
A WEEK IN THE PANDEMIC LIFE OF COMPLEX FAMILIES

by Elaine Taylor-Klaus, PCC, CPCC

HAVE YOU DISCOVERED that even in a pandemic, there's still something different about raising kids with complex needs? In a rare moment of calm these days you may find yourself scrolling on social media, seeking connection to humans other than those you've been "imprisoned" with recently. You observe people talking about their slower pace, their gourmet meals, and other such rainbows in the midst of the chaos.

And you swipe away, because it's just too hard to fathom. Even in a quarantine, their experience is nothing like yours. Once again, you feel more alone than ever as the parent in a complex family.

I can relate. As a virtual parenting coach in the world of COVID-19, who happens to struggle with attention issues myself, nothing has slowed down in my life since March. Just getting food is a challenging adventure. There are more logistics to navigate, more obstacles to overcome, and more parents in need than ever before.

Tears on the other end of the phone

In April and May, it seemed that every time I picked up the phone there was a desperate parent I'd not yet met who was seeking support and guidance. Despite the enormous differences in their kids' ages, locations, and life circumstances, their challenges were surprisingly similar.

In a single week in mid-April I met these parents (*names and identifying details changed*):

- **Janel** (California). The mother of four girls aged 11 to 21, she says she just can't keep doing this—trying to manage her own ADHD, while also wanting to give her girls the tools to succeed in life. She is frustrated by family tensions and wants desperately to restore joy and peace.



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- **John and Ginny** (Michigan). Their eldest of three teens (age 16) is coming home from an internet addiction residential treatment program. They're worried about the family dynamic when they're all living under the same roof, especially in a world dependent on technology, because communication was not going well when he left.
- **Aysha** (stuck in Sri Lanka during quarantine). With two young boys aged 5 and 7 who are homeschooling on a Russian time zone, everything is stressed, tensions are high, and she's trying not to be a "mean mom." Her husband, who usually travels extensively, is aggravated by tense family dynamics exacerbated by living with extended family.
- **Maggie** (Maryland). The mother of three kids, her oldest is about to graduate from high school. He's distant, not joining family activities, and struggling with depression. With a college decision looming in a world of uncertainty, some important and difficult conversations need to happen.
- **Bryan and Aubrey** (Texas). Already homeschooling their four kids, who range in age from 6 to 13, so school isn't a problem. The increasing discord in the family, however, is alarming. Sibling interactions have become emotional and explosions are frequent. The parents have read a lot, but nothing seems to be helping.
- **Sylvia** (New York). A single mother living with her aging parent and 9-year-old son who has ADHD, she's an essential worker, so he's homeschooling alone while she's at work. He's not getting much schoolwork done, and the teachers are asking her to do more. She doesn't feel like there is anything more she has to give.

On the one hand, this was just a week in the life of different parents of complex kids during the early stages of quarantine in a global pandemic. But when you look more closely, all of these parents are struggling with similar challenges that are amplified because of the ADHD and related issues in their families' lives.

Think about typical challenges in our world that have become more difficult in these times: emotional dysregulation, mood management, challenges with transitions, difficulty not having a typical routine, trouble getting started or working independently, managing life's logistics, trouble focusing, prioritizing, and so forth. When you add a pandemic to an already full plate of troubles, it's going to start overflowing.

Three themes hidden underneath the challenges

In my conversations with parents in the pandemic, key themes seem to be hidden underneath many of the challenges facing complex families:

- **Communication:** Parents are struggling to have difficult and important conversations in a way that fosters collaboration and doesn't put family members on the defensive.
- **Independence:** Parents are seeking ways to help their kids take ownership of their responsibilities and be prepared for making decisions for themselves in their lives.
- **Impact on the parent:** Parents are struggling to take care of themselves, handle their responsibilities, and still do the "right thing" for their kids. They are stretched thin and don't know how to give kids what they need most: love and attention.

When parents in complex families understand that these are their deeper challenges, they can show a bit more compassion and patience—for themselves and their kids—and seek out the support they need to address them, one step at a time.

But how? It can seem daunting. Here are two specific techniques to get you started.

Two techniques to try

First, when you identify any challenge, ask yourself if it's an old problem taking a new form, or if it's really a new problem. It's possible that the pandemic will offer a new way to handle something you've been trying to manage for a while. It's also possible that the time to address a chronic issue is not in the middle of a pandemic.

- If it's an old problem, ask yourself these three questions:
 - How much of a priority is this challenge right now?
 - Am I setting realistic expectations?
 - What has helped in the past?
- If it's really a new challenge, ask yourself these three questions:
 - What's most important about addressing this now?
 - Am I setting realistic expectations?
 - What has helped me solve other problems in the past that I could apply to this situation?

Next, to improve communication, remind yourself that everyone is a little triggered right now. These are unsettling times. "Because I said so" may make you feel better, especially at the end of a long day, but your child needs to feel like you're working together as a team in order to feel safe. They need to believe that you understand and care about what they're going through, too.

Try using the A.C.E. Method to stay connected when you're making requests of your kids: use **Acknowledgment + Compassion = before you Explore** solutions. A.C.E. helps you defuse defensiveness and build stronger relationships.

Acknowledgement: Let them know that you can see the world from their perspective. "I can see that _____"

(you're in the middle of playing a game, you're really frustrated, you're struggling to do what I asked.)

"Wow, when you were standing on the counter, I'm guessing you had forgotten that you're not supposed to do that, huh?"

Compassion: Show that you understand how it feels to make a mistake or be asked to do something you don't want to do. For bonus points, use humor.

"When I'm really excited about something, it's hard for me to control myself, too."

SPECIAL NOTE: It helps to pause here, maybe even repeat them a few times. When everyone's ready, move on to Explore.

Explore: Problem-solve how they might handle things differently in the future, negotiate a compromise, or create a code word. Allow your child to regain a sense of control. If they start getting upset, go back to Acknowledge and show Compassion.

"When you're trying to reach something high, would you ask for help? Or maybe use a step stool? What might help you remember not to climb on the counters?"

While these are definitely difficult times, I want to remind you that you've been parenting a complex kid for a while now. So when you're not sure how to handle things, remember:

- **You're not alone, and you don't have to do this alone.** Seek help and support. Seriously, there's no better time to ask for help than during a global pandemic!
- **Focus on your own self-care.** It's not a luxury, especially now. Make sure to put yourself back on your list.
- **Focus on building your relationship with your child.** No school worksheet or spelling list, paper, or test should come before your precious relationships. Show everyone some extra grace during these difficult times. Especially yourself.

Last, but not least, since you have a complex kid, you already know how to handle troubling times. You know that sometimes you have to shift your expectations, look for the positives, and make slow and steady improvements. This is no different. Remind yourself: You've got this! 🎯

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