

COPING WITH SCHOOL SHUTDOWNS

With schools closing and many jobs going to mandatory telework, many families are experiencing the challenge of balancing work and childcare simultaneously. Some parents may not be working but will still find it challenging to keep their sanity during these unexpected and prolonged school closures. Here are a few strategies that I hope you will find helpful:

Create a schedule for your child

If your child is old enough, you should co-create a “school at home” schedule with your child. Children of all ages thrive on structure and routines. Now, more than ever, we need to develop a “new normal” and ensure that children have some predictability to their days, which will reduce anxiety and frustration. Your child does not need to be scheduled to the minute; however, you will want to create a familiar cadence to the day keeping bedtime and wake time within an hour of their typical bedtime.

Considerations:

- **Follow school guidance.** Many school systems are providing work packets or “distance learning” opportunities. (These tend to be math and ELA/Reading). Your schedule should reflect time to complete these lessons.
- **Be creative.** You can consider giving your child a “twist” on traditional subjects (e.g. science is baking bread or cookies; math is having your child play the role of banker in Monopoly)
- **Balance teleworking.** Be sure to schedule quiet time (reading, puzzles, art/drawing, Legos, educational video- e.g. Wild Kratts) to give you an opportunity to participate in work-related phone and video calls with as few interruptions as possible.
- **Make this an authentic learning experience.** If you have ‘tweens and teens, you can step up the chores by having them “project plan”. For example, you can have them plan and execute a family dinner. To challenge them, give them a specific time by which the meal needs to be ready, and have them figure out how to organize themselves to get it done on time.

Create a schedule for yourself

This change in routine can also create stress on parents and caregivers. However, if you use this time spend more time with your family, focus on self-care and, perhaps, get some projects off your long overdue “to do” list (at home or at work), it will help you to see this change as an opportunity.

Considerations:

- **Wake up early!** With children at home, you will not have a lot of quiet time, so wake up at your normal time (or a bit earlier). Staying home means that you save time on the commute, so if your job allows you to work flexibly throughout the day, this is a great time to get work done before your children start moving around.
- **Have morning family check-ins.** Include time to check-in with your children in the morning –start with prayer and a scripture talk. Take advantage of the time to start the day off slowly and on the right foot with your child. It will help you center yourself for the day ahead.
- **Limit media consumption.** Stave off the anxiety that comes with the uncertainty of these times by limiting your media consumption during the day. Identify specific times you will watch the news for updates, so that you are not constantly checking your phone/internet.
- **Stay active!** Pick one fun, active thing to do each day. Plan a brisk walk after dinner as a family; or play catch outside with you child. Keeping yourself healthy is key to supporting a positive mindset. Find the fun in every day!
- **Stay connected.** Choose at least one friend or family member outside your home to check in with by phone or video call each day. Whether it is sharing scriptures, praying together or simply showing someone you care, there is no denying that we need each other more than ever.
- **Monitor your own feelings.** It will be difficult to limit social activity and have everyone in the house in close proximity for most of the day. Frustration will arise but remind yourself that this is difficult for children too. Model self-care by setting some quiet time for yourself in the evening –meditate, pray and know that God is in control!

Written by Janice Harris, Ed.D.

Janice lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband and 7-year old son (the inspiration for this piece), along with members of her extended family. She has over 25 years of experience in K-12 education, serving as a teacher, principal and assistant superintendent. She currently serves as Chief Schools Officer for a national education consulting firm, coaching PK-12 school leaders and teams towards excellence and equity for underserved students.