

There is Not a Lion: Managing Social Isolation While Caring for Children

BY MARIE MASTERSON, PH.D.

As you adjust to the unprecedented circumstances of social isolation, many of you are facing major adjustments to your daily schedule within close proximity to family members. You are pondering decisions for which you may not have answers. You are dealing with financial pressure and practical daily choices about how to manage food purchases and household repair. In addition, you may be worried about your business, your early childhood program, and your staff and colleagues and their families. You may wonder what the future will bring. Persistent anxiety can take a toll on your energy, balance, focus, concentration, and patience.

These new circumstances will require you to dig deep to connect to resilience – choose healthy ways of responding – and extend your reassurance to family and others who depend on you.

These needs are even more pronounced during school and childcare program closures. While you manage your own reactions and set daily action steps, children are watching. They may not be able to verbalize their concerns, but they will take their emotional cues from you. Just at the time you need them to be quiet, focus, and find something to do, they may become clingy, irritable, and moody. In addition to managing your own emotions, you will need to help them manage theirs. They may not understand the changes in the world, but they can feel and see them in your responses.

When early childhood or life experiences have contributed to a heightened response to stress, it's important to remind yourself that the stress response was biologically wired to help humans survive. [The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University](#) notes that our protective coping skills need to remain productive and flexible to counterbalance current adversity.

The flight, fight, or freeze response that hits our bodies without restraint can feel overwhelming. This response during stress stems from the body's need to utilize energy to protect itself in the face of roaring lions and other beasts that threaten our existence. It's a good thing, when you feel panicked about present circumstances, to remind yourself that **there is not a lion**. This cognitive reframing can help you contain the distraction of anxiety and focus and reserve your energy for practical tasks at hand. It helps to say out loud, "I am okay. We are okay. This is going to be okay." Calming and focusing your energy is the first step to managing the many needs you will face each day.

Next, you'll need to take practical steps to make this new reality work for you. Parents who think children will "go play," during this time at home will be in for a day of stress and frustration. While parents feel the

need to be “left alone” to work, young children are highly tuned in to that stress. They will tend to be clingy and act out more – the opposite of what families need.

Planning ahead of time will add a sense of predictability and calm for everyone. A consistent schedule helps to stabilize the day. Below are some strategies to add consistency and sanity:

- Pack lunches and snacks the night before. When children get hungry, you can say, “Sliced apples and cheese are waiting for you.” After lunch, read with children for 20 minutes. This connection fills children's emotional tank and calms them for the next play period.
- Be sure children have plenty of water. They can become irritable but not realize they are thirsty.
- Rotate materials children use and plan spaces that invite and sustain their type of play. For example, board games and card games work well for preschool to school-age siblings. Connect Four, Guess Who, Game of Life, and jigsaw puzzles require dedicated space. A bowl of a favorite dry cereal or pretzels will extend game time.
- Fine motor materials and dramatic play inspire concentration and extended play. These include Legos, Lincoln Logs, bristle blocks, gears, and other building sets. Also gather materials for thematic play. Interesting kitchen utensils along with a clipboard, menu, and money inspire restaurant play. A fire hat, length of tubing, and boots jumpstart firefighter play. Help children gather and prepare materials they need.
- Create soft spaces for children with pillows, blankets, and books for quiet play. Often, children become over stimulated and need places for rest, using their imagination, and daydreaming. They often choose extended quiet time when they have a prepared quiet space waiting for them.
- Create a unique space for children’s art, craft, and school projects. For example, when children have their own space with organized paper, stickers, markers, colored pencils, pens, tape, stapler, and scissors, they return often. Provide a basket of colorful newspapers, fabric bits, and interesting ribbons to glue. Save those many toilet paper tubes and encourage children to make robots or other open-ended creations. Provide felt or fabric, ribbons, bottle tops, and other containers and materials along with tape, glue, markers, and/or paint.
- Offer young children their own briefcase with office supplies. This works for children of all ages, but the items should match their age and safety needs. Markers, pens, pads of paper, a stapler, tape, child-friendly scissors, stickers, and other extra grown up items (erasers, clips, small containers, blank checkbook registers, a measuring tape, and an old-school calculator) are perfect items to include. Children will work quietly near their parent knowing they are working too.
- Provide boxes and blankets for forts. Include books, flashlights, and blankets for extended fun.
- Plan breaks for vigorous dancing or outdoor play. Exercise helps children focus on quiet play activities. Families should have a set time so they can say, “Thirty more minutes for play, and then we are going outside.” If weather or other factors prohibit going outdoors, dance music

or indoor aerobics are a great substitute. To transition back to play, provide water, a story, and deep breathing for younger children.

- A planned 10-minute time in period with children each hour for reading, snuggling, and setting up the next activity will help them refocus on independent play afterwards.
- Encourage children to make digital video calls to grandparents and cousins. Ask them to write old-fashioned letters and draw pictures to mail to friends and family.
- Make meals special, like having breakfast by candlelight or a dinner picnic on a blanket.
- While it's tempting to park children in front of media, this actually detracts from their ability to focus and self-entertain. Reserve media time for the end of the day (4:00-5:00 PM) when children are tired and you really need to finish working.

Keep in mind what children can manage. A four- to five-year old can generally focus on a task for five to fifteen minutes. Children who have just turned three are considered toddlers (15 months to 36 months). They will play near a parent and need assistance to manage frustrations and reengage with activities. School-age children also manage the day better with planned activities and a designated place for school work.

Remember that what children want most is time with you. When they hear your kind words and patient responses, they will follow your lead. When all else fails, punt the plan and snuggle, read, or watch a favorite cartoon. They will remember how you made them feel.

Your goal is to make positive memories and make the most of a challenging time. Your children are learning how to manage hardships and how to have healthy relationships. They are watching your face, listening to your tone of voice, and internalizing your body language. They are learning from you how to handle life – and how to be resilient.

During this difficult time, take time to explore the many resources of the [McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership](#). You may want to check out [Enjoying the Parenting Roller Coaster: Nurturing and Empowering Your Children Through the Ups and Downs](#). It's a good time to start a journal, explore professional development opportunities, and plan for the future. Consider future activities in your community. Take walks outside. This is the perfect time to grow and thrive and to make the most of each day. We are here to support you and are thinking of you and your families during this time.

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