

Tips for surviving extended home stay with children: By Prof Mark Dodds, Sydney University

Extended time together in the house can lead to bored children, getting on each other's nerves, escalating conflict, and serious challenges to our sanity! Here are some practical tips for surviving. They are targeted at primary school age children, but the same principles apply to children of any age.

1. Divide up the house for different functions:

Nothing makes us lose our marbles quicker than chaos. Family spaces can quickly descend into unpleasant chaotic zones unless an effort is made to limit different activities to different zones of the house. Define clear zones in your house corresponding to 1) adult only zones; 2) child play zones; 3) noisy rough and tumble areas; 4) quiet activities, and so on. Put a map of this on the fridge door for all to see.

2. Brainstorm and schedule activities for the morning, afternoon, and evening of each day one week in advance:

Again, put up a schedule on the fridge with planned activities to keep your kids, and yourself busy. Choose a mixture of creative, learning, and frivolous activities, mixed with regular chores for all to participate in. Try to make it all as much fun as you can!

3. Plan for rewards and discipline you will use to manage child behaviour.

Work out what child behaviours you want to see more of, what behaviours you want to see less of, and then plan consequences for both. Thus, positive behaviours like following instructions, playing nicely, playing independently, and speaking nicely should be rewarded with praise, cuddles, affection, prizes, and especially your time. Fighting, aggression, refusal to follow instructions, and other problem behaviours should be met with calm, clear consequences like loss of a privilege, or time out. The rule here is to make sure you are giving more attention to positive child behaviour than negative. And don't forget, rewards should be fun, unpredictable, emotional, and different each time; discipline should be predictable, boring, and non-emotional.

4. Hold a family meeting to brainstorm and decide on the points 1, 2 and 3 above.

Involve everyone, listen to your kid's opinions, and keep it fun. "Shake on it" at the end of the meeting to confirm the family plan (during this crisis, bump elbows!). You are wanting the kids to buy into the plan, so the more they feel they were a part of the process, the better!

5. Schedule in dedicated special time, say 30 minutes here and there each day, for each child individually.

6. Schedule in dedicated parent time, again 30 minutes here and there, to nourish yourself and adult relationships.

7. Try not to get involved in refereeing children's fights.

That is, trying to find out who started what, and who did what to whom, is usually useful at best, and reinforces the fighting. Instead, treat the children as a team, refuse to get involved in who did what and reward them a group for playing nicely, and apply consequences to them as a group, for fighting and not playing well.

8. Use the Premack principle:

A useful principle in the psychology of learning is that people will perform a less favoured task to gain access to a more desirable task. Thus, make access to screen time and other highly desired activities, dependent on having completed chores and homework first!

9. Help children learn to behave well and be happy by doing an online parenting course. This one works!

If the children are constantly fighting, arguing, throwing tantrums, and whinging and being noncompliant, such that you are having trouble managing the children and your own reactions to them, do an online course that teaches specialised skills in managing problem child behaviour e.g. ParentWorks. <https://parentworks.org.au/#/>

10. Re-discover the love!

Finally, try to make this fun and re-discover the love. Think back to the positive reasons you wanted children and a family. Find a place in your heart from your family and spend as much time there as you can. Forgive them for minor irritations, and open up your heart, spend time together, laugh, and find love and joy in the little things that happen each day and the fact you are together.