

How to keep your cool with your kids when everyone is cooped up together

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Halfway through Day 3 of our covid-19 lockdown, I yelled at my kids, “You’re both DRIVING ME NUTS!”

I’m two years into a mindfulness practice that has virtually eliminated yelling from my parental response repertoire, but just a few days of forced togetherness had me feeling like I was back to square one. The anxiety of this entire situation has eroded my emotional resilience reserve faster than I expected.

Of course, it’s done the same thing to my kids and, like it or not, they’re looking to me for a bit of calm in this storm. I realized that just like I create a daily schedule for my kids, I need a plan to settle myself and manage my stress each day. Just like I filled my pantry with food staples, I need to figure out how to stock up on patience and compassion. I reached out to several parenting experts, and here’s what they suggest.

Lower your bar (like, way low)

Before you do anything else, drop some expectations. The next few weeks (months?) are going to be hard. How hard depends upon your particular circumstances, but this won't be a cakewalk for any of us. Systems will break down. Fights will break out. Let's acknowledge that if all we lose is our tempers, that's a win.

Set yourself up for non-failure

We're not going to use words like success right now (see above). But if you want to minimize the fallout, go back to basics. I'm talking about Emotional Resiliency 101. Sleep. Nutrition. Exercise. Hydration.

"Sleep is a nonnegotiable," says Carla Naumburg, author of "[How to Stop Losing Your Sh*t with Your Kids](#)." The best thing you — and your kids — can do to maintain emotional equilibrium is to get [enough sleep](#). And without commutes and school start times, many of us can actually do it.

Next up: Stay hydrated and eat regular, balanced meals, so the whole family doesn't devolve into a hangry, sugar-crashing mess. "Dehydrated, overcaffeinated, low-blood-sugar parents are definitely more likely to lose their cool," says Sarah Best, a psychotherapist who works with parents in New York City.

Finally, moving your body is proven to reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Since my Day 3 meltdown, I've been doing a daily home workout, and it has made a tremendous difference. "Moving is the best way to fight cabin fever and reduce stress hormones," says Laura Markham, founding editor of [Aha! Parenting](#). This doesn't have to be a workout, but it should be sustained and get your heart rate up. Long walks, family dance parties and online yoga are good options.

Schedule regular breaks for you

Few of us (kids included) are used to this much forced family time. Getting breaks from one another is essential. Experiment with these ideas and see which ones work for your family. Then work them into your daily schedule (shoot for hourly or three times a day).

- **Breathing.** "Intentional breathing slows down our nervous system, calming things down and sending a message to your body that things are okay in this moment," says Naumburg. Try [some of these breathing practices](#) on your own or find guided ones on apps such as [Insight Timer](#), [Calm](#) and [Headspace](#).
- **Meditation.** Meditation is another proven stress reducer, and recent research suggests short sessions throughout the day can be as beneficial as one big one. You don't have to do this alone; there are lots of good apps with guided meditations. I like Insight Timer and [Ten Percent Happier](#).
- **Get fresh air.** "Fresh air will do wonders for helping you feel less restrained," says Best. If you have a backyard, use it. If you live in an apartment, open the window and sit near it with a book or a cup of coffee. And get out for walks or jogs around the neighborhood.
- **Anything you like.** Listen to a favorite song or make yourself a quarantine relief playlist. Engage your senses by eating something that smells and tastes good, such as a mango. Rub your favorite lotion on your feet and hands. "Anything that tastes good, smells good, or is pleasing to your sense of

touch is a great way to soothe,” says Best. You can also just get a nice cup of coffee or tea, close the door to your room and read or FaceTime friends for a bit. I’ve decided to have a jigsaw puzzle going for the foreseeable future.

- **A body check.** “Five minutes of stretching can make you feel like you are living in an entirely different body,” says Best. Naumburg likes to mentally scan her whole body to see where she feels tension and then release it. Put your [legs up against the wall](#) and just hang out.

If you have little kids who need constant supervision and you have a partner at home, tag team so you each can get these kinds of breaks. If not, let the [Wild Kratts](#) be in charge while you recharge.

What happens when things go south?

Learn to notice when you’re about to lose it. “It seems really obvious, and you’d think we’d be able to notice it,” says Naumburg, “but the problem is that when we are in that anxious headspace, the noticing part of our brains goes offline, and our emotions are running the show. We’re in fight or flight mode.”

Naumburg encourages parents to get to know their “tells,” the thoughts, feelings or behaviors that indicate they’re about to explode. Naumburg starts responding to her daughters in clipped sentences. I start cussing under my breath.

When you realize you’re about to lose it (or you already have), pause. “If you were in real danger, you wouldn’t be pausing,” says Naumburg. “So, just by pausing for two seconds you’re sending your body the signal that things are okay.” What do you do next? “Literally anything else,” Naumburg says. “Your body is ready for action, so give it that action but do it in a way that’s not toxic for your family.” Try jumping jacks or running up and down the hall. Naumburg likes to break into an exaggerated opera song. Your kids will likely laugh at any of these, which brings you that much closer to reconciliation.

If you need to slow down and feel more in control, try putting your hands flat on the counter and focusing on how your feet feel on the floor. Take some deep breaths. Say a prayer or mantra you like. Lift your shoulders up and down, do some neck circles. Tell your kids you need a break and take one.

Minimize your triggers

We all have things that irritate us, making it more likely we’ll lose our cool. The biggest ones for me are clutter and noise. So, I’ve assigned everyone an area of the house to be in charge of during midday and end-of-day cleanups. And, well before the [coronavirus](#), my kids learned that when I say that I need quiet, they should listen. If checking in with the news regularly is setting you on edge, decide to check in with one source of news you trust and only once a day. Figure out what depletes your reserves and minimize it.

When all else fails

“We are all feeling fear right now,” says Markham. “Most parents have already lost it. That’s what’s going to happen.” So, what do you do afterward?

“It is absolutely appropriate and a good move to apologize to your children,” says Naumburg. Just wait until you are truly calm. If you’re still upset and your kids don’t respond the way you want them to, things could just get worse. When you’re ready, “apologize for your behavior, not your feelings,” says Naumburg. “And if there needs to be a conversation about your child’s behavior you can work on that afterward.”

No matter what, be kind to yourself

“We all have to cut ourselves so much slack, because literally no one alive has had to deal with something like this before,” says Naumburg. “Let’s have some patience and forgiveness for ourselves and for our families.” You can do that just generally or really drive the message home with [loving-kindness meditation](#).

Above all else, know that you are not alone. In apartments and houses across the country — and the world — there are parents confronting fear, entirely new situations, and penned-in kids. We may be living apart, but we are in this together.

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