



## Parenting During an Ongoing Pandemic

Wednesday, May 6, 2020

Zoom Webinar

Notes from a moderated discussion about parenting during uncertain times with psychologists Rob Evans, Ed.D., and Michael Thompson, Ph.D. (*Biographies follow.*)

### **Opening Comments:**

#### **Rob Evans -**

As context, psychologists have training and experience dealing with crises, such as 9/11, financial and economic downturns, unexpected loss, sex abuse, and other challenges, but the confluence of circumstances around a global pandemic are unexplored. This includes unpredictability, long term health implications, loss of life, psychological trauma, and financial and social hardship. These circumstances come under an uncertain timeframe.

#### Before COVID:

- Raising children is complex and challenging.
- Parents' confidence and life balance can be difficult to achieve.
- Parents are responsible for children's wellbeing in every facet of life.

#### With COVID:

- Disruption of routines and expectations.
- *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood* is a parenting book written years ago that applies within the current context.
- Increased responsibilities thrust upon parents can be overwhelming.

#### **Michael Thompson -**

- Parents say they are *homeschooling*, but that would have been a choice. Distance learning is not analogous to homeschooling.
- COVID has created a grand experiment in distance and online learning. Teachers and parents are trying to do their best.
- Home learning does not provide the structure that keeps children focused. Kids are attempting to learn and socialize without the supportive structure of school.
- Children need to know that parents love them, are honest with them, and want to protect them.

- Children could express sadness or anger, demonstrate a lack of motivation, and miss their friends, but these are not necessarily indicative of clinical depression.
- Despite less social interaction, having sibling or family support probably translates to an acceptable level of interaction.
- Children ages 9-15 years tend to adapt well with social media use to maintain social connections.
- A period of 3-4 months of isolation is unlikely to create a long-term social deficit.
- Answer children's questions about COVID truthfully, but do not overwhelm them with information. Try asking: "why are you asking?", "what do you know about this?", "what are you afraid of?", and provide age appropriate answers.

### **Discussion Themes:**

- Teachers and parents have different roles with kids. Teachers have devotion and distance; parents have devotion but no distance. It is one thing to teach someone else's children and something quite different to teach your own (especially when you are not a teacher!). Kids have different relationships with each.
- Address distance learning issues with teachers and schools. Be direct with needs and expectations to try to find the right balance. This is new territory for everyone.
- There is some level of togetherness under the circumstances, but also a recognition that each family's circumstances may be different. This may include differing health and work status, single parenting, only children, developmental ranges and learning styles of children, and varying levels of need for breaks and down time.
- Parents should not feel bad or guilty about needing time to regroup or calm down. Be honest with kids that you need a few moments. It might be good for them too.
- Kids miss social connection. It is okay they are spending more time on phones now.
- Increased screen time may be appropriate in the short term, but observe basic good practices keeping devices out of bedrooms at night and setting an end time for use.
- Temporary allowances can end when a routine returns. Parents worry that children will maintain behaviors long-term. Evans and Thompson are less worried about transition back to pre-pandemic rules and norms.
- Structure for the summer months is unpredictable as circumstances emerge. We do not yet know whether camps will be held.
- Encourage children to express their feelings; some will feel sad and some will feel angry. Be responsive to their needs and fears. Help them acknowledge and identify their feelings and validate those feelings.
- Do not just assume that a child has really strong feelings about something.
- Use care not to project your feelings on to children. Often enough issues weigh on parents heavier than children.
- Be mindful of the need for transition periods.
- When you can, read to your child and have family dinners – both are important!

## **Final Thoughts:**

Michael Thompson -

In 1997, he spent 2.5 days with a school in Beirut following a 16-year civil war.

- School stayed together through the civil war.
- Children experienced trauma and emerged afterward.
- The mission of teaching brought out courage in the parents, teachers, and students.

Rob Evans -

- A school had Grandparents' Day and the Headmaster, talking with a grandmother, commented that Grandparents' Day was much nicer than Parents' Day! A grandmother replied: "That's because we have a common enemy!"
- Grandparents have a different perspective. It would be beneficial if there were such a thing as a grandparent pill that parents could take!
- Mr. (Fred) Rogers has a helpful perspective for us to emulate – always make time to stop and think of the people who have helped you become who you are.

## **Biographies:**

Dr. Rob Evans is a clinical and organizational psychologist and the former Executive Director of the Human Relations Service. A former high school and pre-school teacher, and for many years a child and family therapist, he has consulted in more than 1,700 schools throughout the United States and internationally. Dr. Evans is the author of many articles and three books -- *Seven Secrets of the Savvy School Leader: A Guide to Surviving and Thriving*, *The Human Side of School Change*, and *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with the Crisis in Childrearing*.

Dr. Michael Thompson is a consultant, author, and psychologist specializing in children and families. He is the supervising psychologist for The Belmont Hill School and has worked in more than 700 schools across the United States as well as in schools in Central America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Dr. Thompson is the author or co-author of several books, including the New York Times bestseller, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, as well as *Best Friends/Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*, and *The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child Achieve Success in School and in Life*. A dedicated speaker and traveler, he has appeared on The Today Show, The Oprah Winfrey Show, ABC 20/20, CBS 60 Minutes, and Good Morning America. He also wrote, narrated, and hosted a two-hour PBS documentary entitled *Raising Cain*.