

**Developed by the Behaviour Team with
Developmental Services, Family and Children's Services of Renfrew County**

Behaviour Strategies to Consider During Social Distancing

During this challenging time, the priority for everyone is to be safe. Here are a few behaviour strategies that may help get you through your day.

Prioritizing Goals

Before Covid-19 you may have been working on a list of worrisome behaviours to address. During this new situation, with the added stress of social distancing and restrictions, continuing to focus on too many worrisome behaviours can be overwhelming for parents and children. Be kind to yourself and your children and focus on the things that are important and attainable during this time. Take some time to figure out what needs to be addressed for everyone to have a more successful/happier day, and what behaviours can be left for now. Maybe you'll decide that it's important for your child to brush their teeth, but not as important if they get dressed. Maybe it's important that your child not hit their siblings, but not as important right now if they say a few swear words. Pick your battles, decide what's important right now and let some of the less important things slide, for now.

Emotions and Worries

Children may be experiencing a lot of stress and have a lot of worries right now, much like many of the adults in their lives. Some children are able to tell their parents what's bothering them (missing friends, dance class, visits to Nanna's house, not going to the park to play) and others find it more difficult. Many children will use their behaviour to let parents know they're worried or not sure about things. Our children's worries can be seen in extra tears, sudden angry outbursts, clinginess with parents, being quieter than usual or removing themselves from toys/games they usually like, etc. Stressful situations call for extra patience and kindness with our children. Here are a few things that may be helpful for your child:

- Using words they understand, explain the situation to them, reassuring them that they are safe and well loved. Answer any questions they have to the best of your ability.
- Limit your child's access to news about the pandemic. Watching or hearing the news too many times during the day can cause added worry.
- Use feeling words to label how you think your child may be feeling when you see a change in their behaviour. "You look sad" or "You threw your toy, I think you may be feeling frustrated"
- Allow your child to express themselves and let them know you understand why that would make them feel that way
- Help your child come up with something they can do to help them feel better or what they could do next time they feel that way
- Do some relaxation activities with your child every day (deep breathing, laying down quietly for a few minutes, yoga, quiet reading, etc.)

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Praise and Reward Good Behaviour

Do the best you can to keep your usual house rules in place and reward for positive behaviour. When you notice your child is cooperating or just behaving generally well, praise them "Great job for putting your dish on the counter!" You may even add a small reward- a little toy, a sticker, favourite snack or extra privilege- to your praise when you catch your child 'being good' without being asked. Following a household rule without being reminded, playing nicely with their sister or doing a chore is exactly what you're after. By doing this, it may help your child understand what good behaviour is and may encourage them to do it more often. Focusing on the positive behaviours is easier and less stressful than having to put negative consequences in place for misbehaviours.

Try stopping your activity every 15 minutes to go check on your child. You know your child best – if you need to check in more often to ensure your child's safety then please do so. If needed, you can use a kitchen timer or cell phone timer to remind you to do this. When you check-in on your child, praise them for good or neutral behaviour, or re-direct any misbehaviours as needed.

Modify the Environment

Now that everyone is home all day, let's consider making some changes to the physical space your children may be in. If there are concerns with aggression, self-injurious behaviour, bolting, or property destruction, look at the layout of each room for things such as:

- Remove or secure potentially harmful furniture, objects, cleaning supplies, medication etc.
- Remove valuable property that might be damaged.
- Potentially locking cabinets, windows and doors to keep children safe, or having some kind of bell fastened so you can hear when the door or window is opened.

Other things that may help create a calm and organized space may be:

- A set area for schoolwork, away from distractions such as siblings, screens, toys, etc.
- Sensory bins (Use this when your child seems restless, and you want to redirect their focus. Put several different items in the bin each day, such as fidget toys, bubbles, Play-Doh, stickers, books, or anything that might be of interest. Change the items in the bin up every day or every few days to keep things fresh.)
- Toy bins (Having toys stored away in bins can help take away visual clutter and distractions, letting your child focus their attention on one toy/activity at a time. This can also help make cleaning up easier/faster when everything has its place in a bin)
- A set relaxation area (cozy reading corner or just a quiet space with some of their favourite calming toys)

Spend One on One Time with Your Child

Spend regular "Special Time" with your child, playing what they want to play for 10-15 minutes, letting your child direct the play and being their playmate for this time can help strengthen your connection and help boost everyone's mood. This can also help meet your child's need for your attention, so that after they've had their time with you, they're more likely to leave you alone for a few minutes while you make supper or make a work call.

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Physical Activity and Outside Time

If it is safe and there are no local emergency restrictions in place, going for walks, playing in the yard and just being outside can be a good way to break up the day and release extra energy. Going outside 2-3 times a day for short periods (like your child would if at daycare/school for recess) can help them refocus. Make walks more fun by creating your own scavenger hunt or doing silly walks/skip/hop like a bunny, make a mini obstacle course in the back yard, bring a ball outside and make up different games to play in the yard or laneway, let your child explore the puddles, etc.

If the weather does not permit it, then having movement breaks indoors throughout the day is the next best thing. You can throw on some music and have a dance party with Nanna on FaceTime, start a conga line in the living room, create an indoor obstacle course in the playroom, do some yoga, etc. There are many free online movement activities on sites such as YouTube.

Visual Supports

Visual supports are pictures and/or written words used to help your child to complete a task, follow a routine, chose an option, and more. Using visuals can help your child to do things more independently by showing them what is expected.

Visuals or lists may help your child stay on track and remember all the steps involved in that chore or task. It also prevents any arguments about what you meant when you asked your child to “pick up their toys”. Simply write down the steps necessary to do the job you want done and in what order. Your child can then keep the visual/list close by to help keep them on track. Here are some different ways you can use visuals:

Activity Schedules

Using an activity schedule will help your child know what to expect next. You may need a routine board or planner (days of the week and times when things should be happening) or you may be able to keep it simple with “first/then” statements. Examples of “first/then” statements would be:

- First eat lunch then we will play outside
- First finish your math sheet then you can watch a show
- First brush your teeth then get dressed

Example of a daily routine:

Time	Our daily routine	Time	Our daily routine
8:00	Breakfast	12:15-12:45	School work (math)
8:30-9:00	School Work (writing)	12:45-1:15	Free Play
9:00-9:35	Free play	1:15-1:45	School Work (other subjects if any)

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9:35-9:50	School Work (reading)	1:45-2:00	Snack
9:50-10:00	Snack	2:00-2:30	'Special time' (see above) & Calm time
10:00-11:30	Outside play	2:30-4:00	Outside time (gym) and free play
11:30-12:15	Lunch	** You can modify this to make it work for your family, being as detailed as you child likes	

Photos and picture symbols can be very helpful if your child is not a fluent reader. You can find most pictures online by searching in Google Images. You can also download apps on your phone or tablet to create daily routines and "first/then" boards. You can also get out some paper and markers and make your own visuals by drawing them yourself or asking your child to draw some with you. Visuals don't have to be perfect, as long as both you and your child know what the picture means!

Timers

Some parents find it helpful to tell their child how much time is being given for them to complete the task and then set a timer for this amount of time. If you choose to use a timer remember that follow-up is necessary. What will your child earn for finishing the task on time? What will happen if they're not done before the timer sounds? Using a visual timer may be helpful for the child if they cannot tell time (many visual timers can be found in app stores on phones and tablets, such as the Time Timer app).

Choice Boards

This is a way to help your child understand what the current options are and how to communicate that choice to you using words or pictures. They can use it to pick what they would like to earn for completing a task, choose between free time options, or decide the order they prefer to complete a set of tasks.

Offering choices can allow your child to feel like they have some control and may reduce their level of resistance to doing what they are expected to do. Being able to make choices can also help increase your child's independence. Present two or more pictures or phrases and ask which they would like. For Example:

- "snack first or school work?"
- "when you are done your school work would you like to play outside for 15 minutes or use your iPad for 15 mins?"

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Give Clear and Effective Instructions

Changing how you tell your child to do something can greatly improve your child's willingness to do as you've said. When you are about to give an instruction to your child:

- **Make Sure You Mean It:** Think about the instruction and make sure that it's something that you're going to follow through on. Have an appropriate consequence in mind if your child does or does not do as you say.
- **Tell, Do Not Ask:** If your child does not have the option to say "No", don't give them the option by asking them. Tell them the instruction. ("Can you put your wrapper in the garbage?" vs. "Put your wrapper in the garbage please")
- **Keep it Simple:** Give one instruction at a time. Wait for your child to finish one instruction before giving another.
- **Make Sure You Are Heard:** Go to the same room that your child is in and then make sure you have your child's attention by stating their name and making eye contact. Turn off the game, mute the TV, silence the room, etc.
- **Praise:** Give positive praise *as soon as your child starts* to follow the instruction. Give positive praise *as soon as your child has finished* the task.
- **Be Specific With Your Praise**
 - "Ben, you put the candy wrapper in the garbage! Good Job!"
 - "I like it when you make your bed when I ask you to."
 - "Thanks for listening to me and putting your dishes in the sink."
- **Use Visual Cues:** Point or gesture at the object or the direction they should be going.

Reward Systems

Many parents already use informal rewards with their child (e.g.: extra screen time, buying a special treat at the store, playing special activities, staying up late on the weekend, giving an allowance, etc.). The benefit to using a formal reward system is that everyone is on the same page. Everyone knows what behaviour is being watched and what rewards are available and everyone knows how many points/tokens your child has earned and what rewards they can earn with their points/tokens.

Below are some ideas to help decide what type of reward system to use. You know your family best so pick the system that you think will be the best fit for your child and for yourself. (e.g.: some 9 year olds do better on a token program than a point system, some 4 year olds don't understand the tokens just yet so they would do better on a direct reward system)

For children 3 years old and younger

- Use direct "tangible" rewards, something they can hold/touch/see. Things such as snacks, favorite drinks, stickers or small toys rewards. Children this age generally do not understand symbolic reinforcers (like a token) and their math skills may not be developed enough to understand a token/points system.

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For children 4 – 7 years old

- Use poker chips or some other token (decorative stones, marbles, pom-poms, etc.) as rewards for compliance. Children can see and exchange these tangible reinforcers.

For children 8 years old and up

- Use a notebook to record points spent and earned, like a cheque book. The notebook can be less offensive to older or mature children.

Getting Started with Reward Systems

- Pick 5-6 behaviours, chores and responsibilities that your child will earn tokens/points for (such as being nice to a sibling, saying kind words, making their bed, brushing their teeth, feeding the cat, cleaning up their toys, doing 15 minutes of school work, etc.). Decide how many tokens/points each item will earn them.
- Create a list of rewards your child can earn each day, try and have 5-10 choices for daily rewards (such as 15 minutes of screen time, a special treat to eat, go on a bike ride, their choice of dessert, treasure chest access, etc.). Decide how many tokens/points each reward item will cost (based on how many tokens/points they could potentially earn each day).
- Aim for your child earning about 75% of the daily tokens/points to be able to access a reward at the end of the day.
- Your child can earn their tokens/points for completing things on the list, and for all good behaviours you see them doing. Once they've earned a token/point, these cannot be taken away for misbehaviours.

*If you require support in implementing any of these strategies, please reach out to the Behaviour Team with Family and Children Services of Renfrew County/Developmental Services of Renfrew County through the program supervisor Susan Kirk at 613-735-6866 extension 3032.