

UF/IFAS Faculty Forum Webinar

Thursday, April 23, 9:00 AM – 11:00 AM
Notes and Resources

Childcare tips for faculty during COVID times

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We are happy to share our observations of what has worked for our symbiosis with our children during the times of social distancing. Obviously, our comments stem from our specific situation:

- We are a husband and wife, both science nerds, working in the same institution, so we can coordinate our time flexibly.
- We have two kids at an ideal age, meaning not babies any more, nor grumpy teenagers yet.
- Jiri's perspective was largely built in a different society, in the Czech Republic many years ago. There, children were not the center of attention; instead, they were expected to go with the flow, were involved in all aspects of family life including work, but after work they got complete freedom to roam. Andrea grew up in a midwestern household where education was the core family value.

Some things may be established as sacred in the family

The parents time. We observed that kids don't *need* to be the center of attention. They don't need affirmation all the time. And that kind of approach is good for them in the long run, as it does not build unrealistic expectations of their importance. We set up time when kids may not interrupt us, so they know to be self-contained. Once we are finished, we are happy to commend them on their successes.

Rules and structure. Kids thrive under clear, explicit rules, as long as there are not too many and they are obeyed by all. Clean up after yourself, don't waste food, do chores before playing. Use them sparingly though, and only those that can be logically justified. We always follow up to make sure that rules become automatic.

The kids' time and freedom. When our kids finish the chores on the list on the fridge and school work, they are free. They need practice to be alone. There is some research suggesting that, never being alone makes young people feel lonely all the time. Soon, they discover the joy of being masters of their own situations, they start building their own worlds, and grow towards independence.



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Logistics and management

- We try not to manage situations. Instead, we try to create **an environment of self-learning** which provides feedback to kids better than adults can. The environment has 1) serious role models, 2) clear rules, and 3) genuine freedom. This follows from our observation (entirely devoid of any empirical research, except it is also what our grandmas used to say) that the kids behavior is molded 50% by modeling adults, 49% by their nature, and 1% by what we tell them. So instead of bossing them around, we are trying to be the best of ourselves.
- We observed that kids **do not need to be entertained**, and we don't feel that entertainment is the parents' role. They need to practice entertaining themselves. That does not mean we don't have fun – quite the opposite! But they enjoy having fun with parents more when they also learn how to contribute, not just follow.
- Theory of Change recommends not to overanalyze the problems, but instead to **focus on the good moments**, and build on those. Interestingly, our close friend with decades of childcare experience said the same: ignore them when they misbehave, but be sure to interact with them when they are good, frequently.
- **Electronic toys and screens seem unnecessary**, and there are data showing that they delay some parts of the kids' development. So we don't really have any. We do watch interesting films as a family activity, taking turns in choices. And we provide piles of books, tools, and help with making stuff.
- Kids make bad decisions because they don't understand the consequences. So we try to let them **make silly decisions, and let them deal with the consequences**. It works best if the activity is something serious with adults, that makes the consequences clear but also safe. Cleaning, building, weeding, planting, fixing.
- **School work** – we no longer feel bad about not following what the school assigns them. We insist on writing, reading and math, but science is better in the kitchen sink than online, and civic

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education is more fun when argued at the dinner table. This may not suffice when they are older, of course.

Outdoors, outdoors, outdoors.

Many of us tell stories of how Mom used to kick us out of the house to play and told us not come back until dinner. It's legitimate, use it. This is the best weather for a pandemic in Florida, so let's enjoy the outdoors before it becomes unbearable.

Try to get out of your backyard to real wild public lands, too. Around Gainesville we recommend <https://www.alachuaconservationtrust.org/act-preserves>.

Torturing invertebrates in jars and plants in pots is a great gateway to understanding and appreciating nature. Snails, earthworms, beetles, caterpillars, crayfish... they all make great pets. Compost is almost a pet, too. It does help to have an adult role model, kids pick it up easier.

Grow stuff in a garden, to teach patience and persistence. The key is to be serious about it.

Conclusion

While this time is certainly not without its struggles, it is also a remarkable opportunity for a reality check with your kids. Who are these little people, really? We have discovered that they are two levels smarter and more capable than we thought. The previous reports from school underestimated their sophistication. What the grandmothers said was true: it takes a village to grow a kid, so we are learning to be serious about it.

