low-Risk Activities

So the question remains, what can you and your children do to keep healthy and active and be as safe as possible? Here are some suggestions that allow social distancing, mask wearing and minimal equipment sharing:

Walking, Hiking and Running	Swimming and Diving
Fishing	Dancing and Yoga
Golf, Tennis, Baseball	Skating and Cycling

Higher-Risk Activities

The higher risk sports which involve more contact — soccer, football, basketball, gymnastics, cheerleading and hockey — should be undertaken only if you and your athletes, coaches and sports associations appreciate and follow the best guidance they can to minimize risk.

There are no easy answers to the questions parents have about participation in sports. We know robust physical activity contributes to good mental and physical health. Knowing the risks may help you determine good options for your child. Of course, always consider discussing the health risks and benefits with your individual pediatrician. And while this may not be the ideal year for your athlete, we hope that there are good protective vaccines available in the near future which can help protect us all, and allow for a more active lifestyle again!

Anita Chandra-Puri, MD, is a Chicago pediatrician with Northwestern Medical Group Pediatrics, as well as a mom and NPN board member. To ask Dr. Anita a question, email newsletter@nnpnparents.org with the subject line, "Ask a Doctor."

ASK AN EXPERT

HOW TO SEPARATE PEACEFULLY

By Erin Wilson, NPN member since 2018

YOUR AND YOUR CHILDREN'S HAPPINESS IS INDISPENSABLE.

We are now nearly a year into the COVID-19 pandemic and have experienced the accompanying challenges and bright spots of quarantine, working remotely, and e-learning. As we acclimate to the new normal, you might be experiencing some clarity in your relationships. Some people are realizing their relationship with their significant other may bring unhappiness rather than satisfaction, or strain rather than ease. Are you staying for the sake of your children? Have you tried couple's therapy but still cannot get along?

If you relate to any of these issues, you may be already considering separation or divorce. This can be incredibly difficult to process, but the struggles we have all experienced over the past year may have alerted you to a desire for change. This realization may be enlightening or potentially distressing, but the next steps do not have to be strenuous or daunting. You can separate peacefully and amicably by taking into consideration the following tips.

Communication and Compromise

The best thing you can do now is communicate with your spouse, either directly or through a therapist or your lawyer, in a respectful manner. Compromise and cooperation are key.

Peaceful Processes

Consider mediation, which involves a neutral third party to facilitate the separation or an uncontested divorce process, where either one or both parties can have representation and the divorce will move forward seamlessly so long as there is agreement amongst the parties. Another idea is to begin or continue in therapy for communication or co-parenting counseling. For other couples, separation may become contentious but if you can keep level-headed and communicate your thoughts with your spouse, this can help exponentially. Keep in mind that the common goal is to separate civilly and expeditiously.



Photo courtesy Erin Wilson

Children Come First

Remember your common goals of keeping the children happy, safe and healthy are priority; always consider their wants or needs and how to align those with your requests in the separation. You and your co-parent must cooperate and act in your children's best interests. There are a variety of professionals that can facilitate this process: a Child Representative or Guardian ad Litem may be appointed to represent the children's interests, or a Parenting Coordinator may be appointed to help with communication.

Self-Care

Something many people forget during separation is taking care of themselves. Try to do activities you may not have done with your significant other or even with your children — anything from starting a new fitness class online to spending more time with your friends and loved ones. Recognize that self-care is one of the most important routines you should preserve during this time.

If you keep the above tips in mind, separation and divorce during COVID-19 may actually enhance your life. Remember: Your and your children's happiness is indispensable.

Erin M. Wilson is a family law attorney with her own firm, The Law Office of Erin M. Wilson LLC, offering services in litigation, mediation, parenting coordination and as a child representative & GAL. Erin lives on the North Side of the city with her husband, also a family law attorney, and two children, Ava (7) and Brecken (5).

ASK AN EXPERT

MODELING FAILURE AS A PARENT

By Lemi-Ola Erinkitola, NPN member since 2020

I ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO APPROACH THEIR MISTAKES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO MODEL A HEALTHY RESPONSE TO FAILURE.

Did you know that mistakes are integral to the learning process? It's true. Failure actually helps students develop their ability to improve and hone fundamental skills. Those who don't view failure as an opportunity can find themselves struggling later on. Of course, our achievement-obsessed culture doesn't help matters. We don't often hand out awards for most spectacular failures. Only when that failure is turned into a success do we typically offer praise.

When my own children were young, I felt like a constant failure. Balancing work and home while keeping a family of five happy was no small feat. For a long time I carried that guilt. I was hard on myself, as many parents are. Eventually, I realized that my children were picking up on my reaction. I knew I needed to change how I approached failure, so they wouldn't accumulate the same guilt. Following are some of the lessons I've learned, and share with parents in similar situations.

Model Failing Forward

I encourage parents to approach their mistakes as an opportunity to model a healthy response to failure. Try to embody failing forward — learning from mistakes and embracing failure as a necessary part of progress.

One way to do this is in your demeanor. Children notice how you react when you "mess up." You can spend all the time in the world telling your child that it's okay to make mistakes, but if you melt down when it happens for you, they'll remember. By being gentle to yourself, you teach your child it's okay for them to do the same. There should be no shame associated with an honest mistake.

When discussing failure with your child, avoid language that assigns negative value, i.e. "I made a stupid mistake." Instead, talk about what you learned and what you might have done differently. Emphasize how important it is to move forward despite this setback. If you've failed while learning a skill or performing a task, touch on how you'll improve.



Photo courtesy Lemi-Ola Erinkitola

Lead by Example

In this chaotic world, parenting can seem like a constant string of mistakes. Yet we adapt for the sake of our children. So why not let them in on this process? If our children see us being uncertain, failing, or even flailing, but still managing to grow and learn, they will learn they can, too. Our failures can be their guideposts.

Improve Confidence and Chances at Success

Failure is valuable for boosting confidence and promoting resilience in young people both in and out of the classroom. Children and teens who can persevere in spite of repeated setbacks and without the validation of success are well-equipped for the realities of adult life.

I saw it in my own children. When I adjusted my own attitude, when I allowed myself to fail forward and lead by example, my children were less afraid of their own failures. Instead of mistakes, they saw opportunities. Instead of giving up, they embraced their innate creativity.

How will you embrace failure within your home?

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An award-winning educator and author and the founder of *The Critical Thinking Child*, Lemi-Ola Erinkitola is passionate about giving parents the tools to help their young children succeed academically. She's developed proven frameworks that foster academic achievement and critical thinking skills while also encouraging confidence, family time, and fun.

ASK AN EXPERT

CONNECTING WITH YOUNG BABIES

By **Nancy Mork-Bakker, LCSW**; and **Linda Horwitz, MEd**; NPN members since 2012

Having a baby is hard, and with COVID-19 in the mix, life with a little one can feel even more complicated than before. You have fewer places to go with your baby, and limited access to family and friends to give you a break. If your baby seems to cry more than most, doesn't seem to sleep unless in your arms, doesn't want to eat, or pulls away from the breast or bottle, you are managing even more stress with less support. It would be great if there was a perfect way to parent, but there's often no quick fix or easy solution.

Remember: Each baby (and parent) is unique, and understanding yours might mean going against what the books say. It's important to trust your gut and explore what works and what doesn't. Following are a few ideas that we encourage in our work at Erikson Institute's Fussy Baby Network, which will go a long way in helping you feel more confident as a parent.

Babies Are Individuals

Isn't it interesting that we all accept that adults differ as individuals, yet we expect babies to all act the same? Babies are individuals from the moment they're born, and parents must figure out how to best meet their individual needs. Another way to think about it is to ask, "What fills my baby's cup and what depletes it?" Learning what these "fill ups" are for your baby requires observation and trial and error.

For example, some babies love to be held, while others want to move freely. "Tummy time" sessions are widely seen as a good developmental exercise for babies. But if you notice your child resists tummy time and prefers being held, use this information to make sure you "fill their cup" with cuddles before and after a session. By doing this, you are communicating to your baby that you understand their needs — an important component of trust in a parent/child relationship.

Sleep Begets Sleep

Parents might also find that their baby, particularly young infants, is fussier in the early evenings for a few hours, often starting around 5 p.m. During this time, they want to be constantly held and if you try to put them down, they cry and the cycle continues. There are many theories about why babies cry more around this time, and one thought is sensory overload. A newborn is taking in so many sights and sounds that by the evening, their little body can't take it anymore. Another theory is that babies are overtired around these hours. Often they "cat nap" throughout the day so by the evening, they are sleep-deprived and difficult to sooth. Many parents assume keeping their baby awake will help them sleep better when actually the opposite is true. The more babies sleep throughout the day, the better they are able to fall and stay asleep.



Photo courtesy Nancy Mork-Bakker

Photo courtesy Linda Horwitz

Take a Break

Another tip is understanding that when you feel stressed or anxious, it doesn't automatically mean your baby will mirror your emotions. But it might mean that you have less patience and you need to find a way to take time for yourself. When overwhelmed, parents often hold babies differently or move too quickly for them. It is always OK to put your baby down in a safe place and breath for a few moments. Try saying phrases like, "I'm OK, I can do this. My baby is just trying to communicate with me." You can also do some deep breathing and while you do, put your hand on your baby's chest so you are both slowing down together. Notice how your baby's breathing changes when you do this.

Overall, it's key to remember that babies are not one-size-fits-all. Even if you experience your baby as fussy or challenging, that does not indicate you are doing something wrong. Often as adults, when we feel safe and secure, we feel more comfortable crying or letting loose. Imagine when a loved one hugs us and we actually cry harder! The same goes for babies and as their caregiver, you can likely figure out how to sooth them best. Trust what you know about them, and remember tomorrow is a new day and there will always be room to keep exploring and building your relationship with your baby.

Nancy Mork-Bakker, LCSW, is the Director of Erikson Institute's Fussy Baby Network (FBN). Linda Horwitz, MEd, is FBN's Outreach Coordinator and Infant Family Specialist. FBN offers telephone support, virtual visits, and weekly virtual drop-in groups. There is no fee for services during the pandemic. Families can call 1-888-431-2229 or email fussybaby@erikson.edu.

#REALTALK

COVID-19 AND PTSD

By Crystal Clair, MA, LCPC; NPN member since 2015

LET YOURSELF OFF THE HOOK FOR NOT DOING THE DISHES, TAKE A SELF-CARE DAY WITH NETFLIX, ASK FOR AN EXTENSION ON A WORK PROJECT, GO FOR A LONG DRIVE TO CLEAR YOUR MIND. NO ONE CAN TAKE BETTER CARE OF YOU THAN YOU.

COVID and PTSD. Both of these words are in all-caps because they are words that mean more than the one word itself. COVID is our generation's first and only pandemic that has been so charged that we often find ourselves saying phrases like, "I have PTSD," or "I am OCD." However, it is important to define the words we are using. In narrative therapy, we focus a lot on wording as a way to validate and change our negatives to more positive biographies of our life. My goals for this piece are to define PTSD and provide ways to increase self-care as we go into another surge of cases following the holiday season. My hope is that after you read this, you will be able to help those who are struggling, and validate your own trauma if the terms resonate with you. In the end, I want everyone to know that therapy and self-regulation can have successful and lasting results.

PTSD Defined

According to the American Psychiatric Association, PTSD has several qualifiers. I have condensed the criteria to the most common symptoms related to one's experience in relation to COVID. Please keep in mind that only a licensed professional can diagnose PTSD and that symptoms must last more than one month and create distress and impairment with your daily activities at work, home, school, etc.

The person was exposed to: death (watch the virus take hold of a loved one) or threatened by death (having the virus and fearing death). After such an event the person re-experiences the trauma through upsetting memories, nightmares, or flash-backs. A person then avoids trauma-related stimuli such as thoughts or feelings or external reminders (hospitals, masks, etc.). Followed by negative thoughts or feelings for example, the inability to recall key features of the trauma, decreased interest in activities, feelings of isolation, negative affect. All of these symptoms then create alterations in arousal and reactivity such as: irritability or aggression, risky or destructive behavior, hypervigilance, heightened startle reaction, difficulty concentrating, and/or difficulty sleeping.



Photo courtesy Crystal Clair.

PTSD and COVID

In the context of COVID, here are a few ways that PTSD can come about:

- If you witnessed your loved one suffer, panic, or gasp for breath.
- If you have seen you love being taken in an ambulance to the hospital not knowing if they are going to survive.
- If you are a first responder who has been treating COVID patients for several months and inevitably losing patients along the way.
- If you didn't know if you would make it through after getting COVID.

Medical trauma is being talked about more and more with COVID. PTSD can be caused by birthing trauma, strokes, heart attacks, or any operation/illness in which one is fearing death. It is important to note that feeling afraid to go into crowds is not a symptom of PTSD in and of itself. There is a lot of anxiety that has increased as a result of the virus, but unless you have witnessed or been threatened by death, it is not PTSD.

Once you have identified symptoms of PTSD and been diagnosed, you will be able to start the path of healing. These are real experiences and the way that the body tends to process trauma is to RELIVE it until you can REPROCESS it and allow your body to RELEASE it.

How to Start Healing

Therapy, therapy, therapy. I am a therapist so you won't be surprised to hear me say that everyone should try therapy at some point in their life. For individuals with trauma, therapy becomes even more important. Talking it through with someone that is trained in working with trauma will allow you to have a space to share your biggest fears and to release that fear in order to heal and find peace. There are other modalities that we are finding to have awesome results as well, such as: biofeedback, EMDR, and Stellate ganglion block (SGB). Whatever process you choose, I can guarantee you won't regret it.

Mercy and Grace

Offer this to yourself and others whenever possible. Let yourself off the hook for not doing the dishes, take a self-care day with Netflix, ask for an extension on a work project, go for a long drive to clear your mind. No one can take better care of you than you.

Winter Care Kit

My recommendation for all of my clients right now is to make yourself a winter care kit. Take a big basket or box and fill it with items that you love and that bring you joy. My box has a cozy blanket, my favorite raspberry herbal tea, lemon and rose oils, fancy hand cream, crochet needles and yarn, embroidery kits, sudoku books, magazines that I haven't read but have wanted to, snacks, a list of movies I want to watch, etc. What will yours include?

Now once you've put on your metaphorical oxygen mask, make a box for everyone else in your house. Think of the fun your kids will have on a rainy/snowy/boring day. For couples, this could be a fun activity! In making boxes for each other you will both be truly showing each other you care and giving items that will help increase one another's mood and joy.

Above all, please remember to be safe, check on your strong friends, and ask for help!

.....

Crystal Clair is the owner of CFC Therapy Group in Lincoln Park. In her free time she enjoys nature, bakes, and crochets. She lives with her husband, two children, two cats, and four fish in Irving Park. As a family, they enjoy pizza and movie Fridays, nature preserves, and glow-in-the-dark dance parties.



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#REALTALK

A CHILD THERAPIST'S TOP 10 COVID-19 PARENTING FAILS

By Ritamaria Laird, MA, LCPC; NPN member since 2015

WE ARE ALL TRULY DOING THE BEST WE CAN.
AND THAT IS GOOD ENOUGH.

I can hardly believe it myself when I tell people that I have been a pediatric mental health therapist for 12 years now. I mean, that is over a decade of my life! I would say that I don't know where the time went, but I do. A lot has happened since beginning my professional career. I moved to Chicago, got engaged, and landed my dream job. But what really makes time fly is having kids. Nothing in my life has made me realize just how fleeting life is more than raising children. One day they fit into the palm of your hand, and the next, they barely fit in your lap.

There are a lot of expectations about what kind of parent I am and how I raise my kids. After all, I keep up to date on the latest research in child development and behavior. My passion is in supporting parents and teaching parents how to be connected and attuned to their children. So I talk A LOT with parents. I am often told by parents I work with, "I bet your kids are so well behaved," or, "I bet you never yell." (Yikes, the pressure!)

Of course, I do have to practice what I preach, and while I try my best to be a playful, accepting, curious, and empathic mother...I am also a "good enough" mom. I am not perfect. Despite my training, my knowledge, my passion, and my love, I am here to tell you: if you only knew how I epically fail on a daily basis! Well, actually, maybe it would help. Maybe it would help you have some compassion for yourself, because I promise you there is no such thing as a perfect parent, and good enough is actually all you need (and this is backed by research!). So in all my vulnerability, I will share with you my top 10 epic parenting fails during the COVID-19 pandemic:

10. Becoming so frustrated and out of control with my own emotions when my 5-year-old refused to go to bed that I threatened to throw out her JoJo Siwa Bow.
9. Feeling guilty about my (above) tantrum, giving in, and allowing my 5-year-old to stay up till 10pm watching *Naked and Afraid*. (This went on for a month.)
8. Experiencing the full range of working-mom shame when my daughter named each family member's hobby and declared, "Mommy's hobby is work."



Photo courtesy Ritamaria Laird.

7. Begging my 5-year-old to "Just leave me alone for two minutes while I finish my Zoom call!" realizing that I actually did not mute my mic.
6. Spacing out from exhaustion while the baby crawls on the lawn...and eats actual bunny poop.
5. Logging in my kindergarten late to virtual school. Every. Single. Day.
4. Witnessing her announce to her teacher, "Sorry I am always late. We like to sleep in."
3. Knowing pandemic guilt has turned me into a "Yes" mom, and I have a trillion stuffed animals to prove it.
2. Thinking that brushing my kid's teeth before dessert was OK. Hello, child's first cavity.
1. Being mindless while getting my children out of the car and putting my laptop on top of the car. Forgetting about my laptop. Finding my laptop smashed to bits on North Avenue.

If a child therapist can't get it right all the time, take some pressure off yourself to be perfect. After all, we are in the midst of a pandemic. We are all truly doing the best we can. And that is good enough.

Ritamaria Laird was raised in Cincinnati. She moved to Chicago in 2009 and graduated with her degree in Clinical Counseling from Roosevelt University. She fell in love with the city and found her dream job at Individual and Family Connection (Roscoe Village and River Forest) working as Clinical Director and Pediatric Therapist, where she is passionate about helping parents connect deeply with their children in playful ways. Ritamaria is the mother to two girls, aged 5 years and 1 year.

FEATURE

HOW TO HYGGE AT HOME

By **Fiona Royer**, NPN member since 2013

AS WE CONTINUE OUR WINTER LIVING WITH COVID, IT IS SO IMPORTANT THAT OUR HOMES BECOME OUR SANCTUARIES — AND NOT OUR CELLS.

Hygge: feeling warm, comfortable and safe. This Danish concept advocates enjoying the simple pleasures and treating yourself with care. As our Chicago winter looms, we could all do with a little dose of *hygge*: the perfect antidote to Zoom overload. Here's how.

Clear Out Clutter

To ensure the simplicity required for this concept, some decluttering is required. Make this an opportunity to donate items, then clear everything out of sight into some large, natural hampers.

Bring In Cozy

Then think cozy: wool blankets, faux sheepskins, baskets of slippers. There is nothing better than snuggling with your family and embracing the best of togetherness.

Add In Texture

To complement the soft textiles, add some earthenware bowls for soup or glass jars filled with pinecones for a pleasing aesthetic. Bringing nature in promotes the tranquil vibe.

Display Those Memories

While we can't see extended family members as much as we would like, displaying photos brings them closer. Or, dig out old mementos and arrange treasured items on shelves where they bring back happy memories.

Read and Listen

Reading and listening to music are soothing pastimes for many of us. Select some poetry or a beautiful photo book, create a playlist, and chill out in a nook made from a bean bag chair or throw pillows.

Embrace Changing Seasons

Embracing the seasons is a part of *hygge* that we all have to accept in Chicago. Bundle up on sunny days, invest in a sled for the snowy ones, and makeover your bedroom hotel-style for the really ugly ones.



Photo courtesy Fiona Royer

Set a Fire

Whether you have a fireplace indoors, a fire pit outside, or just a visual on YouTube, fires are immensely relaxing. Rearrange the furniture around this focal point, replacing the TV with conversation.

Enjoy a Cuppa

Make 2021 the year to up the ante on winter drinks. A hot chocolate bar is a fun low-key activity for all the family. Alternately, cover a box with beautiful fabric and fill it with a range of teas for a home tasting.

Bake a Treat

Though cookie exchanges are a no-no, take the opportunity to explore comfort foods from across the globe. Baking bread is another wonderful way to bring in the *hygge*, filling your home with an enticing aroma.

Bathe In Light

If candles are problematic with children and pets, there are plenty of realistic battery versions. And of course strings of tiny fairy lights add a magical effect strung up a little haphazardly.

Put Away Tech

Central to the theme of *hygge* is simplification, and that applies to technology, too. Identify a place to put away these items at the end of the day, such as a sanitizing station or a charging drawer.

Embrace Neutral Decor

To fully embrace the required Danish décor, repaint a room in neutral colors of grays, greens and creams. For a low-commitment fix, try adding new pillows or replacing the bold with calming artwork.

As we continue our winter living with COVID, it is so important that our homes become our sanctuaries — and not our cells. While traveling and experiencing a refreshing change of scene remains problematic, setting up our dwellings to provide respite is hugely beneficial to our wellbeing.

Fiona Royer lives in Lincoln Park with her husband, Randall, and their three young children. Originally from the U.K. with a business and creative background, she now works in the Chicago philanthropic community and writes on the topic of giving. She believes that giving is the key to a fulfilling life.

FEATURE

2020 IS BEHIND US. NOW WHAT?

By Gertrude Lyons, NPN member since 1998

NOW IS WHEN WE REALLY NEED TO CELEBRATE: OUR FORTITUDE, OUR RESILIENCE, OUR CREATIVITY IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS THAT BROUGHT BITS OF NORMALCY AND SPIRIT INTO CHAOS.

It is November 1, 2020, as I write this article. You will be reading this in January 2021. So much will happen between today and the new year: the election (pause and breathe), Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Christmas, and New Year's. That is a lot to take in under normal circumstances, but this year, none of it will be exactly normal. Whatever comes of the election and the intense holiday season, there will certainly be additional tension at the start of the year for all families.

The following is a list of possible scenarios for processing the holidays. Pick the one that most closely resembles your experience, and then match that scenario with thoughts about the new year.

- A. Your candidate won the election and your whole, extended family was in agreement and celebrated. This excitement wove its way seamlessly into your holidays and everyone agreed on a safe plan for a socially distant celebration of all the holidays (every holiday was celebrated because of your culturally diverse family that blends and honors all the holidays equally). Despite the uncertainty of what lies ahead in 2021, you feel so nourished by your time with family and friends that you sprang into the New Year full of hope and possibilities of this new frontier.
- B. Your candidate lost the election. You felt alone in your family of "other candidate" supporters and had to spend a decent amount of time through the holidays listening to their gloating, while you are terrified for what is to come of our country over the next four years. Some members of the family think COVID is a hoax, while others haven't left their house since March because they are so scared. It was so disappointing not to have the annual all-family holiday gathering that each family did their own thing and never connected as a big group. You feel defeated and hopeless going into 2021
- C. You got through it.

Is choice "A" even possible? Is some version of choice "B" inevitable? Is choice "C" pretty darn likely?



Photo courtesy Gertrude Lyons

The reality is, there is truth and possibility in all three. And whether one of these was close to your actual experience or not, we will all have had aspects of all of them and a season like no other we could have imagined. Good for us! That's right: I said, good for us!

Now is when we really need to celebrate: our fortitude, our resilience, our creativity in difficult situations that brought bits of normalcy and spirit into chaos. In addition to celebrating, here are a few ways you can take your lived experience of 2020 — the good, the bad and the ugly — and use it to make a positive difference in how you experience 2021:

Make a list of challenges you faced this past year and how you dealt with them. If you didn't like how you handled some of them, what can you do differently when something similar arises this year? Be ready!

Let your feelings flow. If you are like most of us, you've been holding your breath to get through it, only to realize there is no getting through. Share with a loved one your authentic fears, hopes, dreams for this year.

It is never too late to have a joyful holiday! Bring as much of the true spirit of the holidays into the new year as we can: generosity of spirit, goodwill, beauty, light in the darkness, charity, and lots of hope.

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Dr. Gertrude Lyons has been a professional life coach for 20 years, and is the founder of Rewrite the Mother Code®, focused on exploring, demystifying, and democratizing the maternal power that lives in all women. She believes that motherhood is a transformational journey that all women can take, with or without children, and that together, we can start a new conversation around modern motherhood.

FEATURE

THINKING OF GETTING A PANDEMIC PET?

By **Keisha Mathew**, NPN member since 2014

DESPITE THE RARE MOMENTS OF ANNOYANCE, IT'S BEEN SUCH A JOY TO HAVE ADDED A PET TO OUR HOME

I remember the day my family welcomed Zoomy Zoom into our home. We were filled with anxiety, excitement and love. Yes, you heard that right: our Yorkie Terrier's name is Zoomy Zoom. We brought our pandemic puppy home on a drizzly March 29. Even though I had been researching hypoallergenic dogs for about a year, the first three months of having Zoomy in our lives were still an adjustment. From the vaccine schedule to the poop collecting to the food restrictions, our lives changed under quarantine. The best parts were of course the play and cuddle time with our "furbaby." We have truly enjoyed our new family member's rambunctiousness while playing inside and outside of the house. The not-so-fun part was the potty training. In the beginning, it felt like Zoomy and I were battling over who was more stubborn. There were a few moments where I wanted to put a diaper on his furry butt, but at last, I can finally say that we have reached a place of potty harmony.

Despite the rare moments of annoyance, it's been such a joy to have added a pet to our home. Following are a few items on our checklist whose exploration ensured the smoothest transition possible. Before you commit to getting a pet, be sure to ask yourself these questions first:

Do you want an accessory, or a family member?

Once the quarantine is lifted, most of us will be less attentive to our new pets. Is that fair to them? It's important to consider training your pet to be alone for a few hours a week in order to prepare them for more independence in the home when you return to "normal" life. Perhaps hire a dog walker so they can socialize with other pups. Researching boarding facilities for long travel they may not be allowed to experience is another possibility.



Photo courtesy Keisha Mathew

Can you handle picking up poop and cleaning up urine?

This will definitely feel like a repeat of that first year with your human babies. Until your dog is fully trained, be ready to clean...constantly.

Can you handle a beloved object being chewed on if it's left unattended?

It happens, so be prepared: Breathe in, breathe out, and hide your valuables!

Are you OK with possibly being the main caretaker?

As much as my kids stated they wanted a dog to play with and take care of, Zoomy and I are the dynamic duo — indoors and out. Most days I don't mind, but other days I demand a break from the additional mommy duty.

Can you afford the responsibility?

If your pet gets sick unexpectedly, the pet insurance may not cover it. (Yes, you need pet insurance.)

Are you ready to talk about death?

Having had several pet-death traumas in my childhood, I thread this topic in with my children every so often so they know that it is a part of life. We do our best to cherish Zoomy while he is with us, rambunctiousness and all.

.....

Keisha Mathew is a Chicago native who has worked as a mental health professional for youth and families all over the city. In her spare time, she writes about her greatest inspirations: her life as a Black woman, wife, a mom of two. Follow her on Instagram via [@wanderlust.writer.creator](#) to read more of her works.

FEATURE

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

By **Brenna Moss**, NPN member since 2018

NOW, IT IS MORE ESSENTIAL THAN EVER TO KEEP LEARNING ENJOYABLE BY ENGAGING THE WHOLE FAMILY IN LEARNING, AND PRIORITIZING ORGANIC LEARNING THROUGH PLAY.



Photo courtesy Brenna Moss

As a kindergarten teacher, I always believed my top priority was to help children fall in love with learning. The joy was getting them to enjoy school, to cherish the memories they make there and embrace the challenges. I felt that if each child could come to school excited for learning, that I would be setting them up for a lifetime of success. With school buildings closed and parents juggling their own work while also managing online learning and homework, I am afraid this priority of mine is in serious jeopardy.

How can we, as exhausted and stretched-thin parents, keep learning fun for our frustrated and burnt-out children? How can teachers and the education system maintain rigorous learning while keeping the joys of learning intact? Now, it is more essential than ever to keep learning enjoyable by engaging the whole family in learning, and prioritizing organic learning through play. What exactly does this look like? Read on for some of my favorite ways to play and learn as a family.

Play a Family Game

Think of the amount of learning, thinking, and growing that happens when your family sits down to play a game. If they're old enough, have your children read aloud the rules and repeat them in their own words. Then, as you play, count and describe your play out loud. Take turns saying "Your turn!" and sharing materials. Not only are your young ones benefiting from intentional family time, but they will be learning social skills, strategy, reading, and comprehension skills, too.

Take to the Kitchen

Some of the best learning can happen with a hands-on approach in the kitchen. Have your child help you write out the grocery list: encourage them to spell words out on their own or copy the letters from current packaging. Involve your child in the recipes you create by having them read the recipe card to you. All kinds of math takes place in cooking: fractions, conversions, and counting. And don't forget science! Have your child help you discover the purpose of baking soda, or what happens to yeast in water.

Spread Some Joy

We all know someone who could use a smile. Have your child write letters to loved ones, make a book for a neighbor, or read to a younger sibling. Addressing and mailing the letters are half the fun!

Follow Their Interests

Does your child love building? Have them invent a new way to hang the towels in the bathroom or store items in the closet. Have an artistic one? Have them paint a picture, then write a note describing the image they created. Does your child love "search and finds"? Have them find and highlight sight words in a newspaper or magazine.

Above all, encourage your children to find their own ways to follow their curiosities. Have them ask questions about things that matter to them, and work to find the answer together. We owe it to our youngest learners to keep this journey exciting for them. Their (and our) future depends on it!

After more than a decade of teaching in the public school system, Brenna is now spending the days at home with her 2-year-old. A strong belief in child-led learning through play and exploration guide their days together. Brenna has been documenting their play based learning and projects on her instagram, @raisingminimoss.

FEATURE

CUT YOURSELF SOME SCREENTIME SLACK

By **Liza Balistreri Cahill**, *NPN member since 2018*

STRUCTURING YOUR KIDS' SCREEN TIME WITHIN THIS FRAMEWORK CAN HELP YOU ACHIEVE A MORE SUCCESSFUL BALANCE IN THESE CRAZY TIMES.

I remember being pregnant with my daughter (kiddo #1), and having very ambitious plans about what kind of parent I was going to be. Make homemade baby food? Of course! How organic. Sign up for a variety of baby/toddler classes? Yes, swimming and music galore! And screen time? No way! I'm going to be a totally involved, dedicated parent focusing on real-life experiences.

Fast-forward slightly to balancing work and life with a kiddo, and in comes the kid-friendly shockproof iPad case so we can start with Sesame Street and Chu Chu TV. At that point, we were still limiting the time to when I'm cooking dinner or taking a quick shower. Fast-forward a bit more to introduce kiddo #2, a global pandemic, a lifestyle shutdown, still working and balancing life, and trying not to lose my mind. (Thank you, iPad Screen Time Alert for reminding me how much my daughter's use increased when that happened. Ugh.)

Obviously we are all trying our best just to survive right now. Most kids are at home e-learning, and most parents are balancing working from home with parenting and schooling at the same time. Times are not easy. So what is the right call these days?

The American Academy of Pediatrics — which, depending on the child's age, generally recommends no or very limited screen time for kids — has recognized that kids' media use will likely increase under these stressful circumstances. (See the AAP's article on [HealthyChildren.org's COVID-19 link](https://www.healthychildren.org/COVID-19).) Among their recommendations are:

- Keep a routine
- Use screen time for positive, social connections
- Choose quality content
- Use media together

Recommended screen times are definitely fluctuating now, too. Obviously if you have a middle-schooler who needs to virtually attend classes, their necessary daily screen time is likely more than a toddler's. But the recommendations for keeping media use useful and also balanced can be broadly applied across different ages. Our family's pandemic pendulum is more or less in a balanced state, and thankfully it seems to follow the AAP's suggestions. Here's what it took to get us there:



Routine and Schedule

When the lockdown started and we were going bonkers trying to figure things out, screen time was whenever I felt stressed or didn't know what else to do. But it felt panicked, disorganized, and lazy to consistently use it that way. So we wrote up a schedule and had very specific times on when screen time was allowed. It's still very useful when I need to focus on cooking dinner.

Positivity and Socializing

We have all been Zooming and FaceTiming more, and when my daughter started asking to call her friends, it was a great way for her to feel like she had some control over her own socialization. Bonus: Watching two 4-year-olds have an in-depth conversation about how much they like mac & cheese is pretty cute.

Quality Content

This is really important to me. I'm pretty strict about being on YouTube. Kids can go down some weird wormholes watching videos of other kids eating gross food or strange adult hands playing with kids' toys. We like Numberblocks and Cosmic Kids, videos of kids building with engineering-related materials. We also have total veg-out options, of course, like Disney+ movies on Friday nights and Saturday morning cartoons.

Togetherness

Sometimes I sit with my daughter to chat with her about what she's watching. Hearing her tell me about how multiplication works or how she is calming her yogi energy makes me feel reconnected with her, and allows her to process the information she's absorbing and explain it in her own words.

**Not in AAP's guide, but equally important:
forgive yourself.**

As parents, we are often our own worst critics. There are times when I'll need to jump on my computer when I'm wearing my Mom Hat and we are supposed to be having a no-iPad lunch. Guess what? Sometimes the schedule changes, and my daughter gets a bonus movie-with-PB&J time. Don't feel guilty if it happens.

Structuring your kids' screen time within this framework can help you achieve a more successful balance in these crazy times. Using media as a limited tool — or an emergency helper! — is very normal. You know that you have some time to focus on your own tasks while your kids' brains aren't turning into mush. And a no-mush brain is always a win for a parent!

Liza and her husband, Brian, have enjoyed the urban Chicago adventure as a duo, with their beloved pup, and now as parents of a 4-year-old and a 1-year-old. A former litigation attorney, Liza currently practices her negotiation skills with her most formidable challenger (their daughter!). She is a real estate agent with Compass and is passionate about helping families find their perfect home.



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