We’re all figuring out how to balance our different roles and demands right now, including our most important one—mom or dad. ZERO TO THREE parenting experts are here to help answer your questions about the coronavirus.
address common parent questions and concerns during this challenging time.

Here is your one-stop shop for parenting questions related to sheltering-in-place and coronavirus. Have a question? Send it to us in a direct message on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/ZEROTOTHREE/), Twitter (https://twitter.com/ZEROTOTHREE) or Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/zerotothree/).

Interested in what other parents are asking? Read on, and remember that we’re all doing our best to figure things out. There’s no “right” answers right now—and it’s all about trial and error and finding what works for your family. Use these Q&As to help inform your own parenting decisions, while we all cope with coronavirus and the changes it’s meant for our families and communities.

Will my child be behind in their social skills due to social distancing?

Q: Rules about staying home and social distancing kicked in just as my toddler turned two and was about to start a local preschool program. This feels like the worst possible time for us to be stuck at home—he’s full of energy and fascinated by his peers. I’m worried that he is going to be behind in his social skills once we are (finally) back to regular life and his pre-k program re-opens.

A: Having a chance to learn and practice social skills with peers—sharing, turn-taking, resolving conflict—will be missed for now as we shelter in place. While you take care of your safety, your child’s need for social relationships is also important. He will learn and grow in many other ways during this time. Use the Q&As to help you make some informed parenting decisions.
A: Having a chance to learn and practice social skills with peers—sharing, turn-taking, resolving conflict, and more—is definitely important for young children. The more experience they have interacting with peers, the more they learn about how to get along with others.

But—developing social skills is a process that takes time and experience. Your son will learn to take turns and share over a number of years, as he practices handling these challenges over and over. Putting a pause on peer interactions for a few months will not put him behind. In the meantime, you can coach him to practice new social-emotional skills. For example, opportunities to share and take turns happen naturally throughout the day. Teach simple language that will be useful later in peer play: My turn, Want to play?, Can I share? You can also role model self-regulation and other social skills: I am so frustrated. I think I’ll take a deep breath to calm myself down. Share children’s books that address social-emotional themes, like the ones on ZERO TO THREE’s booklist (https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/7-books-about-feelings-for-babies-and-toddlers). Build on these stories in pretend play to help him practice the language and skills to handle peer situations when he does encounter them.

Finally, while it’s not the same as real-life playtime, your toddler may enjoy video-chat (https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2535-five-tips-to-make-the-most-of-video-chats) with other children his age. This gives him a chance to practice simple greetings and questions with a friend. You can support these interactions by suggesting songs to sing together or playing the toddler game of “I’ll show you my toy, now you show me yours.” They can even play with cars or other toys “together,” each on their side of the screen.

The short answer is: The kids will be alright. While these days are long and the weeks ahead are unsure, your toddler is learning and practicing social skills through everyday routines with you. When the time comes to release them into the world of their peers, they’ll be ready.

How do I encourage independent play?

Q: I know it would be ideal if we could spend our time at home due to coronavirus playing with our children all the time, but it’s just not possible. How do I get my little ones to play on their own for a little while when I need do other things (work/prepare food/etc.)?

A: This is a great question and something that almost every parent is wondering about right now! Let’s start with what to expect when it comes to attention span in the early years. Spoiler: It’s not long. By one year, children have an attention span of 1-3 minutes. By age two, toddlers’ attention span has grown to about 5-6 minutes. Three-year-olds can attend for up to 8 minutes and 4s up to about 10 minutes.

So—while we can help children engage in independent play, it’s important to hold the right expectations about how long young children can focus. The role of a parent in these early years is to support a child’s growing ability to extend their attention.

How to introduce more independent play? First, gather some engaging toys or materials for your child to explore. Objects that can be used many different ways during play often work better than a toy that only does one thing. (For example, children can quickly tire of a toy where they press a button and it plays a
song.) Keep your selections age-appropriate—some items to consider are blocks, art materials (crayons, paper), housekeeping props and dolls/stuffed animals, balls and baskets, and interesting “stuff” like egg cartons, masking tape, paper towel and toilet paper tubes, pinecones, shells, and more. Toddlers who are enjoying pretend play might like a pad, pens, clipboard, and other “work” items. (My friend gave her toddler a shoebox with ‘buttons’ she had drawn with marker. He happily tapped on this “keyboard” while she typed on hers.)

Introduce the play items and let your child take the lead. Ask what you should do or how your child would like to play. Look to see how your child creates opportunities to pretend, combine, sort, match, and construct. As your child becomes engaged in play, phase yourself out. Take less of an active role and sit back and watch. If your child checks in, comment on their play, “I saw you line all the pinecones up on the floor. It was a long line.”

Then move to your own activity. Stay close by because your child will loop back to you when they want to check in (offer a hug/kiss), want your attention (comment on their play), or have run out of ideas of what to do. In that case, you may want to offer an additional prop, object or material to add to their exploration. For example, you might offer dried pasta for them to stir, pour, and transfer using plastic containers and spoons. If they aren’t sure how to proceed in their play, you can also suggest two choices: “Hmm, do you think your baby needs a bath or wants to eat pretend ice cream now?” Strategies like these help children extend their attention by returning to the play again with a new focus.

Over time, children will need less support with free play—and, eventually, we’ll all find a “new normal” in these daily routines.

How should I address screen time?

Q: What should we do about screen time rules while we’re sheltering-in-place? I’ve got to work to do (and sometimes I just need a break). As a result, my toddlers are on screens more than usual.

A: I reached out to my co-authors of ZERO TO THREE’s Screen Sense (https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/screen-sense) materials—Rachel Barr, PhD from Georgetown University and Elisabeth McClure, PhD of the LEGO Foundation—about your question. Given the many stressors and demands that parents are facing right now, here are some guiding thoughts on managing screen time during periods of work-at-home and shelter-in-place:

- Encourage video chat. Video chat helps young children—even babies—remember and build relationships with family members.
- Choose educational programming. These are stressful times. Don’t feel bad about using screens more than usual. Choose age-appropriate, educational programs (like those on PBS) if you opt to allow extra screen time.
- When you can, watch programs or play video games/apps with your child. Talk about what’s happening on screen. Afterward, use real-world playtime to extend the learning from screens—counting, matching, pretend play, and more.
• Make sure children have access to a balanced “activity diet.” While they may be engaged with screens more than usual, it’s still important for toddlers to have a mix of activities across the day, including free play, story/book time, art activities, and active play.

How can I manage screen time for two children of different ages and needs?

Q: My three-year-old is getting more screen time than usual and as a result, my 12-month-old is often in the room and getting more TV in the background too. We try to separate them when my daughter is watching but it’s not always successful (or possible!). Is this something we should be worried about?

A: These are unusual times and most (if not all) of our family rules and routines are a little out of whack. The research is pretty clear that background media can interrupt the play of young children, decrease parent-child interactions, and interfere with learning. But we all live in reality here. Sometimes media time is parents’ only chance to focus on other responsibilities.

The first thing to remember is that sheltering-in-place is not expected to be a long-term situation. The negative child outcomes we see for background TV exposure is in the context of long-term, extensive exposure, not the short-term weeks or months that we’re experiencing now. Secondly, you are dealing with the reality of having two children. When I had a similar concern recently, my husband responded, “What do you want me to do—put Number 2 in a box?” We do not recommend boxing our younger sibs! But if it’s possible to set little ones up with some quiet play near us (while our older one has screen time separately), that’s ideal. Allowing your older sibling to watch on a tablet limits your younger child’s access to the screen as well.

Finally, keep in mind this dilemma is one that every parent of two or more children deals with at some point. Younger children tend to do activities earlier than their older siblings did, just by virtue of being there. So, try to choose a screen experience that is high quality, educational content (check out PBS’ offerings) and also select programs that appeal to a wide range of ages—such as Blue’s Clues, Kipper, Curious George, and Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood.

We’re all figuring out how to balance our different roles and demands right now, including our most important one—mom or dad. You’re asking all the right questions and the answer is really about balance and making sure everyone is getting their needs met (including grown-ups!).

Looking for more information? Visit zerotothree.org/coronavirus for our latest resources and updates for families.

AUTHOR
Rebecca Parlakian
Senior Director of Programs