

Stress of COVID-19 pandemic could lead to violence at home, Tulane experts caution

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The playground equipment at Audubon Park was closed in March because of COVID-19 restrictions. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

While some COVID-19 stay-at-home orders are being eased across the country, the stress on many families remains high and will be felt even after restrictions are lifted. Physical distancing, isolation and quarantine measures designed to stop the spread of the virus could lead to an increase in family violence at home, according to a perspective in [Pediatrics](#) co-authored by Tulane University child psychiatrists.

Schools, summer camps and daycare centers remain closed around the country, leaving many parents to juggle working from home while also taking care of their children. Other parents are scrambling to find childcare as they work outside the home. These changes in routine can be upsetting for children, and kids may be expressing this by lashing out and testing limits. The stress of bad behavior along with financial, logistical and existential concerns are a recipe for angry outbursts, even verbal and physical abuse, said co-authors Drs. Charles Zeanah, Mary Peters Sellars-Polchow Chair of Psychiatry, and Myo Thwin Myint, assistant professor of psychiatry at Tulane University School of Medicine.

Family violence is most likely to be reported at school, and with those institutions closed, researchers worry abuse could be going undetected.

The authors recommend the following for parents who may be feeling overwhelmed:

- Recognize that feelings of stress, anger, worry and irritability are expected given the demands of childcare, especially coupled with the job demands, income loss or job uncertainty.
- Use consistent wake, bed and mealtimes to provide structure for both children and parents.
- Consider structuring the day in specific segments, reading, exercise, screen time, etc.
- If two parents are home, consider a tag team approach to childcare.
- Understand that increases in children's challenging behaviors likely reflect distress and disruption from typical routines.

- Identify when feeling stressed and use a coping strategy that helps (deep breathing, identifying things you're grateful for) and, if those don't help, institute a time for rest.
- Develop a plan to call a friend or family member in order to avoid engaging in violent behaviors.

“The economic stresses of the pandemic and disruptions of families’ usual sources of support will likely extend well beyond the period of stay-at-home orders,” Myint said. “Recognizing that risk for family violence is high right now may help people be more aware of the signs.”

Parents can find free resources about coping during the COVID-19 pandemic at www.healthychildren.org and the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#).