

Coronavirus pandemic: All stories *Lifestyle / Family & Relationships*

Coronavirus: how to make home a stress-free place for your family – have boundaries and a routine, get off social media and talk

The coronavirus outbreak has resulted in plenty of home time for families in Hong Kong, as parents work and children and study away from school and office

A clinical psychologist offers tips on how to create a happier home environment for the family at such a time

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Hong Kong-based teacher Jenny Thomas says a shift in family dynamics as a result of the coronavirus outbreak has driven a wedge in what are already shaky relations between her and her two sons.

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Like many in Hong Kong, Thomas (not her real name) has been working from home while helping with online lesson for her boys – one aged 12, the other 15 – with the city in lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus. By Friday morning, Hong Kong had 53 confirmed cases, one of them fatal.

On Thursday, the Hong Kong government announced it would extend school closures from March 2 to March 16.

“I’ve reached boiling point many times – it’s been really tough,” says Thomas. She says the situation is made worse by the absence of her husband, who is working overseas until the end of the month.



Family members' empathy and patience can run low during stressful times. Photo: Shutterstock

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“I don’t think I’ve had this much face-to-face communication with my children in many months. Sadly, most of it hasn’t been positive.”

Her fraught family situation is one echoed by many on social media platforms, where there has been plenty of discussion not just about how to [keep children entertained](#) in between e-lessons but how to keep the home conflict-free.

Quratulain Zaidi, a clinical psychologist at MindnLife in Hong Kong’s Central district, says family members’ empathy and patience can run low during stressful times.

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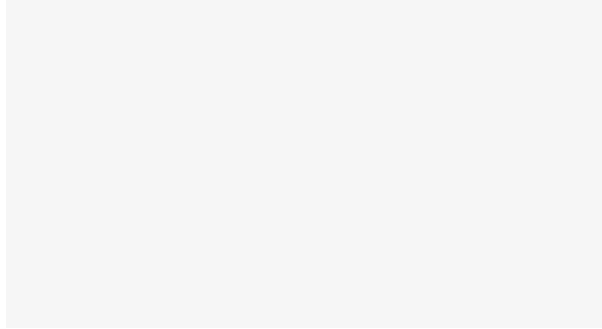
“It is difficult to be confined to small flats in the city – and the weather is unhelpful,” Zaidi says.

Her main piece of advice? “Limit time on social media and separate the reality of the virus pandemic from the pandemic of anxiety that’s being created due to the virus.”



Quratulain Zaidi is a clinical psychologist at Central-based MindnLife.

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Zaidi says keeping communication lines open is vital. “It’s extremely important that family members are mindful of effectively and actively communicating with each other with regards to their schedules and online meetings, and of the use of space if someone needs to be online or on a phone call.

“And it’s important family members express their feelings and concerns respectfully and kindly to each other and are responsibly managing their own stress rather than taking it out on each other,” she says.

Zaidi says setting aside time at the end of each day to check in with each other and discuss practicalities for the following day is a good routine to follow.

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Parents must try to fortify themselves so they can be present for their family in these stressful times.
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In December last year, a [poll found text messaging](#) is a popular means of family conversations as opposed to face-to-face communication or phone calls, with 53 per cent of respondents saying it had become their most commonly adopted method, compared with 31 per cent in a similar poll in 2013.

Professor Lam Tai-hing, principal investigator with the Jockey Club's Smart Family-Link Project, which carried out the survey with researchers from the University of Hong Kong, says using technology to improve the family home environment is more crucial than ever as the city deals with the health emergency.

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“Under the current situation, families must embrace what I call smart exercises – younger family members using video and other technology to connect with older family members, thus increasing communication and ensuring personal and family happiness.”



Dr Lam Tai-hing says using technology to improve the family home environment is more crucial than ever.
Photo: SCMP / K.Y. Cheng

Zaidi says parents must try to stay sane and fortify themselves so they can be present for their family in these stressful times.

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She shared some advice for parents on how to maintain a happy home environment:

1. Structure and routine in times of uncertainty create a sense of security, so it's important to have routines.



Setting aside time at the end of each day to check in with each other is a good routine to follow. Photo: Shutterstock