The problems Catholic school families are currently facing

News of the Coronavirus-19 is relentlessly surging from our televisions and website news outlets warning us of the constant and ever-present danger this invisible virus is imposing upon our health and our lives. As counselors and educators, we join your concern, primarily for the safety and health of students as well as your family, and secondarily, the educational concerns you may have. We want to share with you some ideas for stabilizing your family and continuing a home-based education until the time arrives when we can get back to our school buildings and regular routines.

We are all dealing with:

- Stress and the uncertainty about how long this will last and when life will return to normal.
- Concern about our jobs, ability to pay rent, mortgages and provide food for our family.
- Anxiety and loneliness associated with being isolated from family, friends and co-workers.
- The challenges, frustrations and difficulties being home together for long periods of time.
- Parents supervising their children’s education at home. For some, this feels like an opportunity. To many, this is an overwhelming and daunting task.
- Parents are also working from home and trying to juggle child supervision with the demands of their own remote-work situation or there is lack of childcare for the parents who go out to work.

The family rhythm is disrupted

Each family is experiencing a unique set of circumstances that is disrupting our normal routines and stressing the family system. We love each other but are not used to spending so much time together.

Can you tell me more about this?

Yes, the family system thrives on a state of ‘homeostasis’ which means that, if everything in the family stays the same, whether that is healthy and adaptive, or not, everyone feels comfortable. However, when something new is introduced to the system to throw off that normalcy, such as being home together all the time, a new baby, or even a parent becoming sober, the family looks for ways to cope.

Families that have smaller networks of support will have more difficulty coping than those that have more developed and sturdy supports during this time of crisis. For example, the single working parent, parents who rely on outside child care, who may have untraditional work hours, whose extended family live out of town, who may not have contact with neighbors or does not belong to a church community, will be more isolated and vulnerable to being overwhelmed compared to a two-parent family, parents with traditional work hours and child care, who have access to online contact with extended family or a family with set routines involving regular family time at home together.

A support system is a protective factor for the family. Make a list of all the people and communities you as parents have for support, especially during this difficult time. If you find you need more support, consider how your Catholic school community may direct you to resources. Visit the website for Catholic Charities of Denver https://ccdenver.org/ or call your parish to discuss needs with your pastor and how you may become more connected and engaged with school and church. Reach out to family you may not have spoken with in a while and see how they are doing. Look online for social or volunteer groups you may join with common interests or reach out to a co-worker. You may want to speak with a therapist if you need help growing your support network. It is okay to ask for help. Place your fear in God’s hands. Depend on Him.
Our family is stressed, on-edge and family members are easily angered. What should we do?

It is normal and understandable to feel stress and anxiety more than usual because we don’t know what to expect in the coming weeks. There is fear of our family members becoming sick. There is anxiety because it is hard to maintain a learning and work schedule for everyone. The kids may be fighting with each other and parents may be feeling short-tempered. It might be time to ease up on ourselves and your kids…

Here are some ideas to consider:

1. Have a sense of humor! We are living an absolute calamity here at home! Find the funny every day. If you can’t, ask your kids because they are good at this.

2. Flexibility will be more conducive to calm than rigidity.

3. Take a realistic approach to expectations. Most of us are not professional teachers. We can choose to be easier on ourselves and our kids. School at home does not intend to be confrontational. Find ways to motivate other than yelling. We really don’t like yelling anyway. Kids know what motivates them, so ask.

4. Use a schedule to help define boundaries and prevent chaos but see what works. That is key. Find a rhythm in the day that works for your family. The schedule and rhythm that works for your friend’s family may not work for yours. Find your family’s sweet spot.

5. Limit the consumption of virus news and discussion with children.

6. Take brain breaks! Use a timer to stay on track if it helps.

7. Exercise together outside. Walk, run, skate, board, park play. Get in the sun for 15 minutes a day to receive the Vitamin D we need. Being indoors too long can lead to depressed mood. Relax and watch your children play. “We are going to get through this.”

8. Self-talk your way through the day. “I am doing the best I can.”

9. Practice gratitude. “I am grateful for…” “I love this (whatever it is) about (each child).”

10. Thank the Lord for each day.

11. Face fear with God’s word. It is the source of life and light. It sustains us. Here are some:

   - Be still and know that I am God - Psalm 46. Pray this entire Psalm!
   - Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding - Proverbs 3:5
   - God did not give us a spirit of fear but power, love and self-control - 2 Timothy 1:7

Find the verses your family likes best and repeat them throughout the week.
Before we go any further…

If your family is in crisis, if there is more stress than you are currently able to cope with, or if you or a family member are having thoughts of suicide, then do not wait…

Pick up the phone and call Colorado Crisis Services [https://coloradocrisisservices.org/](https://coloradocrisisservices.org/)
Talk to someone: 1-844-493-8255 or Text “TALK” to 38255.

More ideas to consider…

- **Consider taking advantage of online counseling sessions.** Almost all therapists have set up a confidential Telehealth or similar online or telephone platform for meeting with clients. Since play therapy sessions are currently on hold for children, this may be a good time for parents to consider counseling support for themselves instead. There is no shame in asking for help when things become overwhelming or you are unsure how to proceed. Counseling referrals can usually be found from your or your child’s health care provider, pastor, school principal or school counselor.

Feel free to ask one of St. Raphael school counselors for assistance.

- **Connection to others is a mental health protective factor.** Practice physical/social distancing but do not isolate yourself from others in the family or from the outside. Don’t let your children turn in on themselves and retreat to their rooms for hours on end on social media, video gaming, or YouTube watching.

  *It is normal for teens to want more alone time than younger children. Allow some time to talk with friends and do their own thing. They are striving for independence. This is the developmental task at this age. Set reasonable boundaries while giving them the space they need.*

Conversely, set up platforms such as FaceTime, Skype, or Google Hangouts for video calls to loved ones and friends. Set up time for the family to play constructive and non-violent video games together. Your children probably know which games are available in those genres and set the guidelines. If you have wanted to take a break from video gaming altogether, this might be a good time as long as there are substitute activities in place. Interactive face to face games develop social competence and family bonding. It helps them think and learn. It’s time for all of us to embrace a new mindset!

**Embrace a New Mindset**

Anxiety and fear will become as strong as the thoughts that feed them. Our society is undergoing a paradigm shift. We can change our thinking from, “When things get back to normal” to “We are in this for the long haul. There is now a ‘new normal’.” We are not going back to what was normal for a long while, if ever. The news is clearly informing us that ‘things have changed’ and will continue to change as we learn more about this virus and how we must respond. Life looks so different now and accordingly, we should go about things differently, as well. However, there is no timeline. Be easy on yourself.

This is a journey!
Talk with your child(ren) about the coronavirus

Remain calm and reassuring.

Make yourself available, give attention, listen to your child’s fears, give lots of love.

Avoid blaming.

Monitor TV viewing and social media. Constantly watching updates on the virus increases anxiety.

Engage your child in other interesting activities instead.

For more information on how to talk with your child about the virus see these links:

Talking to children about COVID-19: A parent resource

How to explain coronavirus to a child with anxiety
[Written for parents of students with learning differences, the suggestions will help the parents of all types of learners]

Create your Family’s Own Survival Guide

Once we make the decision to accept the new normal that has been thrust upon us, we can start to reorganize, reorder, renew our family, school and work life. This is possible! There is no set timeline. Be easy on yourself. Grab a blank notebook and decide to begin.

The first step is to adjust our expectations and standards to meet the new realities of the situation we are in. How can we do this? Recognize that our community has slowed down. It is so hard to accept this because we have become accustomed to living a very fast-paced life.

Some thoughts you may have about this situation is, “This is completely inconvenient! It is awful and disruptive, difficult and FRUSTRATING!! [It’s okay and normal to feel all these things and more. This is hard! Most every parent in your situation is feeling this tension. You are not alone..]

Consider these ideas when creating your Guide to address uncomfortable emotions:

• Our anxiety, tension and fear are going to be higher so what can we do to talk through these feelings with each other in ways that will be helpful?

• How are you feeling? Can you name it? There is a phrase we use in counseling, “If you can name it you can tame it.”

• Try to help each of your family members name their feelings so that everyone can process and voice what they are going through. Every family member is going through something.
• Use a feeling chart to help identify emotions. Feelings change throughout the day. If you want, you can track these to see what the ‘hotspots’ are throughout the day. This resource on Emotions contains a few good samples of emotion charts for young and older people as well as more information on managing emotion.

• What can our family choose to do instead of what we are currently doing to further maintain our calm and peace?

• What positive thoughts can we substitute for negative ones to motivate us to do some things differently?

• What comfortable feelings did we have today?

Our mental outlook changes our perspective when facing difficulty. Take Italy, for example. They are singing and blasting music from windows! We can have a party on our doorstep and wave to you and your family having a party on your doorstep. You can find videos on the internet of people helping others and in their communities. Share one a day with your family.

Let’s look for the opportunities rather than dwell on the sacrifices, and when we must sacrifice, let’s teach our children what that is. We can use our sacrifice for the help of souls, actually contributing to a cure for the spiritual ills of the world. And while we sacrifice, we can choose to sing!

To understand a little more about this spiritual reality, begin with this excerpt by Mother Angelica:

**What is redemptive suffering?**

**Another question to consider for your Guide:**

• “What will contribute to a better family rhythm?”

Since we don’t know how long this situation will last, and it might even get worse before it gets better, we need to come together to embrace this reality and find solutions. Therefore, begin or continue frequent family meetings to brainstorm what things can look like going forward in terms of our family schedule, when and where to have time together and how to give space to one another for time alone. Debrief with your children (and spouse) about how the day went and what can be better tomorrow.

Additionally, answer the questions, “What are ways we are going to entertain ourselves? What do the parents expect from their children and what do children need from their parents?” Allow this dialogue to happen. Use ground rules. Let everyone have a voice. **Collaborate and come up with a plan together.** Collaboration does not equate with letting go of parental authority. For more information about collaboration with children see Dr. Ross Greene at [https://www.livesinthebalance.org/](https://www.livesinthebalance.org/). For children who share the households of the mother, father or grandparents, allow for an extended version of the Guide, to be written in a notebook and passed around to all the households. Allow the adults of each household to modify the ground rules and routines according to both the adult and children’s needs in that home.

Part of the family meeting can be brainstorming ideas for limiting time on TV and video games. Click here for screen time guidelines from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](https://www.healthychildren.org/).
One Archdiocese of Denver Catholic school administrator came up with a list of “Things baby boomers did in the 1960s that you can do now at home!” Create your own list:

- Take a walk
- Bike ride
- Play in the park (if not crowded)
- Hike trails in your neighborhood or in the mountains
- Explore mountain towns or backroads
- Scavenger hunts – inside or outside
- Exercise is the number one activity that benefits health and de-stresses.
- Indoor exercise like push-up competitions, family Olympics, etc.

- Teach your children life skills – laundry, cooking, sewing, how to run a house and how to create a personal budget. Spend time with kids to teach them how to cook, bake, do the dishes, etc. One idea is for your children to pick what skill each will learn and see if they can be the family ‘expert’ and teach one another that skill.

- Every business and ‘influencer’ on the internet has something to say about COVID-19. Lowes even sent an email blast with a list of craft projects that can be made at home. With supervision, put your teen(s) in charge of coming up with activities found in books in your home or on the internet. Then, schedule time in the week to do that.

Here’s the link from Lowes! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYI-_sQeyDY&cm_mmc=em-_c-_prd-_mdv-_gdy-_all-_152-_lm_269811-_npc-_20200318_bnr_family_project

Home-based learning is challenging but not impossible. Learn with your children.

Most of us are not called to solely home-school our children. The role of Catholic school has always been to support you, as the primary educators of your children. What does that mean?

The Church in her wisdom set forth a vision of education within the family in the Vatican Council II, 1965 Doctrine on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis) #3 stating that parents have a “serious obligation” to educate their children and are “recognized as the primary and principal educators of their children.” The bishops and Church leaders did not paint a picture of education as rigid environments of production. To the contrary, the family “must create an atmosphere animated by love and respect” for God and others where “well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered. The family is the first school social virtues that every society needs.” This beautiful vision of family education is meant to teach children to “know God, worship Him and to love their neighbor.” The bishops note, in the home, the children “find their first wholesome experience of human society and of the Church. Using language of invitation, not of guilt, they go on, “Let parents recognize the inestimable importance a truly Christian family has …”
It’s a beautiful idea but what about the reality of accomplishing this task? I feel overwhelmed. It’s just too much. I am not sure I can do it.

You are undoubtedly overwhelmed with the expectations asked of you to help your students complete the work received by their teachers, especially if you have students in multiple grade levels to supervise.

Go back to Embracing a New Mindset: when you begin a new job or your work group begins a new endeavor what is the first thing that you or the group undertakes? Before any work begins, there is usually a retreat and also some ‘team building’ activities, of course! When we start a new job, we usually take a few days off to recharge and get into a new mental framework. The family is not meant to be an engine of productivity but “a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values” (Charter of the Rights of Family).

As we speak with parents starting this journey, it became apparent that the need to reacquaint with one another under this new ‘learn at home’ scenario is one of the best ways to begin. Structure your day with learning hours, praying hours, eating hours and activity hours. Go on a bike ride together or play some games. Do a little cleaning and organizing, or something you all like to do and ease into academic hours. Keep a ‘flexible’ schedule. For example, maintain the same routine of getting up, eating and going to bed, but during learning hours, be flexible as to what assignment to do and when. One idea is to have each of your students give an update (show and tell) on their work for the day and take questions. This can be part of, or separate, from the family meeting. You will probably need to have motivators for these meetings by saying, “First we will do this, then you can….?” Use motivators!

It may be helpful to share ideas with other parents. One parent arranged a Zoom call with her student and a few others in her class to discuss what they learned that day. You can get creative. The goal is to learn the new material given by the teacher, practice by doing the assignments and to allow your students to enjoy learning.

Use the teachers as your primary resource if you have questions or run into trouble. They are experts at ideas for making their subject matter come alive! Collaborate with them. They miss their students and want to help you!

Some tips to guide your student’s learning at home:

To assist in finding a successful balance between helping your children stay on track and adjusting expectations with flexibility, we offer the below strategies to keep in mind:

1. Create a schedule
   There is nothing that brings a sense of calm, security and safety as consistent routine does. To make this manageable, build your new routine around those things that are more difficult to shift, such as a toddler’s nap time or your own work schedule. Of course, structure is difficult to maintain with various needs of multiple-aged children trying to live and learn under the same roof. The schedule the school follows won’t work the same at home. Therefore, stay flexible and remember that it is okay if things don’t go as originally planned.

2. Create a learning environment
   Invite your child to help create their own “school at home” – somewhere comfortable and appropriate for them to complete work. This is ideally a quiet place without a lot of visual and auditory distraction. Your home was not intended to be a school, so this place does not have to be perfect. Some children do better if they can change locations throughout the day, and some children might need more explicit instruction on how to use their space, such as having only what they are presently working on out and on the table.
3. **Provide motivation for completing work**

During this unique time, allow for the use of external rewards that may not be the normal ideal. Talk with your child what might motive them...they know best! It can be helpful to use choice language, which may sound like, “If you choose to complete __________, you choose to pick the dessert/movie/book tonight”, which can help strengthen their sense of autonomy when they may feel like most everything is out of their control.

4. **Allow for breaks throughout the day**

Research shows how important “brain breaks” are for learning, for both children and adults. Taking breaks increases one’s ability to focus, process information, and regulate emotions. Go Noodle and Mind Yeti offer free physical-activity and mindfulness-base brain breaks. Coloring, playing with play dough, or getting outside to run around are also great brain breaks, and can happen as often as needed to get your family through the day.

5. **Schedule time during the day for prayer**

Without the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, family prayer will be an important source of grace for your family. This doesn’t mean long, “perfect” prayer, especially if this is a new practice you are incorporating into your routine. Start small, such as one decade of the rosary, and embrace the potential messiness of it. Family prayer can be dynamic – coloring, painting, clay modeling, and other multi-media can be used to express prayer, as well as music and dance.

6. **Physical Distance but greater Social and Spiritual Connection**

The silver lining to our current situation is the possibility of slowing life down and become reacquainted to spending more time together as a family through games, walks outside, family talks, movie nights, and moments to problem solve. Not every family is able to make use of this opportunity due to other responsibilities such as work, caregiving, and maintaining a household, so a “good enough” attempt to embrace these moments is in fact, more than enough!

7. **Use your school resources**

School personnel including administration, teachers and your school counselors are here to support you through this time. Don’t hesitate to use your school resources! The phone numbers listed below can be used to contact your school counselors.

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**The Problem with Anger**

Earlier it was discussed that change and stress affects a family’s homeostasis or its’ “state of normalcy.” The flux in homeostasis usually culminates in episodes of anger among family members and, like grief, anger looks different with different people. Some people withdraw, some lash back, some use escapism like video gaming, alcohol or substances, some turn anger inward, which is dangerous.

- Children and teens often hide, cry or have temper tantrums.
- Children become fearful when they see the adults in their family become very angry.
- Avoid “blowing up” in front of kids. In order to feel safe, kids need parents to maintain emotional equilibrium and provide reassurance, even if they internally feel anxious or afraid.
- Earlier we discussed the need to name our emotions so we can recognize when we are becoming upset and work on managing those in healthy ways with our spouse or friends.
• If you can’t do this on your own, there is no shame in seeking professional help. That is why the therapists and counselors at St. Raphael are here along with other mental health providers throughout the city and State. Michael Phelps is to be thanked for allowing himself to be vulnerable enough to share this public announcement with the world: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7KuJ1ruD4o

“...for when I am weak, then I am strong.” - 2 Corinthians 12:10

• One of the upsides to this crisis is that it will bring to light emotional issues our family needs to address. How to regulate emotion is a very common issue.

• At school, we use the Zones of Regulation to teach children how to identify what they are feeling, how the feelings are related to their thoughts and how these thoughts and feelings influence behavior. We teach children that they can influence their behavior by being the ‘boss of their body’ when they know how to match their behavior to the situation they are in. Find strategies for your family on how to manage big emotions.

• Check out the St. Raphael School Counseling website page and read our blog for more ideas. It will be updated regularly.

Start, Continue but Don’t Give Up on the Power of Family Prayer

Without Mass bringing our family together spiritually and, especially, if we have not begun a time of prayer each day, family prayer time will be the source of grace, strength and oasis of forgiveness. It will help you cope. Here is how:

• Pray and ask God for the gift of Grace for your family. Openly and with all your heart and soul ask the Holy Spirit to reside in, through and surround your family and guide your parental leadership during this crisis.

• Create morning and evening prayer time in your family. Do not worry about your family prayer looking or sounding “perfect”, especially if this is new for your family. Children do not have the same stamina for prayer that adults have, and we should not expect it. If your child is so inclined for a prayerful routine, support that, but what we as counselors find is that ‘mandating sainthood’ backfires and we know you certainly don’t want that.

• Create a prayer page in your Family Survival Guide. A simple shared vocal prayer, a prayer over one another, prayer aloud for family intentions, with each child taking a turn (yes, especially your teens. In fact, allow them to be the leaders.) Make up your own family prayers.
A family prayer for the morning: begin in the folded praying hands position and as the prayer is recited bring hands up and then open them, arms wide and down to the side: “From the rising of the sun to its setting, may the name of the Lord be praised.”

That’s it. Super simple and effective, every morning. Add your prayer intentions for the day. Teach your children the Angelus and pray it before or after lunch. [https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/devotions/angelus-383](https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/devotions/angelus-383)
End the day with one decade of the rosary for the intentions of your family and those that need help. Start small and help them work their way up, with everything you teach your children.

Ask your children what prayers they like and have learned at school. Children love being teachers themselves. Record all your favorite prayers in the Guide to use as a memory book of this time together and as a resource for the future.

- **Make time for Gratitude each day.** Lots of research on happiness has shown that taking time each day to be grateful for what we have promotes mental and spiritual health. During family time ask, “What do we have that we now appreciate even more?” This will help with the shift in mindset from scarcity to abundance. Discover and share ways, how less, is more. Keep a list in your Guide.

- **Be a light for others: take on a family mission.** Collaborate with your children about ways your family can help others who are suffering during this time. Write letters to the elderly shut-in or who are in the hospital sick with the virus and not able to have the comfort of their family. Your children will have LOTS of ideas, if you give them the opportunity to brainstorm.

- Finally, the difference between adequate mental health and mental wholeness is how we view what is happening and the situation we are in. **What we tell ourselves has a lot to do with how we cope.**

> “Lord, keep your arm around my shoulders and your hand over my mouth.”

Let’s start to train ourselves to be models of virtue for our children. We can persevere, keep our cool, and be reassuring, “We will be safe, Mom and/or Dad will always take care of you.” Ensuring basic needs, an education at home, allowing them to voice their fears and concerns is a vital part of caring for your children and surviving this crisis in the best possible way, together.

Here are some ideas to grow virtue in your family while you are all home: [https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/7-ways-your-domestic-church-can-imitate-the-holy-familys-virtues](https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/7-ways-your-domestic-church-can-imitate-the-holy-familys-virtues)

Here is the Catechism of the Catholic Church explanation of the virtues: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a7.htm)
In conclusion...

Know that you are not in this alone! We are speaking to many parents who are struggling to figure out how to help their children complete all the assignments, keep their kids on task, manage their work and other concerns.

Reach out to others if you are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, isolated or just need someone to talk to.

The idea of having a physical Survival Guide is to help you something tangible, if that is what you need. However, just take one idea from this resource and try it. One thing at a time. This is not meant to be another project for you to undertake, just a guide with ideas you might like to try.

We, at St. Raphael Counseling, are here for you as you transition to this ‘new normal.’ If you need us, please call our office Monday through Friday at 720-377-1359 or go to our website at http://straphaelnew.wpengine.com/ if you would like more information or to make an appointment.

Godspeed and God Bless!

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About St. Raphael school counselors and program services to schools

The school counselors of St. Raphael Counseling of Catholic Charities of Denver serve nine of the 39 archdiocesan Catholic elementary/middle schools.

We have written a Parent Survival Guide to Catholic school parents during these first weeks of the COVID-19 community crisis after the switch students made from the school building to home-based schooling. “The Catholic School Parent COVID-19 Crisis Survival Guide” was written to help parents cope with the uncertainty, stress and changes currently taking place in school and family life.

It also is meant to provide encouragement for parents who tend, out of love for their children, to want to do everything so well that production and perfection overwhelm the joy of parenting. It is also for parents who are struggling with an exceptional child, the one who learns differently and is especially challenging, and for parents going through trauma and difficult life circumstances in addition to the current changes in the school day. For all parents, we hope this Guide helps you put things in perspective because Life is a Journey—Enjoy the view.

St. Joseph, protector of families, Pray for Us!

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