

## INSIGHTS

# Riding the COVID waves



The disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic continues, with the scale of its impact dependent on geography. Families in the nation's two most populated states are no strangers to lockdowns and the disturbance they bring to normal life. Regardless of where you live, the sense of the pandemic is always present, ready to disrupt daily life at short notice.

### We crave connect and certainty

Human beings crave certainty and human connection, both of which are severely impacted by the current pandemic. Just when life appears to return to normal, coronavirus case numbers can flare, sparking changes to our daily lives. As demonstrated by the massive increase in people seeking psychological support services over the last 18 months, these are difficult times for us all.

Every family has its own coronavirus story consisting of loss, disappointment, hardship, frustration or overwhelm of some kind. While there is no magic bullet that will make living through these uncertain times easy, here are some strategies to help you and your family stay upright while you ride the COVID waves of uncertainty and change.

### Model a coping mindset

Let's start with a coping mindset, the hardest and most important strategy. The leader in any group is the person who remains calm in a crisis, so as parents we need to do all we can to keep our acts together, or at least look like we are in control. Kids of all ages, but especially primary-aged students, take their cues from parents, the most important people in their lives, about how to view events. If catastrophising, anxiety and anger are modelled, then inevitably younger family members will mimic these behaviours. More significantly, these behaviours contribute to their feelings of lack of control. Alternatively, when acceptance, perspective and optimism are on display, kids learn how they can cope with uncertainty and change. This is not to suggest that parents aren't struggling, and that we shouldn't show our vulnerability to children. However, children and young people feel safer and more secure when their parents radiate a sense of calm and composure in the face of difficulty. Challenging, but essential.

### Act like a middle born

Despite the negative press that middle-borns receive including 'middle child syndrome', and 'middle-child complex', this cohort is generally very resilient. Their flexibility as a result of fitting into a life pattern set by an elder sibling enables them to more easily adapt to change. Often considered less ambitious and driven than first-borns, middle children generally expect less of themselves, and are more inclined to bide their time, letting the big waves pass before riding the more accessible, easier waves to achieve success. Birth order research reveals that middle children tend to have broader social circles than children born in other positions enabling them to form social connections in many different settings. Their adaptability, lowering of expectations and wonderful approachability are examples of how to survive challenging times.

## Embed wellbeing strategies into family-life

If ever there was a time to make wellbeing come alive in a family, it's now. If you have previously believed kids' wellbeing is less important than homework, music or sports lessons and chores then it's time for a priority rethink. Mental health practices are most successful when they are embedded into family life, rather than being focused on when life gets hard. While no means limited to these, the most significant wellbeing practices include sticking to daily routines (to maintain feelings of control), taking regular exercise (to get rid of built-up stress and promote feel-good endorphins) and prioritising sleep (to maximise the brain's capacity to manage stress).

## Only sweat the big stuff

If you find that you're arguing with your child over minor issues such as leaving clothes around the house, then it's time to let the small stuff go and focus on the bigger issues. You may need to set the parenting bar a little lower, focus less on academics, even relax screen time limits for a time if they are a source of conflict. Expect behaviour blow outs from children who have lost their own bearings – in some cases access to friends, school, and schedule. Give kids space if they regress, rather than reward tantrums with plenty of your attention, which will reward and keep the behaviour going.

## Connect with your village

Are you an introvert or an extrovert? What about your kids? It matters because each group reacts differently during lockdowns. Those on the introvert end of the spectrum can feel a little too comfortable being home and away from work or school. Scheduling regular digital catch-ups with friends and family can overcome reluctance to connect. Extroverts, on the other hand, can really struggle being away from friends and need little encouragement to stay in touch, which is vital during times of uncertainty.

There are no hard and fast rules about living through this pandemic. COVID didn't come with a 'how to' manual, so most of us are writing our own rules as we go. Embrace any ideas that work for you and your family and let go of those that aren't right for you. Be mindful, that the tide will eventually turn, the waves more predictable and our capacity to deal with hardship will have been enhanced by this experience.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.