

The March Break That Never Ends

Supporting Your Family's Mental Wellness

"...but I can't do that!" With tears running down his face my son melts into the couch and I know things are too much for this moment but, I missed catching it before now....inside I am thinking, "HOW? I am a competent adult but HOW am I going to keep us all afloat?"

With the 'March break that never ends' upon us, we are all dealing a little differently but, universally, Ontario parents are feeling the strain, stress and impact of divided attention, fear and unknowns, and of course the elephant in the room, "How do I teach them?"

The break being officially over for most schools means that the impact of these changes are becoming obvious, this is not only for a week or 2 but will be for an unknown time. This is certainly stressful for any family but for those households also managing mental health challenges daily this can be so much more.

There are a few things that you can be mindful of to support the mental wellness of the whole family while supporting your child's ongoing growth.

1) Keep your own anxiety and fears in mind

Have you found yourself talking to your spouse, a friend, family member or even a neighbour (from a healthy distance of course) about your thoughts and fears around this health crisis? Or maybe, about your concerns around schooling your child(ren)? What about your thoughts on stores closing or getting all the groceries you need?

These are all realistic concerns and you are likely going to need to talk them through with someone but, be aware of the impact your own anxieties, fears or musings may have on the little ears that are always listening!

2) Encourage helpful and realistic routine and predictability

Routines and predictability are often beneficial (within reason) for those with mental health challenges. Every household is going to need to do things differently for everyone to benefit. Whether you are trying to manage multiple ages of children, learning to work from home in the midst of this, managing family commitments beyond your child's care and so much more, you will need something specific to your schedule, lifestyle and family.

Most households will have some part of their day that they have little control over but, where possible, create a routine you can realistically follow through on. This might mean the routine is set meal times and a family "chat" at the end of the day. If that is what you can do, do it as best you can.

Where possible, include your child in some amount of the routine planning as this gives them a sense of control within their environment. We all like to have choice and children are no exception. Small, manageable choices for the young ones and age-appropriate options for the older ones. Choice does not have to be large, but it should be genuine. Be careful to provide choices you are happy with as the parent. For example, "We have

chicken and pasta as dinner options. Could you choose dinner for the family today please?"

Life is unpredictable, as this situation has reminded us. However, when possible, create predictability for your child in their time with you (within the family). If you have said you will play with them for 30 minutes this afternoon, try to follow through. Feeling like the world is even just a little bit predictable will help your child to feel more secure in their safety at home and currently that is all we can control.

3) Do not try to recreate school/community routines but make this time your own

Creating routine and predictability does NOT however mean recreating school exactly. Movement, healthy eating, things that bring them joy - these are all important too. A daily routine should include some fun, some exercise or movement and likely some learning time but how you learn with your child(ren) is really up to you.

Take a moment to consider if there are ways that you often wish you could spend time with your child (playing a board game, teaching them to cook, reading a book as a family, sharing a hobby you enjoy, etc.) - build those things into the routine! Is there something your child often struggles with in the day (say - getting ready for school by 8am)? Consider removing that challenge for this time - start your day at 9! (or, whenever they are ready if that is best for the family!).

Consider trying out some of the activities provided by the *School Mental Health Ontario* team - [12 easy and fun mental health practices to try with your children at home](#) (note these are targeted at Elementary School Students). The Ontario Ministry of Education has also provided supplementary resources through their [Learn At Home](#) website to support parents and students through this time of school closures.

4) Be active in any way possible

This again will look a little different for each family and there are many ideas popping up on social media but the key to this is to do what works for you! This isn't a contest to be won, this is a chance to do what is best for your family. If at all possible, getting outside, even for a few minutes is a healthy option, however, that may not always be available.

You can play a game of "Simon Says" with silly big motions, or challenge everyone to stand on one foot as long as possible, or run the stairs in the house. Sometimes, you can just walk around the block, but sometimes you can't. No guilt required, no justifications, just do what you can. For those of you with children who are facing fears and anxieties about leaving the house try changing the "scenery" when you are doing active vs. passive activities. Move rooms, open or close the blinds, turn the TV off and the Lamp on...whatever your system - make it something you can be predictable about and ENJOY if at all possible! (If you are having fun it's harder for the kids not to)

5) Talk! Talk to the kids, talk to loved ones, talk to yourself.

Talk to the kids - Try to take a moment each day, for each child to have time to discuss anything that they are concerned about, things that they miss, things they like about the new normal and things they are thankful for. This will allow you to keep a close watch on their emotions and thinking. It may also give you some ideas of what you can do to help make this a bit easier.

Talk to loved ones - Take time in the week to check in with the people who make up your social support network. That may be a spouse, extended family, a close friend(s) or the members of a support network (or a combination of the above) Give yourself space to talk about the strains of this experience but also take some time to see the joys. Tell a friend something funny that happened, talk about the ways you are seeing growth in the kids, etc. Be sure to check on your loved one too, no one is without impact in this.

Perspective is hard to keep when anxiety and fear are the foremost experience but if you can help yourself by looking for the positives where they can be found you will benefit. Talk to yourself - Use some self-talk to remind yourself of the truths in this situation. This is for a time, you are not alone in this even when it feels you are, there are people who care - reach out to us if you need it!

Be patient with yourself, this is new to everyone in the whole world, and that is not an exaggeration. The kids are adjusting just like you. They don't expect you to be anyone but you! In the words of my son, "Mommy, do you think tomorrow you will have time to not be a teacher or a worker but just to play?" - this is the heart of your child, they need you to be you!