

Building a Resilient Family in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

We are just starting out with COVID-19, it is a marathon and not a sprint. It is something that we will have to endure for another 1-3 years and perhaps longer. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted all of society. Most of us are struggling with many different emotions and uncertainties. We have a deep sense of loss of the present realities we had taken for granted and the future hopes we have dreamed of. This is especially true of younger persons and those in training.

Uncertainty about the future frustrates us. We are going through a collective period of grief, fears and anxieties as individuals, communities, a nation and a world united by the destruction caused by the virus.

No one can be certain what will happen in the next 1-3 years but unless there is divine intervention, the following is likely to happen:

1. We will have intermittent outbreaks and we will have to control each 'wave' until it gradually fades over time. Hence we will have an extended movement restriction order that will vary with location.
2. Travel outside the country will be severely restricted and travel within the country discouraged.
3. We will continue to encourage online gatherings and conferences and this will include religious meetings.
4. Schools, child care services, offices, restaurants will remain open but wearing of masks and taking precautions will remain for a long time.
5. We hope a safe and effective vaccine is developed, produced and made widely available in the next 18-24 months. But there are many challenges with any vaccine and it may not work well.

The Challenges Faced by Society

The Covid-19 pandemic has enormous impacts on all strata of society. It has especially significantly impacted those in the lowest socio-economic class and worsened their poverty and inequality. Children who on relied on school meals and families dependent on social services/NGOs are the worst affected.

Some businesses have had to shut down, other businesses are struggling, some individuals have lost their jobs, and many are struggling to make ends meet.

While we have had a transient improvement in air and water quality, however the environment has been significantly affected by the worsening of deforestation and plastic pollution (especially from masks).

Psychologically the pandemic has worsened mental health, increase suicide and domestic violence and child abuse in the world. The uncertainty for the future has made many anxious, unsettled, disempowered and unable to plan for the future.

The Challenges Faced by and Impact on Families

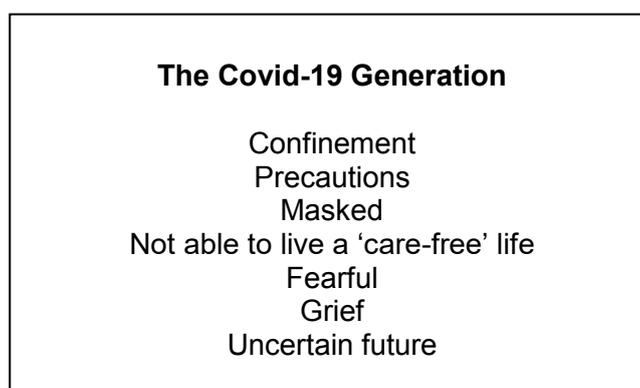
Many of us are exhausted and pushed to the limit. School closure and the limited outdoor activity with irregular home sleep routines disrupt children's usual lifestyle. Families are now 'thrown- together' for extended periods of time with limited 'breathing-spaces', resulting in increased friction and conflict. Some children have had to witness more domestic violence and others are unable to 'escape' from abuse at home. Apart from financial hardship, parents have had to deal with the fears they are facing and the restrictions placed on their children.

Many children have taken on board the fear that their family is experiencing. Even with schools and kindergartens re-opening, the need to wear masks and take precautions, the limited ability to interact with your friends and have physical contact has negatively impacted children. Some have become distressed, irritated, depressed, fearful of returning to school, poor sleep, etc. The developmental and educational needs of children may also have been impaired.

There are some groups of children and families that have experienced even more hardship or special difficulties:

1. Parents of children with disabilities face, especially those with autism, face difficulties managing the loss of established routine for their children. Some children have meltdowns at home; many have lost progress they made. They also have more difficulty sending their children back to school, EIP, or continue rehabilitation and healthcare services.
2. Those that are poor in the inner city or indigenous communities are struggling with basic food and job security. These have serious impacts on children's growth and development. Some have lost a sizable portion of school time (no electronic access).
3. Migrant families have suffered not just from the poverty of job loss but also the negative stigma from the community of being more likely to be Covid-19 infected, which is false.
4. There are that some families will have been separated by distance and movement/restriction orders; others by the fear and risk of meeting with older family members. A sizable number of foreign spouses have not been allowed to return to be with their children/families. Many of the children in these families suffer from separation anxiety.

The prolonged 'confinement' to home and the limited ability to live a 'care-free' life (as in the past) has taken its long term toll on children and adults. As it will carry on for the next 1-2 years, it is uncertain what the long term impact will be on this generation of Covid-19 children.



A Meaningful Response to Build Self and Family Resilience

To build resilience in our children, parents are the key. Teachers can help but parents form the foundation. Children are very perceptive; if parents are not at peace in their hearts, children will know and it will affect them. So the key is for parents to work on their own adjustment to the pandemic, their own resilience, their inner peace; live the reality you want for your children. This will then translate into providing the children a calm and safe environment at home, a secure oasis of peace amidst this Covid-19 storm. You cannot help others if you have not yourself grown, moved forwards, come to a better place.

As human beings we can be described as tripartite, i.e. having a body, soul and spirit. To develop resilience we need to focus on all three. Just developing mental health, while ignoring your physical needs and inner peace will not be enough. The body requires adequate rest and a good routine for physical activity. The mind and emotions need mechanisms to deal with Covid-19 and other stressors, and even more they need to become 'wholesome'. The spirit, the core of our being, is where we need to find and develop peace. This peace will see us through the difficult up and downs of this and other crisis.

There are some disciplines that can help us. Often the word discipline is taken in a negative connotation. Here I mean a framework to live with; a routine that can help us to grow, and not just grow but flourish.

We need to:

- Establish new daily routines
- Establish a meaningful, open and ongoing dialogue in the family
- Deal constructively with conflict
- Find creative mechanisms to appreciate and find joy in life
- Live for the moment while we plan for the future
- Embrace the inadvertent 'gift' of this pandemic of bringing us closer to our family and also opening our eyes to truth and reality

Remember that there is no quick fix method because we are all very different personalities. Hence what may work for one person may not be useful for another person.

Practical Suggestions

Some simple things (disciplines), which all of us can do throughout the day and week to cultivate resilience and growth. These only work if they become routines or good habits in our life.

1. Create the space to listen to each other

Invest in the space and time to listen to each other. Offer children opportunities to ask questions, express their fear and feelings. Do not give glib or standard answers to them e.g. "don't worry everything will be ok"; these are not useful. Be honest and factual, as children usually are more perceptive than we give them credit for (or may hear things from a school friend). Tell them the real situation and it is OK to say you don't have all the answers, but that all of you will see this through together. Quite often we need someone who listens without needing to answer. Listen to your children, not just their words but what they do not say (unspoken) and also their behaviour.

2. Spend time being silent and heartfelt (mindful) together daily

Sitting together in silence and listening to the Divine/Eternal is a very meaningful activity that can bring calmness to everyone. The way to do this is for everyone to sit comfortably, close their eyes and breathe slowly and deeply together for 5-10 minutes. Breathe in slowly through your nose and breathe out slowly through your mouth. There is no need to think or feel but only focus on your breathing. As you breathe in receive all the strength and goodness of the Divine, the Eternal. As you breathe out let go of all your worries and fears. It is important to discover and embrace the Source of our strength to live meaningful lives. The 'power' that is going to see us through this time and all times i.e. the Divine – here I mean God who has Truth and Reality to offer us.

3. Private time for yourself

Remember to create space for yourself as opposed to shared activities. Establish some boundaries in the home for privacy and personal quiet time for each person. Use the time to be silent with God or reflect or write (journal) or read. Do what you enjoy doing for yourself. Use the time to re-charge your batteries daily.

4. To take joy in small things - take time to walk in nature (jungle) or spend time in a park or even your own garden

Nature has a profound effect on us. It has endless variety and beauty that can teach us much about hope and life. It also allows us to get out of the house, expand some physical energy and 'forget' Covid-19 for a while. While you are with nature, remember to enjoy small things – an interesting leaf or mushroom, a tiny fascinating insect, the magnificent trees, etc. Look deeply.

5. Have a regular physical activity routine

Physical activity has many benefits to offer us. Not just improve physical health but impacts our mental and emotional wellbeing. This might mean a 20-30 minute daily walk/jog, skipping, stretching, cycling, etc. This could also be a family, fun activity.

6. Be creative in spending time together as a family (and reduce screen time)

As families we tend to come together mainly for meals. Consider reading a book together, playing a game together (a jigsaw puzzle, old fashioned games from our childhood) or even watch a good movie together. Ask children what they would like to do. You might also want to cook something together. Consider also music and dance.

Remember that 'quantity time' is more useful than 'quality time'. Children need our presence and a lot of it. Just spending 30 minutes of 'quality time' with them daily has less impact. Spending much time (lepak time) with them allows for us to unite as a family.

It is best to reduce your screen time to specific times; especially consider limiting screens first thing in the morning, last thing at night and during meals. We also have a Covid-19 saturated media. Best to consume the essential on Covid-19 and do it a day as an update.

7. Celebrate small and big occasions and successes

Remember to look for occasions where we can celebrate. The celebration should not be large or involve many other people (just the family). Celebrations give us a sense of hope. We can celebrate having survived another month of a RMCO (movement control order), that we have sufficient in life, that we are loved and have a home (in addition to our birthdays and anniversaries).

8. Connecting with loved ones not in the home

When physically separated from other family members, especially grandparents for Covid-19 safety reasons, establish regular connections via phone call, video chats or messaging. Remember and support foreign spouses separated from their children and families.

9. Supporting others

Look for meaningful ways we can support others in practical and financial terms to meet their basic needs. There are some who do not even have food security. Remember also the migrant families that are struggling and have job loss. Supporting them will grow our societal strength and offer our children a good example for their future. Donate to good NGOs working in the community. Keep 'ang-pows' handy to give away. Share our resources with others.

Conclusion

We need to make some 'movements' (change) in our lives:

Movements to Make During this Pandemic

- From just Survival to Resilience
 - From Waiting for Covid-19 to end to Living Meaningfully Today (in the present moment)
 - From False Constructs to True Reality
 - From a Covid-19 Saturated World-view to a more Holistic one
-

The unique challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic requires all of us as families to **change** our life-style, daily routines, **re-establish relationships** while we chart the unknown. This work is one that is not static but evolving and progressing. It requires learning from each other as we share our struggles. It requires transparency and honesty at a level we may not have established in our relationships in the past.

It is not merely a meeting of the needs of the individual family members but transcending that to develop new capacities as interdependent individuals, discovering new strength in each other and in God. This is what true family resilience would look like. Not a mere 'weathering of the storm' or adversity but a transformation.

We need to remember that the pandemic does not change who we are.
We are the beloved (much loved) children of God.
We need to grow even deeper into this reality.

Dato' Dr Amar-Singh HSS

Senior Consultant Paediatrician
Advisor, National Early Childhood Intervention Council (NECIC)
Advisor, National Family Support Group for Children & People with Special Needs
Senior Fellow, Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy
Formerly Head Paediatric Department, Hospital RPB Ipoh & Clinical Research Center Perak

September 2020

Dato' Dr Amar-Singh HSS is a Senior Consultant Paediatrician who recently retired from the civil service after serving for more than 35 years. He is a child advocate and the recipient of a number of international advocacy awards. He has a long standing interest in children in the community, disability, family self-help groups, child abuse, adolescent counselling and disadvantaged, indigenous & marginalised children. With his wife, Datin Dr Lim Swee Im, he also offers spiritual direction and counselling. He is enjoying his recent retirement and tries to live every day to the fullest. Bird watching continues to fascinate him but advocating for children is his passion.

Appendix:

Suggestions for Working from Home with Children during the Coronavirus Outbreak

This are some quick notes/suggestions for parents, carers and employers on working from home with children.

Maintaining a daily/weekly routine

- Write/draw out a weekly or daily schedule – get children involved, put it up for everyone to see
- Make it graphic
- Stick to the routine
- Include meal times, study times, nap times, activity times, play times
- Avoid screen time that is 'free-for-all' – fix screen times so that you can limit them
- Must plan to have at least one full day off in the week

Create work & play spaces – clear boundaries

- Have separate rooms or spaces in the home – i.e. designate a specific area as your work zone & children's school area - use masking tape on the floor to indicate the location
- Plan activities for children that don't need supervision so that you can work
- Use a reward system for children - reward good behaviour (use a star chart)

Involve children in the house activities

- Give household tasks to the children – have no gender bias
- Examples are: putting away toys, helping with meals, cleaning up home, etc

Work in blocks with breaks & downtime with children

- Take breaks with children, you both need it – work 2-3 hours then have a 30 min break with kids before resuming work
- Don't expect to work at your normal capacity from home
- Don't work after hours, work fixed hours and then stop

Have your own private time

- Get kids to sleep early
- Alternate with your partner/spouse to look after the children so each of you can get some free time
- Consider virtual babysitters (grandpa, grandma)
- Use technology wisely and not excessively

Understanding employer & co-workers

- Employers must not abuse work from home employees
- Avoid non-stop expectations & media (don't answer work emails and messages after hours)
- Have a clear idea of realistic expectations

Network with other parents for ideas & support

Celebrate every day, even small things

Dato' Dr Amar-Singh HSS
September 2020