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# Europe's Parents Stand Up Booklet

## Dealing with current and future crises



Make  
Mothers  
Matter



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# Part 1

## Families under pressure and new forms of balance

### 1.1 Why this booklet?

"I wish for my former life"; "I would like to put everything behind me and not think about it anymore"; "I want to wake up from this nightmare and get back to normal". These are phrases that, at least once, each of us has thought or uttered during the long pandemic period. Sometimes we have hoped that we could erase everything. Imagine that nothing had happened and pick up where we left off. Even more so now, when contagion seems perhaps less of a concern than during the most critical phase, it might feel strange to have a book in our hands that talks about crises such as the pandemic and their effects. We will discover together that we can look back on crises to learn how to face new challenges, both the everyday and the exceptional and unexpected. COVID-19 is just one of the many challenges we faced, and it will certainly not be the last. In this first part of the booklet, we will review together the impact (both negative and positive) that this 'storm' has had on all of us and our families, and in the second part we will reflect on the relationship between parents and children, taking into account the specificities of the different age groups of children and young people, and imagine some strategies that parents can implement to promote their children's and their own well-being, even in critical situations.

### 1.2 The challenge of the pandemic

The experience linked to the COVID-19 emergency constituted a turning point in the biography of most individuals: a moment of crisis and rupture in the continuity of events capable of marking a division between a before and an after. The pandemic, and the restrictions that followed it, led to an abrupt rupture in our daily rituals: the lockdown in the home and the obligation of distancing broke our mental schemes relating to the organisation of our lives, destabilised our balances, on a personal, family, and collective level, causing disorientation, anxiety, feelings of precari-



ousness and threat to our safety and security. This has had a serious impact worldwide on not only the physical, but also the psychological and social health of children, youth, and adults. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable because their nervous systems are not fully developed, which is why their abilities to handle stress and regulate emotions and behaviour are still limited. Research shows that emotional and behavioural difficulties have increased in children and adolescents: irritability, easy distractibility, sleep and eating disorders, psychosomatic symptoms (for example, headaches, nausea, stomach-aches without a medical explanation) have been reported. These symptoms of discomfort were mostly present during the lockdown periods but had important after-effects even after the resumption of normal daily activities. What about the parents? The uncertainty related to COVID-19, the fear of falling ill and the fear for the health of loved ones, new family routines and the drastic reduction of social and leisure activities, worries about the economic and work situation and the strain of managing distance learning were sources of stress in the majority of the families. Irritability, concentration problems, boredom and feelings of loneliness were also found in the parents.



### 1.3 Families facing this challenge

The critical, terrible, and totally unexpected situation we have faced has highlighted the centrality of the family's role and its ability to respond and adapt to change, even when so sudden and significant. The period of restrictions we went through made it clear how central the family is to the care of sons and daughters, and how it is the privileged place where our needs as adults for intimacy, sharing, comfort and closeness can (or cannot) be met, even with the need to safeguard our own personal space and autonomy. In our daily experience, we usually do not realise how much our family is a group characterised by dynamism, subject to continuous (small) transformations, capable of adapting and changing in the face of the different situations and changes we encounter. These small daily transformations, which we do not usually observe, become more evident if we take a longer time frame and think back to what our family was like a few years ago, when our children were small or when they were not yet born... the

feeling is really strange: we are still us, it is still our family, but so many things have changed! We think about the spaces in the house, the furniture and the games, the time we spend with our children and the behaviours we use to take care of them, the time we have for ourselves and our partner, and the topics of conversation with the other parent, or with our friends... In this way we can see, from our own experience, two fundamental tasks that every family faces: the need to modify, to adapt to changes and, at the same time, to maintain its own stability and identity. The pandemic has confronted us with a decidedly imposing, sudden change that has affected every level of family life. First of all, it will be easy for you to recognise the impact it has had, on an individual level, on you and all the other members of your family since it changed the living spaces, habits and routines to which you were accustomed. Then think about how the relationships between you and the other members of your family have changed on an interpersonal level: the amount of time devoted to talking to each other has been different, the tasks and contents that have characterised your conversations and your days have been different (think of your commitment to follow the distance learning of your children...), the opportunities for communication and confrontation are different and more numerous (and with these, often also the opportunities for discussion and sometimes conflict). You have undoubtedly observed the changes that have taken place at the level of the larger family group: the relationships and support of grandparents or other family members, for example, have disappeared in order to safeguard the health of the population groups most at risk in the event of infection.

Finally, try to think of the obvious changes that have taken place at the social level: your family has had to close itself off within its own borders, within the walls of its own home, severing ties both with friends and with the organisations you used to rely on (the various services in the area, school, workplace, family doctor, etc.). Each family, within its own home, had to cope with the pandemic, restrictions, in many cases even work difficulties, economic precariousness and, above all, the anxieties and fears associated with a new, unexpected and unimaginable situation until a few days before it occurred. Especially in the lockdown phases, the balance between inside and outside (between time spent outside the family and inside the family, between rela-

tionships lived outside and inside the family, etc.) has profoundly changed, and it is for this reason that it has been necessary for all families to seek a new arrangement, a new form of balance in their relationships not only with life outside the home (school, work, friendships, other relatives not living together), but also within the home, in the couple, in their relationship with their sons and daughters, and even in their relationship with ourselves! How many times, before the pandemic, did we happen to think of our family, of our home as a safe haven, to which we could not wait to return, especially at times when we felt in difficulty, tired or worried about something.

During the lockdown, this image changed somewhat: our family, our home was our only (also physical) living space, our only possibility of movement and relationships; limitations made our family and our home narrow spaces in which we often felt constrained, with only technology as a means of communicating with the outside world. As parents, we reacted sometimes by becoming more intolerant with those who shared (and invaded) our spaces, or we were more permissive with our children to avoid conflict. Simple household rules (mealtimes, sleep, TV time, playtime) were sometimes swept away by the storm: the home often turned from an organised and predictable environment into a chaotic space. We have not always been able to 'keep the compass', while knowing that for children and young people (but also for us adults) there is a need for rules and limits that are clear, understandable, shareable, stable, and consistent. In spite of these difficulties in living in the home as the only living space, this has remained for quite a long time connoted as the only safe place in the face of the risk of contagion. This led to a serious sense of isolation, as families could not avail themselves of the usual social support normally offered by relatives, friends, and neighbours.

The epidemic was in fact accompanied by a 'social disconnection', and also often by a sense of suspiciousness towards the outside world. "The 'other' was often seen as a potential virus carrier, rather than as a potential ally against the problems associated with the pandemic. Fear arose 'of the outside', where an invisible danger lurks and where everything could be contaminated. Even after the lockdown ended and in the milder phases of the pandemic, it was not always easy to resume one's usual activities. A 'lockdown anxiety' has arisen in some cases, and some people, often young people, have suffered from the 'hut syndrome': leaving one's nest (one's 'hut',



one's home), perceived as the only safe place, is still generating a feeling of insecurity and anxiety in some people. It is important to remember that one of the family's tasks is to mediate between the internal context and the external social context: parents help children, from an early age, to understand the world and find the most appropriate ways to interact with other people. The family should be a springboard, a **secure base** from which to approach the world and gradually become more and more autonomous. But what if the image of the world that adults send back to children is that of a dangerous place? For our children to regain trust and hope, it is our way of looking at the world that must regain trust and hope. Let us start focusing on the positive, let us emphasise with our children that in times of pain, people can be found who are willing to offer help and solidarity (we can remember the valuable work of doctors and nurses during health emergencies, for example): in this way, we do not hide the difficulties, but show that it is possible to find a way out. It is not possible to protect against difficult experiences, but we can help children to integrate these experiences into their understanding of the world and to learn from them. How children make sense of their lives also depends on the reactions shown by adults. It is also important to make our children understand that it is normal to feel fear in the face of perceived danger. Our autonomic nervous system reacts automatically, beyond our control, if there is a threat<sup>1</sup>. During the 'peak' periods of the pandemic, each of us experienced anxiety and disorientation. These are unpleasant feelings: if we could have, we would have made to disappear immediately. And yet fear, a primary emotion, is fundamental to our defence and survival: if we did not feel it, we would not be able to save ourselves from danger. And it is precisely through fears and fears that we become courageous. You cannot be brave if you have not been through fear. This is an important message for your children; it is a message that traditional fairy tales also teach: the protagonists must always face a difficulty, a dark period, experience strong and negative emotions, in order to triumph in the end and become heroes/heroines in some way. There is no such thing as a happy ending that does not involve a big problem to overcome.

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1. If you want to learn more about this mechanism, take a look at the box at the end of this chapter!

## 1.4 The family crew in the storm

From what has been said so far, it is clear that not only your family, but all families have been faced with a major sudden change, a critical situation that has altered personal and family life and required the implementation of strategies and mechanisms of transformation and adaptation to cope with the situation. And in this situation, it is above all the parents who have had the most difficult task of guiding the family and ferrying it through the storm of the pandemic. We can really imagine the family as a team, the crew of a canoe, which has a common and shared goal; the parents are the captains of this team within which everyone has a role, takes an active part, and helps by rowing in rhythm with the other family members.

Obviously, everyone contributes to the navigation with their own strength and characteristics; when one of the members is tired or loses the rhythm, the other family members can come to their aid, show them how to proceed, encourage them to regain strength or rhythm, or compensate, at least temporarily, for their rowing slower or in a different direction, so that the boat can continue to sail towards its destination. It is only in this way, by all working and rowing in the same direction, that it becomes possible for the boat to face the storms it may encounter more safely.

The role of crew captains is particularly central when turbulence is encountered during the voyage. Their ability to cope with and manage turbulence while staying on course is crucial. Parenthood, the most difficult job in the world and one that no one can teach you, turned out to be an even more arduous task following the changes encountered, that strong and unexpected storm that we tried to describe in the previous lines and which, no doubt, is a vivid memory in our minds.

The pandemic and the restrictions that followed constituted a major stress factor outside the family, which powerfully affected all its members. Parents are the ones who had to guide the family in the midst of this turbulence, trying to take on and manage not only their own discomfort and fears, but also and especially those felt by their sons and daughters, continuing to do their job: taking care of their children, with the aim of promoting their well-being and helping them to grow up in peace. Research conducted over the past two years has highlighted the much higher lev-



els of stress felt by parents and how this can have a negative impact on parents' ability to care for and respond to their children's emotions and requests. How many times in the past years have we felt overwhelmed by our task as parents, lost patience with our children, become angry and responded to them in a standoffish or hasty manner, and then blamed ourselves for what we said or did! And how many times have we felt tired, nervous, lacking time and energy to devote to our children, and felt that they were also taking away our time to devote to ourselves! What has happened over the past few years, therefore, is that our individual stress level, that is, the discomfort produced by various personal conditions and also external to us (in this case the discomfort produced by the pandemic, restrictions, economic precariousness, etc.), has also affected our parental stress level, that is, the level of demands that are related to parenthood and the relationship with sons and daughters.

A higher level of individual and parental stress is associated with a greater difficulty for parents to take care of their child(ren) and this is associated with a lower level of well-being manifested by the child(ren) and also by the par-

ents themselves, that is, by the whole family. On the other hand, parents who were able to implement good strategies to manage their own and their children's stress levels were able to mediate and mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic and social isolation on their children's adjustment and well-being. Research shows that the less psychological distress of parents, the less anxiety and depression in boys and girls; conversely, more stressed parents often have more stressed sons and daughters. When one is invaded by emotions that are too strong and difficult to control, one finds it more difficult to be supportive of one's children. Boys and girls notice the inconsistencies of adults. If, for example, we say: "Don't be afraid!" but then constantly repeat "don't touch anything!", "don't get too close to your friend!" "don't kiss grandpa!" and so on, we can generate confusion in them. In addition, when we are stressed, we are more likely not to react in the best way to our child's negative emotions (we already struggle with our own emotions!), perhaps by ignoring them or debasing them or punishing them. In doing so, however, we are not giving them the tools to learn how best to handle them.

**Stress<sup>2</sup>** is contagious: tensions pass from mind to mind very easily: have you ever had dinner with a couple of friends who quarrel with each other and constantly punish each other? At the end of the evening, you probably felt exhausted and nervous. It is because you have been infected! In this case this is a slight temporary effect, either because the evening is over (thankfully!) or because you, as an adult, have the ability to manage your negative feelings, for example, by distracting yourself by thinking of something pleasant. But what happens when a child, who has not yet developed mature emotional management skills, is exposed to a high level of stress on a daily basis? Children are much more vulnerable, and the negative effects will be more intense and longer lasting on them. They will become restless, unable to concentrate, possibly aggressive or anxious and possibly develop psychosomatic symptoms. The child's behavioural problems, in turn, will make life even more difficult for the already stressed parent, creating a short circuit that is difficult to manage. In high-stress situations it can happen that one feels overwhelmed and inadequate. A certain level of stress is inherent in the parental role, but sometimes the

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2. The highlighted words are explained in the Glossary of Part 2, Section 5.

situation degenerates, and 'parental burnout' can set in. When we talk about burnout, in the work and non-work context, we refer to a situation of high stress and progressive malaise, accompanied by psychophysical exhaustion. It is good to be aware of one's own stress level: there are several alarm bells for a possible **burnout**:

- Fatigue and a state of weakness, tiredness.
- Difficulty sleeping, disturbed sleep (continuous waking at night, insomnia).
- Irritability, impatience.
- Hyper-alertness and constant worrying.
- Constant brooding with negative thoughts.
- Difficulty making emotional contact with children, detachment.

If you experience these difficulties, perhaps the stress in your home has become excessive, almost toxic. If you have the feeling that the situation is getting out of hand, if you are afraid of not being in control with your child(ren), if you have lost the pleasure and joy of sharing affectionate and pleasant moments with them (playing together, cuddling, etc.), do not hesitate to talk to someone you trust and/or seek help from an expert. Get help. There are times when it is impossible to carry the load all by yourself: accept to share the effort with someone. You will be better off, and your child(ren) will be better off.

### **1.5 The other side of the coin: positive experiences in the crisis**

We reviewed the negative aspects of the impact of the pandemic and the 'darker' aspects of the lockdown. But it was not all negative! If you close your eyes, can you recall at least one pleasant moment spent with your child during the lockdown? Definitely yes! Many parents report that, during that slower time spent at home, children had the opportunity to invent new hobbies and collaborate in family life, and there were more opportunities for dialogue and sharing with their child(ren). Parents and children often enjoyed the opportunity to spend more time playing and having fun together.

This is no small thing. Shared play, not only for children, but also for adolescents and even adults, is more than just a pleasant experience. Play al-

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3. If you are interested in learning more about this, you can take a look at this video (in English): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sutfPqtQFEc>

lows one to express one's creativity, to train in problem solving, to find a mental space of respite from everyday problems, to express and manage emotions, and even to negotiate conflicts. Have you ever started a game with your children reluctantly because you were tired and nervous, and then found yourself very involved in the game, enjoying it, and at the end feeling regenerated?

Of course, it doesn't always happen, because sometimes our thoughts get caught up in worries, commitments, fatigue. But when adults manage to 'unplug' for a moment, getting completely into the game, just like boys and girls do, they certainly find there a means of regaining energy and good humour. Not surprisingly, some scholars have identified play as one of the ingredients of a healthy diet for the mind.

According to this approach, there are seven ingredients, to which we should devote an adequate amount of time during the day: sleep, physical activity, concentration, relationships, inner reflection, idleness and, of course, play<sup>4</sup>. Neuroscience teaches us that pleasurable and fun experiences, such as play, are associated with a rush of dopamine, a brain chemical linked to gratification. The release of this substance makes us want to repeat the pleasurable experience (it is the same mechanism as addictions, but in this case without the risks and side effects). This does not only mean that your child(ren) will ask you more often to play together (this may even scare you, since you cannot always be available for their games!).

It also has another, much more important effect: if children have many opportunities to experience that being together is pleasant and rewarding, they will be more open to other people in the future and will have confidence in the possibility of having other pleasant and rewarding relationships. So, as we play with our sons and daughters, we are working for their future! Moreover, one must consider that it is not only stress that passes from mind to mind: positive emotions can also 'infect' those close to us! Moments in which positive emotions are shared are very precious. Of course, this also means that in order to take care of your child, you must also take care of yourself. Take care of yourself, pay attention to how you are (it is not trivial, it is not obvious). Dedicate time to yourself (you could fol-

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4. If you are interested in learning more about this, you can take a look at this video (in English): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EQ2tzHI3Ks>

low the healthy mind diet we talked about earlier!): you will be better able to give quality time to your child(ren) and your loved ones. Neuroscience reminds us that the child's brain is shaped by the experiences parents offer it: thanks to cerebral neuroplasticity, the architecture and functioning of the brain changes as a result of experiences with the environment<sup>5</sup>. The relationship is the humus in which the development of the individual and their ability to cope with challenges, both everyday and exceptional, such as the one at the centre of our reflection, takes root.

### 1.6 Emerging from the emergency stronger than before

In the face of a situation as critical as this pandemic, perhaps we can think that it is already a lot if we have come through. Yet, it is possible to see this crisis (like many others we have overcome in the past and will overcome in the future) as an opportunity, as a chance to 'flourish', to 'grow'. The pandemic was a disorienting life event, but it was potentially an 'activator' of functional resources for change. The hope is to emerge from the emergency stronger than before. And, even more so, parents wish this for their children: not only that they know how to overcome difficult moments, but that they face problems and learn from them. In short, that they become resilient. What is **resilience**? It may sound like a difficult, technical, 'insider' word; instead, it is about processes that we all put in place on a daily basis that allow us to feel better, despite difficult times. We can think of resilience as an immune system of the mind. The concept originates in the field of mechanics and indicates the property of materials placed under pressure to change without breaking. Being resilient does not mean adapting passively to a change, or to go back to the way it was once the 'storm' has passed: it means being able to change to cope with difficulties, turning a negative life event into a positive enrichment (in fact, it is even possible to speak of 'post-traumatic growth'). Resilient parents support their children more easily in the face of stress; in a virtuous circle, sons and daughters who are able to manage their own emotions and behaviour even in difficult situations show their parents that they have done a 'good job': parents consequently increase their self-confidence and resilience. What can

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5. If you are interested in learning more about this, you can take a look at these two videos (in English):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNNsN9Ijkws>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m\\_5u8-QSh6A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_5u8-QSh6A)



we take home from the pandemic experience? The image of a family that is able to adapt, that can respond to various difficulties through strategies and mechanisms that we can also use in other situations and circumstances. Today, we are living through a 'new normal'. We can learn from the storm we went through and learn the best strategies and ways to return to see, and above all to live, the family as our safe haven, where we can recreate our serenity and where we can feel (and make our sons and daughters feel) protected and where we can balance the insecurity we may feel outside, for example, due to anxiety about the future and fears of economic precariousness. This can help us in the future to face possible new storms, new difficulties or, in any case, can accompany us to make the best of everyday life. We must learn that, as parents, in order to take care of our children, it is essential to also take care of ourselves, our fears, our emotions. Only in this way can we really listen and respond to the fears, emotions and needs of our sons and daughters, whatever age they may be. In the second part of this booklet, we will talk in more detail about the role of parents in supporting the development and well-being of sons and daughters at different stages of growth.



**Box: the role of the autonomic nervous system in the face of danger**

The need for security is a primary need for all living beings. To ensure the survival of the species, a kind of 'internal vigilance system' is active in animals and humans, which acts without us being aware of it, and is always on the alert to 'sniff out' signs of possible threats in the environment. If it senses a danger, it immediately prepares our body to react. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) plays a key role in this process. It regulates important bodily functions, such as helping us to breathe, helping our heart to pump, helping us to digest food and, finally, scanning, interpreting, and responding to danger signals. There are two separate systems at work within our autonomic nervous system involved in responding to a threat:

- Sympathetic nervous system. This triggers our 'fight or flight' reactions to dangerous situations: it activates a rush of adrenaline, which allows us to promptly move away from the danger or fight it off. Think for example of an animal faced with a predator: the increase in respiratory and cardiac rhythm, pressure and muscular tension makes it easier for the animal to take sudden action to save itself (fleeing or attacking the predator). It is possible that our sympathetic autonomic system is often activated in response to the invisible threat of covid 19. What effect did the adrenaline rush have in this case? Obviously, we couldn't escape or fight. Here we felt restless, unable to sit still, anxious, or more nervous and aggressive than usual. It may have happened to you, a family member, or your child.

- Parasympathetic nervous system. This is the system that regulates our relaxation and rest. When we realise that there is no danger, our body starts to calm down and conserve energy, it is like slowing down the rhythm: the parasympathetic nervous system lowers the heart rate and blood pressure. In particular, the ventral vagus pathway of this system allows us to relate to others and facilitates listening and learning (which we find impossible to do when we feel in danger). The parasympathetic system also comes into play when the internal vigilance system senses an extreme threat to which nothing can be done. In such a case, the dorsal vagus pathway of this system, instead of merely slowing us down, immobilises us. Do you know an animal that pretends to be dead in order to deceive the predator? This automatic and unconscious mechanism causes us to faint, or leads us to feel paralysed/frozen, unable to reason, confused, drained. Has this ever happened to you or your child? Of course, the pandemic is not the only source of threat we may face on a daily basis. Knowing how the autonomic nervous system acts can help us make sense of certain sensations and behaviours (ours and our child/children's), understanding that these are automatic and unconscious physiological reactions in response to a danger].



## Part 2

# Families with children 0-6 years

### 2.1 Facing the challenges of the life cycle

Each stage of the family life cycle has its own specificities and vulnerabilities, related to the developmental milestones, or developmental tasks, that children have to face in order to grow as individuals and as members of society. At the same time, parents also go through phases of change, with respect to, for example, their relationship as a couple, the care of older generations, their commitment and investment in work and friendships. It is very different, for example, to have very young children and find oneself dealing with the advanced old age of one's parents, or to have teenage children when one is already a little older. At each stage that dynamic between the drive for change and the drive to maintain one's identity as a family unit mentioned in the previous chapter reappears and is redefined, and at each stage one's wellbeing depends on the number and extent of the challenges to be faced in relation to the individual, family, and social resources we can count on at that time.

If the challenge is excessive and/or our resources are few, we risk triggering processes of psychological deterioration, with various manifestations of distress. If, on the other hand, we manage crises because the challenge is within our grasp - we are, for example, well equipped - then we will come out of it with something extra that will become, in life, 'a new arrow to our bow', a new competence or skill that may come in handy at other critical moments.

Sometimes, however, the normal challenges that every family goes through - the birth of children, their entry into the world of school, the adolescence of children, a move, a new job... - are compounded by others, those that are more difficult to overcome. - there are also others, what are called paranormative events, that is, events that are unexpected and in front of which we feel a lot of stress because we do not know how to cope with them (for example, a bereavement at an early age, a disabling illness, or macrosocial events such as the pandemic we have gone through, or wars and economic crises that come back to worry us).

Macrosocial events thus have the effect of amplifying the 'ordinary and normal' difficulties and challenges that families experience, with an effect that is all the more disruptive the more the equipment is lacking or defective, both in terms of material resources - for example, economic - but also in terms of psychological, emotional, social and relational resources. As we have seen in the previous chapter, being the captain of a ship going through a storm is no simple matter, being the captain when we lack the oars, or the boat is filling with water becomes a feat beyond measure. When children are born, for example, the couple is called upon to take upon itself the parental role, which must be amalgamated and harmonised with the dimension of the couple's relationship, without obscuring it and finding a new balance: becoming parents is an undertaking in itself full of joys but also of uncertainties, disorientation and fatigue, experiences that during the pandemic were accentuated by the fear of contagion and the social isolation experienced by new parents. The fear of falling ill and social isolation also had an impact on other tasks typical of the developmental phase of pre-school children, such as acquiring a basic trust in the world and being able to explore and get to know it in an increasingly autonomous and self-determined manner, participating in the first social communities such as the crèche and pre-school, building the first friendship relationships with peers, and gradually acquiring the ability to regulate one's own behaviour and emotions. In the following, we will try to focus on some of these developmental challenges, what it meant to face them during the pandemic, and what coping strategies we can learn from this experience in order to promote the well-being of our children and our own, even in critical and stressful situations.

## 2.2 Dealing with difficult emotions

In the pre-school years, children are 'in their infancy' in the development of what is called **emotional competence**, that is, the ability to express their emotions in a regulated manner without allowing themselves to be overwhelmed, to understand the causes of their emotional state and to share their own and others' emotions with others. The way we adults express our emotions, the way we react when we experience very intense emotions, and the extent to which we are able to empathise with the emo-

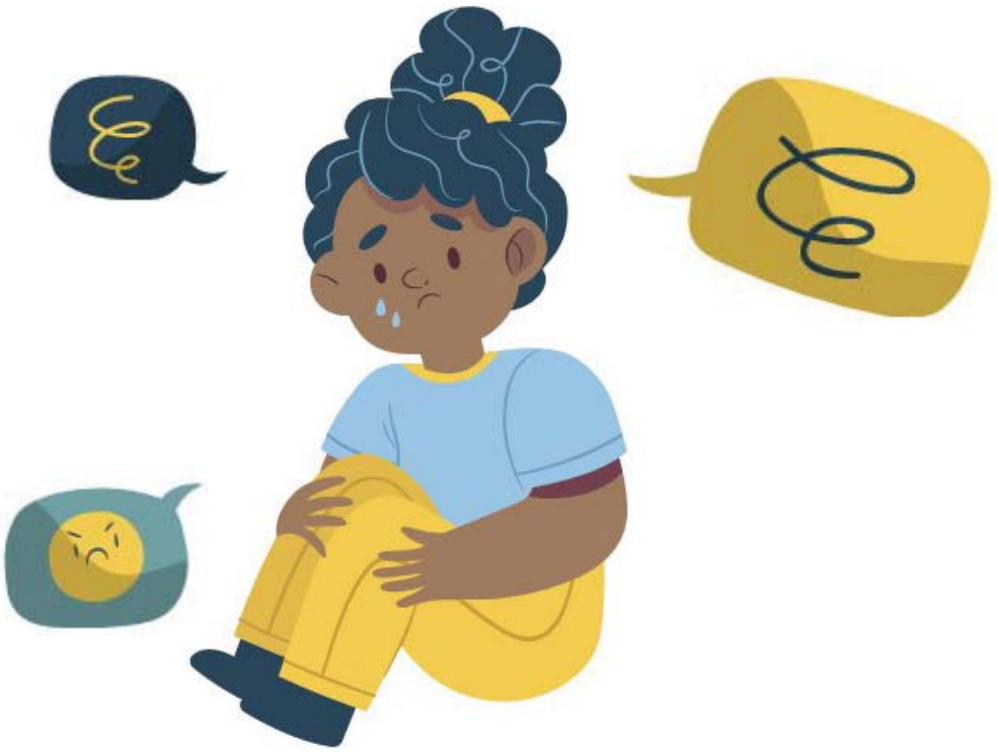
tions of others, are the first points of reference for our children in the arduous task of learning to untangle the tangle of emotions they experience on a daily basis. For example, it is difficult for a child to learn to express their anger in a controlled manner if every time we get angry with them<sup>6</sup> for something that he or she should not have done, we fly into a rage, shout and say or do things that we often regret because we know that they are not only useless but also harmful (such as using humiliating expressions, inflicting excessive punishment, or worse still, beating the children). It certainly happens that even the most caring and sensitive parent occasionally loses control of themselves and adopts inappropriate attitudes or behaviour: it is customary to say that to err is human, and decades of studies and research on the emotional relationship between parents and children have taught us that occasional mistakes - defined as interactive failures - are not harmful if the adult is able to 'correct' themselves and repair the bond with the child. A well-known paediatrician and child psychoanalyst named Donald Winnicott stated that children need parents who are good enough and not perfect. What is harmful, however, and thus generates suffering and discomfort in children, to the extent that it can lead to psychopathological development, is repeatedly experiencing situations in which one's own emotions are not understood by adults and in which the responses received are not respectful of their developmental needs: if to err is human, to persist is diabolical. Certainly, however, it is not always easy to understand the moods of young children, and we do not always have the emotional resources to welcome them. The younger the child, the more they express what they feel through behaviour - crying, requests for closeness, 'tantrums', destructive behaviour - or through the body - difficulty in feeding, falling asleep, speech problems, body discomfort - which cannot always be immediately and easily 'decoded' and traced back to the source that generated them. In order to succeed in this task, the adult is firstly required to tune in to the same wavelength as the child in order to best intercept their emotional communications, just as when with the old radios it was necessary to carefully position the knob so that the signal arrived clear, strong and without interference. If the adult is in turn overwhelmed by their own emotions, for example, because he or she is very

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6. In this booklet, "they/them" is used as a singular pronoun as well, for a more gender-neutral language. Therefore "his/her" and "him/her" becomes "their" and "them", while "himself/herself" becomes "themselves".

worried, disorientated and sometimes overcome by a sense of helplessness, as happened during the last Covid 19 pandemic, it becomes difficult for them to pick up the child's signals without the 'interference' of their own experiences. It can then happen that instead of having a warm and welcoming attitude towards a child who cries, complains, protests, or opposes, one responds with impatience, irritation and sometimes even with abrupt and violent ways. Even if it is not always easy, being a parent at times of emotional turbulence in a child's life means being able to maintain equilibrium and lucidity and remembering that the child's behaviour, however difficult it may be for us to tolerate at the time, is not intended to put us in difficulty, reproach us, make us feel lacking or inadequate. The more intense the child's emotions are for them and the more difficult they are to control, the more excessive their behaviour may become: it is precisely at such times that we must not lose our bearings, not get carried away by the child's emotional wave and try to offer them containment for their emotions. During the pandemic, it happened to everyone to go through moments of strong emotional activation: even the youngest children, although they did not fully understand what was happening, 'picked up' in the family atmosphere signals of alarm, tension, anxiety, fear, pain, from which they were infected, reacting in ways that, in a vicious circle, burdened their parents even more, who were not always able, as we said, to act as emotional containers.

Containing means taking in and holding together 'emotional pieces' that instead the child experiences as 'splinters gone mad' or pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that they cannot put together, and let them experience that in the face of such emotional impetus, we do not leave them alone, we offer them an anchorage to which they can cling and we show them a way out, that is, a way to deal with their emotions. In short, we do what the author of Peter Pan described as the task of good mothers, that is, 'to put their children's brains in order every night'. Well, a brain that is still a work in progress, such as that of pre-school children, needs the adult to guide it towards the construction of ways of relating to reality that are as functional as possible to its well-being. Emotional containment by the adult therefore allows the child - and also their brain, as neuroscience has shown - to have the important experience that even when faced with strong and difficult



emotions, such as sadness, fear, anxiety, terror, we are not alone and can 'survive' the emotional storm. The younger the child, the more containment must be achieved through physical closeness - holding, cuddling, hugging... -, voice modulation - calm and relaxed tones -, and, as the child grows, through more complex strategies for containing and regulating emotions such as play, drawing and verbal language. It should be pointed out at this point that a prerequisite for effective containment is the recognition of the legitimacy of every emotion expressed by the child: there are no right or wrong emotions. If anything, over time the child may learn to behave in a more socially appropriate way to express their emotions. Indeed, no one can tell us what to feel in a certain situation, or judge what we feel, because emotions are subjective reactions.

### 2.3 Setbacks in developmental trajectories: the significance of childhood regressions

As we have emphasised so far, attunement and containment thus require the adult's willingness and ability to listen to the child, accepting their emotional manifestations, but also observing their behaviour, the way he or she plays, what he or she says or draws.

As they are not yet able to put into words what they are feeling, pre-school children can tell us that 'something is wrong' by, for example, regressing, that is, reverting to the behaviour, requests or attitudes they had when they were younger, such as sucking their fingers or the dummy when they had stopped, starting to wet the bed again once they have achieved sphincter control, refusing to do things on their own that they are now capable of doing, such as eating on their own. **Regressions** are quite common at pre-school age and often represent physiological moments of emotional fatigue of the child, who through such regressive behaviour, it demands more attention and closeness from the parents, communicating that it feels 'still small' and needs time to grow and become independent. How often does it happen that when a baby brother or sister is born, the first-born child again asks for a dummy, or a bottle, or to sleep in bed with the parents? If we tell the child that we understand how he or she is feeling and reassure them that we are present and available for affection, these regressions will soon disappear and the child will once again be ready to progress, having gained the valuable experience of having been welcomed and understood at a difficult time.

Other times, however, regressions can be caused by 'non-physiological' emotional events that are excessively stressful for the child: conflict at home, parental separation, a bereavement in the family or, as was common during the Covid 19 pandemic, the continuation of a state of emergency that has completely disrupted our everyday life. During the lockdown and in the months that followed, the youngest children showed greater anxiety and concern at times of daily separation from their parents, although they had already been able to cope with such moments for some time: **Separation anxiety** is generated by the fear of not finding oneself, of losing one's parent or of being abandoned, and it is therefore easy to understand how the pandemic has made more concrete and realistic the fears that all young chil-



dren experience in the gradual process of emotional learning that concerns the ability to separate from reference adults, certain that one will find oneself. The concern that children show at the moment of separation should never be belittled or circumvented (for example, by moving away from the child when they cannot see them because they are distracted by a game). This last example leads us to emphasise how important it is to talk to children, even if they are small, about the emotions they are feeling, even when they are very painful emotions linked to traumatic situations such as loss, illness, or death. How many times during the pandemic did we want to hide the truth from the children, not to talk about it, when our gaze, our facial expressions, our postures did not convey the message 'everything is OK' at all. As adults, we sometimes mistakenly think that talking to the children makes them suffer even more: it is likely that if we tell our child that we understand that they are afraid that we will not come back to pick them up from kindergarten, we will trigger a good cry, but by doing so, the child will not have had to make the effort to keep it all inside, to cope on their own, thinking that it is better not to talk about what is hurting us. Naming our emotions, decoding them and sharing them is a bit like realising, when we turn on the light, that in the dark there is nothing to be done to be afraid of: 'shining a light' on what is going on in their mind, with the help of a supportive adult, helps the child to have the courage to explore their emotions, to recognise them and thus gradually learn to handle them. Regressive behaviour is not the only way in which young children can communicate their emotional distress. It can often happen that they suddenly change their habits, for example, eat more or less, refuse food, find it hard to fall asleep, lose interest in games that used to excite them... In this case, too, it is necessary to listen to the child and understand together with them the reasons for their distress. Other times, however, oppositional, and defiant behaviour may appear: sadness and fear that are not recognised and accepted turn into anger towards things and/or people. Such behaviour is always a call for help and should not be labelled as 'tantrums' or 'naughtiness': anger is in fact a consequence of the feeling of having been damaged, deprived, hurt. It is by no means easy to contain a child's anger and not to fall into the trap of symmetrical escalation, where we respond with harsh and punitive behaviour, thinking that it is rudeness, a challenge to our parental role, or an attempt to question



ourselves that must be curbed in good time. Nor is it functional to ignore such behaviour, hoping that it will go away by itself: usually if the interlocutor we are addressing does not hear, we raise our voice; even the child, if we ignore what they are doing, will 'up the ante' in order to elicit a response from us. Even if it is painful, we must instead get involved and try to understand what is not working in the relationship between us and our child at that moment: this is certainly the least comfortable road, but the only one to take, not with the aim of blaming ourselves, but of improving and repairing the relationship with our children by empathising with their experiences. **Mentalised** emotions, that is, thought and understood, will then no longer need to be expressed through the body, behaviour, or regressions. But we adults must also be able to do the same with our emotions! Emotional sensitivity and **empathy** are therefore two 'pieces of equipment' that can best help us in our relationship with our child/children, both in good times and even more so in stormy moments, and therefore, far from being innate qualities, they must be cultivated and nurtured: When we feel that

we just do not have any emotional space left to accommodate our child(ren) and their emotional needs, when we feel too much pressure, it is important to get help from our partner, relative, friend or professional, because we can all run out of emotional resources at times. Just as when it is important for the mother to feed her newborn baby satisfactorily, so to 'feed' the minds of our children, we need our mind also has the right emotional nourishment that we can draw from our relationship with others close to us.

#### **2.4 The need for regularity and predictability: managing everyday life**

The pandemic did not only put a strain on the emotional capacities of adults and children: it also profoundly altered our daily lives, especially during the periods when we could not leave the house and carry out our normal activities, such as going to work and for the children to attend nursery and kindergarten. During periods of lockdown or isolation we all lived within our homes, having only long-distance contact with relatives, friends, colleagues, teachers, or educators. The home was our refuge, but sometimes also a somewhat suffocating and limiting environment, especially for those families who, as we have already mentioned, had little space at their disposal and many different needs to meet, such as smart working, distance learning for the older children and play for the younger ones.

Before the pandemic, on the other hand, we had our own rhythms, often pressing and hurried, but certainly reassuring scans of our daily life: then suddenly everything changed. We had to review and renegotiate family spaces and times, and we often modified even the most 'normal' habits, such as mealtimes or bedtimes, with the consequence of finding ourselves, at certain times, in the midst of chaos. So, we have experienced first-hand how important it is, both for us and especially for younger children, to have an orderly and predictable life. The daily rhythms that punctuate our day guide us in knowing what is going to happen, just as a train's route is guided by the tracks it has to run. We need predictable and recurring times and spaces because predictability and recursiveness generate in us a sense of security from being able to know in advance, and thus control, life events. In the case of young children, daily routines intervene in the process of identity construction, help children to have realistic expectations of 'how the world is going' and to develop what is called a sense of mastery over the en-

vironment: if mum picks me up every day at four o'clock, it is easier for me to face the day with serenity than to live in anxiety that mum might come back at an unspecified time, or to fear that she might not even come back. Rituals, with their familiarity, therefore, help us to cope with the typical worries of our existence and moments of transition. We adults also need such rituals, but we are able to tolerate greater demands for flexibility and adaptation to novelty than are children. For this reason, it has been common to observe increased nervousness and irritability in children, triggered by the loss of established spatiotemporal reference coordinates. It is not only our minds that need order and predictability, but also our bodies: we know very well, for example, that if we go to bed at approximately the same time and get up at the same time, we fall asleep more easily and feel more rested in the morning, and we know how much more difficult it is if we have irregular mealtimes. Children who have regular meal and sleep schedules are also calmer and it is fairly easy to understand if and when they are hungry or sleepy, compared to children who are more irregular in their eating or sleep-wake patterns. In the progressive acquisition of such regularity, our own habits, and the ability to construct an organised and orderly daily routine play an important role. During the pandemic this was not always possible, sometimes we let things go a little because we were locked in the house, other times we were forced to radically change our habits and it was difficult to find new balances.

Of all the routines swept away by the lockdown, that of having to get up for school is certainly the routine that has had the greatest impact at all ages. School time' was initially replaced by empty time and then by various forms of distance learning. For the youngest children, nurseries and preschools have also activated ways of staying in touch with children and families through devices, which have come to occupy more and more space in the daily lives of even the youngest children: from video calls, to sending audio and video clips, to online meetings, the everyday life of us all has suddenly become digitalised and screens have replaced people and objects in our daily lives. Those who have young children know how tiring it can sometimes be for children to adjust to different rhythms and routines at the weekend and then to take on more during the week when they return to the nursery or kindergarten. If a weekend or a holiday can already be a source of upset for children because

their daily routines are interrupted, we can well imagine the psychological impact of the sudden and inexplicable loss of the opportunity to go to school and see their friends, without knowing when this would be possible again. This 'indefinite' suspension of our daily routines, which characterised above all the first months of the pandemic, made us clearly understand how important it is to be able to stay and find ourselves in known, familiar, recognised, and reassuring spaces and times. We used to say that when faced with the impossibility of going to the crèche or kindergarten, in many cases it was the educational services that 'went' to/from the children: faces, sounds, images reached us through a mobile phone, a PC or a tablet.

The possibility of maintaining a link even at a distance with the school was certainly an important resource in an emergency moment when it was a priority to "saving what can be saved": we soon realised, however, that schooling in the classroom - and we will expand on this in the chapter on school-age children - can in no way be replaced by virtual learning experiences, since it is based primarily on exchanges and emotional relationships between children and adults and between children and on being able to experience first-hand, with our whole body and all our senses. In addition, distance education has forced us to confront the risks associated with the excessive use of technological devices, a problem common to all age groups, but certainly even more accentuated when it comes to pre-school children. In fact, in addition to contact with school, during the pandemic the various electronic devices were often used as 'virtual babysitters' when parents could not take care of their child/children, or as 'vacuum fillers' in the many moments of boredom, or as distraction elements to buffer difficult situations. These are 'habits' that we should limit, if not abandon, ensuring that children have time and space to play, move around, stay outdoors, play sports, and enjoy the company of adults and children in physical spaces, rather than digital ones.

On the other hand, paediatricians and psychologists have for some time been denouncing the negative effects of digital overexposure on the cerebral, linguistic, cognitive, and even emotional development of such young children, emphasising that other experiences are suitable for healthy growth. These certainly include the opportunity to explore and learn about the world around us and to share this adventure with peers.

## 2.5 The need to explore and learn: encountering the world 'in safety'

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget already stated in the early 20th century that children, in order to grow and develop their thinking and reasoning skills, need to interact directly with the world around them and to experience it for themselves. He stated that the child is like a little scientist who actively constructs their own knowledge about reality by observing, questioning, exploring, experimenting, searching for the why of things. After more than a century of scientific research, we can confirm how important it is for young children to be able to gain concrete experience of the world through their own bodies and sense organs: carrying, sniffing, manipulating, assembling and disassembling, rolling, climbing... these are both activities that are enjoyable and fun in their own right, and ways that young children can learn about the world around them: For example, a ball for a two-year-old will be an object that they can grasp with their hands, throw or kick, it can be hard or soft, of a certain colour and shape; or a newspaper for a one-year-old will not be something where there are important things to read, but something to taste, smell and maybe even snatch. Up to the age of two, children learn about the world through their perceptions and the actions they can perform on and with objects: this is the stage of so-called sensorimotor intelligence. In the following years, up to the age of 6 or 7, children need to put their industriousness to the test: making, unmaking, building, destroying, transforming... in short, acting on reality in order to get to know it, but also to exercise that sense of mastery that makes us feel able to operate in the world to achieve specific goals, to find answers to our questions and to see that we can manage.

These are in fact the years in which the foundations of our **self-esteem** - that is, how much we feel we are worth- and of our **self-efficacy** -that is, how capable we feel we are in a certain sphere, such as playing football or drawing- take shape, experiences that we will also take up in connection with the typical challenges of school age. In order to be able to set out to explore the world, however, we need a springboard to give us the right boost, encouraging us, having confidence in our abilities and presenting the world as a place where we can venture. To borrow a metaphor from the psychoanalyst Bowlby, it is a matter of having a '**secure base**' from which to depart and to which to return in case of danger, certain of finding a refuge: one



cannot face unknown seas if one does not have the certainty of a safe harbour. Being a reliable and encouraging 'safe base' is a very important aspect of parenting: children only learn to trust themselves and the world if someone has first trusted them and 'given them permission' to go it alone and 'stand on their own two feet'. It is therefore essential that adults allow young children to explore the outside world for themselves, which at this age cannot only be told or represented or imagined: it must be experienced with the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands, feet... It is also important that children of this age can spend time in the open-air playing games of movement and testing their motor skills, and that they do not have a full 'agenda' of structured activities, but are allowed to have empty spaces in which they can freely choose how to spend their time, or to rest or even get bored. It is in the emptiness, in the absence, in the lack, that children's creativity, fantasy and imagination are stimulated.

All too often they are 'switched off' by excessive exposure to the media, by an excess of pre-established activities, by a myriad of toys that experts define as structured, that is, toys that provide for a use that is already estab-

lished a priori and that leave little or no room for alternative and creative ways of use. A wooden stick can become a sword for some children, a magic wand for others, a horse to be ridden for others, and can be used for new interpretations and scenarios each time; an electronic game with buttons that, when pressed, allow you to hear the cries of animals, cannot stimulate the playfulness of the children no form of use other than pressing buttons repeatedly until, when the novelty is over, it is put aside.

The pandemic, first by preventing us from frequenting places other than our homes and then by constantly reminding us of the importance of disinfecting hands and surfaces to avoid contagion, has meant that, even with good intentions to protect them from contagion, we have begun to pass on to children the message that outside the home the world is dangerous: 'don't touch, clean yourself, disinfect, don't get dirty, we won't go there anymore because there are too many people' have been much repeated phrases. Thus, free play in the open air, in parks and gardens became off-limits, as did the possibility of playing with natural and unstructured materials within the educational facilities, as these materials could not be disinfected. All these prohibitions and restrictions made it difficult for some children, during the first attempts to return to normalcy, to trust that they could do even the most normal things again, such as going to the park or riding on a merry-go-round. Some of them even refused to leave the house and see their friends, which also had consequences for their social development, as we will see in the next section.

The theme of the fear of contagion also often emerged in the children's games: pieces of cloth became masks for dolls, cans of various kinds became imaginary containers of disinfectant gel with which to play at disinfecting toys, instead of the notorious 'bad wolf', the 'nasty, nasty' virus appeared in the games to catch you... In their own way, through symbolic play, the children tried to come to terms with fears and prohibitions that were not only incomprehensible, but completely against the nature of their way of experiencing reality and learning. Aware of these serious limitations, it has been and still is important to try to recover what has been lost, taking care to invest in enriched and enriching educational spaces and times that can in some way 'compensate' the children, at least in part, for their lost experiences and allow them to once again become the protagonists of their growth, feeling



that they can safely go out into the world and face the journey of growing up in the company of their peers. Indeed, the need to build meaningful social relationships was another of the children's rights that was profoundly affected by the limitations induced by the pandemic: The media often talked about this, referring above all to adolescents and their risk of social isolation, and at times it was even claimed that, all things considered, younger children were fortunate enough to be able to 'enjoy' the presence of their parents to an extent that was previously unimaginable, forgetting, however, that it is precisely at pre-school age that one learns to be with others and that relationships with adults, however rich and satisfying they may be, cannot by their very nature provide all the experiential nourishment that children need.

## **2.6 The need for 'social connection': the importance of childhood friendships**

We have emphasised several times in the preceding pages that during the pandemic, as in all moments of emotional overload, parents may have felt a sense of exhaustion and weariness, comparable to a condition of burnout, due to the strain of keeping several important tasks together. During the pandemic it was mainly a matter of keeping the work dimension together with that of caring for the child(ren), at the same time and throughout the day: that initial relief of 'we are all united and close' turned at times into a 'we are too close', to the point that some authors have spoken of a kind of 'child indigestion'. However, we could say that the children have also had 'parental indigestion': children who were previously used to spending many hours outside the home at the nursery or pre-school or in the company of adults other than their parents, have long found themselves forced to relate exclusively to their mum and dad. This has certainly allowed, as we have already mentioned, many moments of emotional closeness between parents and children, and the sharing of activities for which there was never time before, at the expense, however, of the social nourishment that children, from a very young age, can draw from meeting and confronting peers. For a long time, psychology itself studied in depth the influence of the quality of the adult-child relationship on the latter's well-being or discomfort in the first years of life, leaving out the field of investigation of the relationship with peers, which is more in-depth in the case of pre-adolescents and adolescents.



Since the 1970s and 1980s, however, numerous studies have highlighted the importance of the bonds between children even at pre-school age, describing their complexity, the role they can play in the cognitive, linguistic, affective and social development of children and what differentiates them from relationships with adults, and this has gone hand in hand with the consolidation of an image of a child who is not only socially competent at an early age, but also eager to engage in relationships with peers. This disposition or pre-disposition to build social relationships is, as many neuroscientific and evolutionary studies have now shown, encoded in our genome, to the point that our brain has been called 'a social brain': nature has endowed it with brain areas and circuits - including the famous mirror neurons - specialised in managing relationships with others and responsible, for example, for human capacities such as imitation, empathy and understanding the mental states of others, all abilities that enable us to 'connect' with others. Social connection has been an important evolutionary advantage, as through cooperation with one's conspecifics, human beings have been able to survive even in hostile environments and conditions. Since this is an in-

nate predisposition, young children also seek and need to develop satisfying social relationships, both with adults, with whom they find security, protection, and support, and with their peers, with whom they are able to build rich social exchanges and even deep friendships from an early age. In a symmetrical relationship dimension, pre-school children share play experiences with each other, but also emotions, stories and fantasies, experiencing being 'equal' partners in the literal sense of the term and living as members of a group where it is possible to 'work out' intimacy, cooperation but also competition, mutual support, sharing thoughts and experiences sometimes completely unknown to adults, respecting diversity and the spaces of others, certain of 'playing on equal terms'.

We could therefore say that it is precisely thanks to the nurturing of social relations from an early age that we can build and nurture those attitudes to meeting others that we later define as 'citizenship skills' and that are now increasingly recognised as integral parts of the education and training of the new generations. From what has been said so far, it is easy to understand how social distancing has been detrimental to the social development of children, and with it the consequences induced by the fear that the other, even if they are your friend, can be dangerous and therefore it is forbidden to approach them. Research carried out during the lockdown months, but also in the months following, has shown that parents have observed an important change in their children, frightened by the idea of getting closer to known adults and children, and even more so by the idea of getting closer to new people.

We think, therefore, how much the more or less explicit message of "don't get close to others" has conditioned children of this age, who, on the other hand, manifest the pleasure of being with friends and companions by hugging, kissing, holding hands, sharing games and even, for the youngest, sucking the same dummy or bringing the same toy to their mouths. Seeing and hearing one's companions on the screen of a mobile phone or computer certainly aroused initial enthusiasm and curiosity, but soon parents, educators and teachers 'experienced with their own hands' that we should certainly try to abandon the 'long-distance relationship' route as soon as possible: since the pandemic, we have seen the importance of ensuring that even the youngest children have the opportunity to be with others 'in the flesh' reconfirmed, a theme that we will see come up again with the older children and teenagers.

## Part 3

# Families with children 6-11 years old

### 3.1 School and its challenges

As we have seen in the chapter "Families with children 0-6 years old", each phase of family life is characterised by specific developmental tasks, that is, tasks that have to be tackled and solved in that particular period and that lead, once overcome, to the acquisition of particular skills.

As far as families with children between the ages of 6 and 11 are concerned, these tasks are primarily related to the school environment and the challenges that children face there, challenges that become particularly complex in the presence of paranormative events, which, as in the case of the pandemic, reduce the personal, family, and social resources available.

The start of school for children and parents marks an extremely significant transition. School is an area of transition between family and society, it has the function of a time scanning in the growth process, it imposes a series of expectations towards what the child has to learn to do: for example, to achieve a certain level of profit, to relate in an appropriate way to adults and children, to inhibit physical movement in favour of mental engagement and impulsive actions in favour of self-regulation, to respect social norms, to communicate, to manage conflicts, to negotiate, and so on. For parents, too, school can be a testing ground: our child's school results are often perceived as confirmation that we have done a good job, while sometimes when our child brings home negative evaluations, we too feel somewhat affected and hurt ('what did we do wrong?'). After all, a child is often perceived, even unconsciously, as a part of themselves, and it is natural to feel deeply involved in their successes and failures. Perhaps that is why school performance is often the first concern of parents, and it is very common for an adult to ask a child: 'How are you doing at school? Sometimes, however, we adults put another aspect of the school experience on the back burner, which is just as important: that of relationships. Let us therefore remember to ask children more frequently: 'How do you get along with your classmates? With whom do you get along best? Do you feel com-



fortable within your class group?". The time children spend at school is indeed essential not only for learning opportunities, but also for relationships: the classroom is a laboratory in which children develop their cognitive, but also communicative and relational skills.

### **3.2 The experience of school lockdown and distance learning**

The lockdown and closure of schools has meant a loss of important reference points for growth.

Distance learning is not comparable to the school in attendance. It had the merit of having ensured the continuity of the pupils' educational paths and of having maintained contact between the children and with the teachers, but at home there are no classmates, the complicity between school desks, the mutual glances, the possibility of laughing together at the same joke has been missing; paying attention to lessons has been much more difficult: the gaze in front of the computer is strained, the teacher cannot use his physicality and gestures to attract attention. The school routine, which is so important for learning to be organised, was also missing. Being able to follow lessons without getting ready to leave

home, without checking one's backpack, without the anxiety of arriving late (and so on) deprived the children of an experience that is fundamental for their autonomy and their ability to be responsible.

As we saw in the previous chapter, in fact, the need for regularity in schedules, in the organisation of the day is important for all of us, even more so for children. This has often resulted in a marked decline in interest and motivation towards school activities. Even before the pandemic, it was not unusual for a parent to have to harass a child who did not want to do their homework, but during the distance learning (and also later, with the resumption of school in attendance, as we shall see), the children were even more difficult to deal with at school. We have to consider that the sense of belonging to the class, the relationships between children and teachers, the active involvement in school life, the emotional and communicative dimensions strongly influence motivation. Disinterest, apathy, and rejection of school are reactions that we can expect from children, who have had such important parts of their lives taken away from them.

Learning takes place 'together' and is all the more fruitful the more the children feel they belong to a learning community and get along well with the other protagonists in the school context (classmates and teachers): learning notions in isolation actually decreases performance. Distance learning overwhelmed not only the children, but also the parents. During the lockdown, we experienced not only the difficulty of reconciling family life with work, but also the need to support the younger children in lessons and, in the case of several children, perhaps even manage conflicts between siblings, competing to occupy the room in the house best served by Wi-Fi or to use the only computer available. In fact, electronic devices have become the only foothold to stay somehow connected to the outside world, at a time when social spaces, sports centres, and in some cases even public gardens, were 'off limits' to children.

### **3.3 The use of devices**

The implementation of distance learning by the schools, as we have seen, has greatly expanded the commitment and involvement of families in school activities. From one day to the next, parents had to deal with organising the necessary spaces and tools (computer or other device, in-

ternet connection, ...), and using unfamiliar or, for many, completely unfamiliar devices and modes, educational technologies, and virtual noticeboards. If we think back to the first months of the lockdown, we certainly remember our first time in front of the many different platforms used for sharing educational material, the need to register the children on these platforms and explain to them how to log in, download the material, scan the homework and upload it directly to the platform or send it by email to the teachers... How many messages on the parents' groups asking for help with all these aspects and how many videos, memes and messages joking about the new methods and the new tasks of parents in the face of distance learning! A source of stress and discomfort for many parents, especially those who were less familiar with these tools and computer language.

In addition to the memories of our difficulties, of our feeling overwhelmed by the demands related to distance learning, research has also highlighted the high level of stress and discomfort that families felt, particularly in situations characterised by low technological knowledge, limited availability of devices and little space in the home. On the other hand, the various devices were, during the lockdown months, the only means of contact with the world outside the family and allowed the children to maintain their relationship with school and their classmates, and us adults to continue to cultivate forms of sociability and sharing (albeit virtual) with friends and relatives. Quite common, in fact, were appointments on online platforms for a virtual snack (or an aperitif for adults) or to celebrate birthdays or other occasions with someone far away from us. The interruption of our daily routines and commitments outside the home due to the pandemic has led us, as a direct and inevitable consequence, to resort more to the use of devices, opening up our world, and even more so that of our children, to a virtual dimension.

In the lockdown period, in fact, our children (also at the request of us parents and society) were hyper-connected to serve different purposes: to get information and for their education (they had to follow school lessons and, for those who attended them, also extracurricular meetings, such as language and music courses, etc.), to allow socialisation and to enable them to make use of the Internet, and to make the most of the Internet,

for socialising and maintaining human relations and relationships (greeting distant relatives, chatting with friends) and for leisure (playing alone or online in the company of friends or other playmates). For all these aspects, the virtual world has proved to be really useful in the pandemic as it has allowed children (but also us parents) to continue with many activities interrupted by the lockdown. It is important, however, today not to continue to exclusively promote the use of the virtual, so as not to run the risk of raising hyper-connected generations, with children who withdraw and shut themselves up exclusively in this parallel world, making it prevail over concrete, real activities, being physically close to other people, face-to-face relations with friends, playing sports, educational and school activities carried out in classrooms, various cultural, artistic and sporting leisure activities, thus renouncing exploring, investing in, and therefore living in, the real world.

As parents, we must teach our children to use devices correctly and safely, remembering that they are neither dangerous and evil monsters to stay away from, nor safe places to leave children alone, but they are tools that can be useful and functional if used appropriately. It is crucial, therefore, that parents support children in the use of different devices. Children must be followed, listened to, welcomed, informed, trained, and supported in the knowledge and use of the devices so that they learn to make appropriate use of these tools and that this virtual reality does not become a refuge for them. The pandemic has made more salient a situation that, however, was already present before. Entering primary school is often a time of encounter (not for everyone a first encounter) with technology. At this age (and increasingly earlier), children discover that the online world opens up endless possibilities for them. Children are curious by nature and, of course, their curiosity opens up to this new world, but their ability to understand what online means, how and who can interact with them online or can post content is still limited. They do not have sufficient tools and knowledge to assess whether content, words, images, activities are appropriate for them or not. This is why the role of parents as guides and guardians is crucial.

It is not only a matter of limiting the time they use devices or setting up a filter to restrict internet browsing or the viewing of certain content, but



also (and above all) of educating children in the use of digital technology, working alongside them, listening to their doubts, their questions, monitoring the way they use technology and explaining to them both the benefits and the risks of using devices so as to minimise the risks and maximise the opportunities. So, what can we do as parents? One important means that we must always use is speech, dialogue: we must never forget to talk to our children about what is appropriate for their age and explain to them the reasons why, for example, a certain game or application is not suitable for them. In this dialogue it is important to listen to their point of view, to recognise the importance of technology for them, to involve them in the discourse so that they can feel an active part of the decision-making process and can slowly develop greater awareness and autonomy of judgement. These moments become excellent opportunities to foster the development of their critical thinking skills and their sense of responsibility. We can talk about their well-being and how online activities may affect it (for example, effects on sleep, concentration and learning, emotions and feelings), and we can stimulate them to engage in other activities that do not involve the mediation of a screen (a sport, a walk with friends, a manual and creative activity, a bike ride or a playground, for example). Agree with them on a daily time of use that is appropriate for their age.

Once the rules have been set, explained and agreed upon (time of use, how to use the devices, etc.), it is essential to consistently maintain our position; this means, for example, that when our son/daughter asks us to download an application (or game) that is not appropriate for their age because their friend is using it, we must stand firm in our position and say no, without giving in to their request, but explaining why we say no. We, as parents, must also be aware of the dangers present online, be informed (and trained) about the safety and risks of sharing information online and monitor children's online behaviour in this regard as well (what information is appropriate to share and what is not, with whom they communicate online...). Last but not least, let us not forget that children observe us and learn from what we do, not only from what we say: the way we use devices becomes a message that will influence our children's choices and behaviour.



### 3.4 Returning to school: re-experiencing social relations

Once the peak of the emergency was over, with the return to school, children had to adapt to new rules and restrictions: in many countries of the world, children were deprived of the possibility of sharing social moments such as recess, communal meals, and school trips. The spacing between desks has not made it possible to restore the sense of intimacy and dialogue that is typically established between classmates, and masks have severely impoverished communication and emotional exchange, partially concealing the facial expression of faces. Anti-covid rules also often limited the possibility of exchanging and sharing materials and games, and consequently the children had less opportunity to play together and cooperate in group work.

Finally, in moments of despair or anxiety, it was not possible to be reassured and comforted by hugs and physical contact from friends or teachers. In short, the children often felt lonely, even if in the midst of others. Added to this is the climate of suspicion and fear of others that the pandemic has somehow sown. How many homes have heard comments like these: 'One of my classmates coughed today and I immediately moved

away, because he might have covid'; 'One of my classmates didn't come to school today because she is sick and I spoke to her yesterday: am I sick?'; 'We can't invite my friends home, because if we do, they will bring the virus'. Adults - parents and teachers - have fed, with their recommendations (obviously made for good) a representation of the other as dangerous: 'don't get too close to your friends'; 'always keep your mask on because you might get infected', and so on. Even the mass media, often using very incisive slogans, emphasised the need to protect oneself by keeping away from others. In this climate, in which 'being together' and 'being in a group' have become synonymous with danger, establishing, and cultivating friendships (which is a fundamental developmental task at this age) has been quite a challenge for our children. In particular, those who faced the transition from one cycle of studies to another experienced greater difficulties in settling in and building relationships with new teachers and classmates. The children who finished kindergarten or primary school in the pandemic period did not have the opportunity to close this journey with a moment of celebration, a farewell to teachers and classmates. No rite of passage, for them and their parents, that could mark this moment and underline, in a symbolic way, this transition that leads them to see themselves as older. This is an important stage in the children's growth that represents, at the same time, a change, a discontinuity within, however, an evolutionary path of identity and self-image that remains unified. If we reflect on how difficult and disorienting these experiences were, we can more easily understand the problematic behaviour that children can exhibit today: difficulties in relating to peers, aggressive or withdrawn behaviour, fear of approaching new environments and people are in some ways 'natural' reactions to the atypical and in some ways traumatic situation they have experienced. As a result, it is more difficult for a positive classroom climate to be established in which children respect each other's point of view, are empathetic, know how to collaborate, feel understood, welcomed, and develop a reassuring sense of belonging to the class group. Let us remember that in a place where one feels good (with oneself and with others), one learns more easily: positive emotions facilitate and nurture learning. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. We must therefore expect that tiring interpersonal relation-

ships negatively affect academic performance. It is important to bear in mind that these two aspects are closely interconnected: we cannot expect to help our son/daughter to improve at school, if we do not take care of his/ her friendship relationships, for example, by creating opportunities to meet, listening to any fears he/ she may have about relationships with peers, helping them to put their difficulties into words, supporting them in rediscovering the 'good taste' of being with others.

### **3.5 Returning to school: emotional problems and academic achievement**

The children, returning to school, brought with them a very heavy emotional burden. It is as if, along with books and exercise books, they had also crammed a tangle of negative emotions into their schoolbags, which acted as a brake on their progress and made the achievement of good results more critical. As we have already pointed out, the pandemic has caused an increase in anxiety and stress levels: these also negatively affect learning. Research data show that children have increased difficulties in their ability to concentrate, memorise and maintain attention for long periods, as well as some problematic behaviour, indicative of increased difficulty in regulating emotions.

All this was associated with a significant deterioration in academic performance. Emotions in fact influence the thinking resources that are fundamental for learning: attention, comprehension, memory, perception. Pleasant emotions favour the approach to study, are allies of intuition, creativity, reasoning. The opposite happens in the case of unpleasant emotions: let us imagine a child who, during a test, is afraid of failing: their mind will be invaded by thoughts such as 'I am not capable; I will fail; I will get a bad grade', which take away space from the possibility of reasoning and achieving the objective. This type of anxiety, called performance anxiety, absorbs working memory resources, that is, the type of memory that allows us to keep in mind information and data necessary to solve a problem or perform a cognitive task. For example, a child who has studied hard, but is terrified of making a mistake and making a bad impression in front of the class, may not even understand the teacher's question or may not remember information that he or she knows (and may remember it after the end of the question or test, when the tension suddenly subsides and stops

"holding in check" the mind, which is now free to access the stored information). Unfortunately, in this situation, it is easy for the child's fears of getting a bad grade to become a reality and thus confirm their idea of failing. This type of anxiety thus reduces the child's ability to fulfil their potential and improve their results and affects the child's self-image. Taking into account all the hardships that children have gone through and are going through, how can we help them (re)find the pleasure of learning?

### **3.6 Supporting motivation and enjoyment of learning**

One of the key words that could guide us in supporting our children in their schooling is 'confidence'. In order for children to believe that they can succeed at school (as in other areas too!), we adults must be the first to believe in them. If the child feels that we have faith in their possibilities, that we are certain that they will be able to face difficulties with courage, that they will be able to learn from their mistakes and will achieve their goals, this conviction of ours will turn into 'petrol' available for their 'journey'. Children are mirrored in our eyes and build their self-image largely on the basis of how we see them. The trust we have in them is almost magically transformed into the trust they place in themselves.

When we talk about self-image, we have to refer to two important and interconnected concepts: self-esteem, which is the set of evaluative judgements that each person makes of themselves, and self-efficacy, which is the perception that each person has of the possibility of achieving success in a given task, that is, the sense of competence, of being able to do it. Research in many countries around the world shows that self-esteem declines during school age.

Young pre-school children, when judging themselves, often tend to overestimate their positive aspects and emphasise them (it is not uncommon to hear a child say: 'I can jump as high as the tenth floor'; or 'I am as strong as Superman'), whereas as they get older, they begin to evaluate their own abilities more realistically and learn to compare themselves to their peers. As parents, we can be taken aback by the fact that our previously self-confident child suddenly questions himself or herself and tends to devalue himself or herself: 'I don't understand anything about maths'; 'I'm the ugliest kid in the class', etc. With the start of school, the children are called upon to 'produce', to achieve predetermined goals, they are subject to judgement.

All this can lead to a validation of their own abilities, but also to painful feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. At school, the role of self-efficacy is also particularly significant, because children are constantly confronted with challenging experiences.

Let us imagine an 8–9-year-old child struggling with the study of a complicated science subject. If they have a good level of self-efficacy, and consequently thinks that it is a task within their reach, their approach to studying will be permeated by pleasant feelings, such as curiosity, satisfaction, pride. If, on the other hand, he experiences learning that subject as an obstacle too big for them, due to a reduced perception of self-efficacy, will probably postpone or avoid working on it, in order to avoid the negative emotions (anxiety, fear of failure, anger) that are associated with the task. As in a self-fulfilling prophecy, children who feel they cannot succeed at school will immediately become discouraged when faced with obstacles and will work less hard, and this obviously decreases their chances of good results. Poor results, in turn, further reinforce their negative self-image. In fact, children often believe that their difficulties are due to an unchangeable and stable cause ('I'm stupid, I'll never manage'; or 'I'm not good at it, I don't understand anything').

However, we can help them to change their interpretation of the situation by referring to something they can control and modify, such as their commitment, study method, way of organising themselves, note-taking, and so on. In this way we increase their sense of mastery and control over the situation, and act to increase their self-efficacy and motivation ('if I change something in my approach to studying, I can improve my results and succeed in my goals'). When a bad grade arrives, it is obvious that our first instinct is to intervene in some way. For example, we might be tempted to say: 'You got a failing grade, so you won't watch television for a week'. Punishment, however, could be counterproductive, because we would be reinforcing the equation school=angry, or school=anxiety.

If the child experiences an emotion while studying, every time they find the stored information in their memory, they will also reactivate the emotion. If the child studies serenely, the message will be imprinted in their memory: 'This feels good, do it again'. If, on the other hand, while studying they are invaded by stress, fear and boredom, the mind will store this message: 'This makes you feel bad, don't do it again'. When a bad grade arrives, therefore,

rather than resorting to frustrating punishments, which certainly do not fuel the desire to study, it is better to decide together with the child on a strategy to remedy the bad grade.

One could also decide to limit the time spent watching television. However, this must be a rational and planned choice, and not one dictated by our momentary nervousness; a choice possibly negotiated with the child, so that he or she understands that we can be allies against a bad grade instead of waging war against each other. And when a good grade comes instead?

Let us train ourselves to value and praise commitment and perseverance ("You tried hard, and you did it!") and not the result itself. Complimenting the child with general expressions that do not focus on what they have done ("You are really good!"; "What a clever child!") may be counterproductive because, when they fails and brings home an unsatisfactory grade, the child may feel that they have failed our expectations, or that they are not as smart as they thought they were, with obvious negative effects on their self-esteem. Let us therefore try to break down the idea that it is grades that define the value of children. Moreover, let us also remember that there are many types of intelligence (studies speak of 'multiple intelligences') and not all of them find in school the ideal territory to manifest themselves and be valued. Alongside logical-mathematical intelligence and linguistic-verbal intelligence, which make life easier at school, children who are more gifted in bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, or in visual-spatial intelligence, or in musical intelligence (and so on), will make the most of their talents in other areas. Finally, we must emphasise that we can cultivate good self-esteem and self-efficacy in our children, not only when they are busy with school-books, but on a daily basis, at home, taking advantage of the many opportunities that present themselves to us. Every time we let our son/daughter experiment in small challenges (keeping his/ her things in order, helping us prepare dinner or in small household chores) and show trust in them, we help them to believe in themselves. And even when they make big messes, we should try to refrain from making overly critical judgments or negative comments ("there you go, you're doing it wrong"; "you don't know how to do it"; "you're not good at this") and also try not to replace them ("leave it: I'll do it, we'll finish it quicker"): we value their small progress and give them time to improve their skills, so as to increase their self-confidence.





## Part 4

# Families with pre-teens and adolescents (11-18)

### 4.1 Adolescents and parents:

It is not true that in adolescence parents lose their importance. All research tells us that for adolescents, parents remain an important reference to turn to especially for important life choices. Keeping this in mind means not giving up on your educational role even if your children are getting older.

### 4.2 How can parents guide their children towards autonomy?

Parents' task is to accompany their children in the process of acquiring more and more autonomy. Adolescent children must be increasingly able to manage the various aspects of their lives independently (school, friends, partners, household tasks, values, life plans). The acquisition of autonomy is a long and gradual process. The increasing autonomy of children does not equate to a break in their relationship with their parents; on the contrary, adolescents who are capable of exercising their autonomy with responsibility usually have parents who trust them and transmit their own sense of trust to them. For example, autonomy in movement of a 15-year-old who at the same time requires proximity to his parents for help with respect to a problematic situation he is experiencing at school. Pandemic counter measures have strongly threatened in particular this aspect so crucial to the growth of boys and girls. At a time of gradually gaining spaces of autonomy, lock downs have led adolescents back to an exclusively domestic life, in continuous and exclusive relationship with family members. This has generated great stress and malaise in adolescents (and often in their parents as well).

### 4.3 The role of the conflict with parents

Generally, adolescents gain spaces of autonomy through negotiations with their parents (for example, "can I go out alone in the afternoon"; "can I go out alone in the evening?"; "can I go on a few days' vacation with

friends?"; etc.). Sometimes these negotiations generate conflict; in fact, parents may consider their child's requests inappropriate for their age ("you are too young for this") or their level of maturity ("you are not yet ready to do this on your own").

Children's adolescence is generally the period in the family life cycle when conflict is greatest. Through conflict, children often make important autonomy gains. So experiencing conflict in the family can contribute to development but, conversely, it can hinder growth if conflicts are too frequent (for example, a girl says, "In my house we fight over everything") and generate destructive emotional escalation for the participants (for example, a boy says, "When I fight with my parents we insult each other"; "When I fight with my father we end up breaking objects out of anger"; "If I fight with my parents we end up using our hands"). Being able to manage conflict with teenagers is a tough task for parents (teens can be exhausting!) but essential to help them grow and learn in turn that conflict with others can be managed while always maintaining mutual respect (for example, conflict dialogue between parent and child marked by mutual respect).

#### **4.4 The role of communication with parents: Parenting styles**

We have repeatedly stressed the centrality of dialogue between parents and children as the main educational tool.

On its own, however, it is not enough; to help children grow up, it is also necessary to clearly establish what rules they should follow for life inside and outside the home (for example, for household activities, school commitments, use of leisure time, return time). We speak of an authoritative educational style when parents know how to well combine dialogue and demands for compliance with rules. In this case, parents use reason rather than imposition to enforce the rules they demand compliance with. It is not only useless but also harmful to put rules in place and not enforce them.

This creates disorientation in children and encourages transgressive conduct. It is necessary to think carefully about which rules are really important, state them to the children clearly explaining the reason for them, and then demand compliance. Parents can be true managers of their ado-

lescent children's lives. Adolescents are seeking autonomy and self-actualization; parents can support them on this journey by helping them identify their growth goals, select the information they need, weigh the life choices they make, and take on age-appropriate responsibilities (for example, homework, chores, bedtime, and so on).

#### **4.5 Through Puberty: body and psychological changes**

With the entry into adolescence, obvious bodily changes related to pubertal development emerge, first among girls and then among boys. Such changes are often associated with strong emotions: surprise and fear being the most frequent. Throughout the life cycle, the body is the biological reference of our identity, so the sudden and sometimes overwhelming changes of puberty put adolescents in crisis with respect to their own identity.

During this period, it is difficult for them to answer the question: who am I? In addition, the physical changes of puberty are generally not harmonious, so preadolescents see more changes in body parts than others and often fear that they are not "normal" (for example, "my feet are too long"; "my nose is too pronounced"; "my head is too big compared to my body"). During the pandemic, the focus of many adolescents (especially females) on their bodies has greatly increased, and with it, feelings of anxiety and worry have also increased. During the pandemic, adolescents spent a lot of time in online interactions through various forms of video calls, this mode of exchange generally involves mirroring themselves in the video on which the other party is also seen. It has been noted that during video calls, interlocutors spend more time observing themselves than they do watching the person they are talking to. This mode of communication does not allow the exchange of glances between the interlocutors and favours the concentration of each person's attention on their own physical appearance. Excessive focus on the self, coupled with the inability to meet friends with face-to-face exchanges, may have increased concerns about pubertal development especially among females. In fact, they spent more time on video calls than males, who used the Internet predominantly for online games, here the focus is more on the game rather than on one's own image.

## 4.6 Parents facing their children's puberty

Parents also often experience strong and mixed emotions when faced with the sudden changes, physical and psychological, of their adolescent children. No one knows at the outset what adult body the ongoing changes will lead to, and so it can happen that children's concerns about their own physical development become parents' concerns as well. This is the case of a 17-year-old boy who is very focused on his nose, which he thinks is weirdly shaped and too big in relation to his face. This preoccupation becomes a daily thought that distracts the teenager even from his normal school and recreational activities. His parents, seeing him so sad and worried, go along with his request for cosmetic surgery. They think in this way they will restore peace of mind to their son. Keeping the dialogue between parents and children open is important in order to know what may be worrying the children while being careful not to get caught up in the bursting emotions of the children so as to maintain the lucidity necessary to be able to help them deal with their concerns. Keeping a clear head means being willing to talk to children about their worries, placing them in the often not easy growth paths of adolescents. Neither does denying or minimising their states of mind serve to help them resolve them, as is the case with a 14-year-old girl who is very worried about her weight, she sees herself as fat. When she mentions this concern of hers to her parents, they smile and tell her that it is only her fantasy! By doing so, they reject his daughter's anxiety referring to her being overweight and deny the problem by stating that it does not exist and that they are all pure fantasies.

To cope with these difficulties of children, it is important to:

- know the changes associated with puberty and the worries that these can often generate in adolescence
- devote time and attention to dialogue with their children, taking what they say seriously and letting them express themselves freely; this is already a first way of helping them
- foster friendships with boys and girls of their own age
- remember that teenagers may appear to be adults because of the maturity of their physique, but this does not correspond to maturity on a cognitive and emotional level, which takes longer



#### **4.7 The new thinking skills of adolescents**

In adolescence thinking becomes abstract, teens learn to make hypothetical-deductive reasoning and have a lot of fun exercising it (for example, abstract reasoning: "If humans did not exist, the earth would still exist, but it would be different ...."). Thanks to this new thinking skill, adolescents broaden their temporal perspectives and gradually imagine more and more precisely what adults they will be: what work they will do, how they will set up their lives. Learning to think in an abstract form makes adolescents much more like adults and more able to sustain an always equal confrontation with them. Parents become aware that their children demand explanations for the rules they have to follow and sometimes challenge them vigorously. Teenagers experience that they are much more powerful with their thinking than they were able to be a few years earlier, and this makes them feel at the center of their world. Until around

age 16-17, boys and girls are very self-centered. (Ex. of phrases that almost every parent of teenager has said to their child: "In this house there is only you!"; "You think only of yourself"; "You are not the navel of the world"; "This house is not a hotel").

Social media have helped amplify this feature of adolescent thinking. The social media most used by adolescents (for example, Tik Tok and Instagram) emphasize adolescent bodies. Thus, the investment in one's body image is even more exaggerated. Many teenagers are constantly showing off on social media, spending a lot of time and energy on such displays, living as if they constantly have an audience to perform in front of. So, it is harder for today's parents to help their children reduce their egocentrism.

The lockdowns and massive use of the internet made by kids during the pandemic has fostered an increase in egocentrism, particularly in relation to the use of social media (for example, video calls in which the interlocutors in the screen look more at themselves than at each other; the lack of the exchange of glances fosters a focus on self).

#### **4.8 Changes in Identity**

Changes in body and thinking underlie adolescents' redefinition of self. Starting at age 12-13, boys and girls begin to restructure their identity. It takes many years to achieve an adult identity.

This is a very demanding and emotionally charged process of physical and psychological change.

Usually, teens experiment with different ways to show that they are growing up: clothing and hairstyle, behaviours such as drinking and smoking, commitment to personal training, choice of friends and romantic partners.

#### **4.9 How can parents help adolescents' Identity development?**

Parents have to cope with their ideal child, which often does not correspond to their real child. Recognizing in their children their qualities and characteristics is essential to accompany them in self-discovery.

Central to this is dialogue on issues concerning the future, life plans starting with the child's personal characteristics.

It is through dialogue that parents help their children cultivate their

dreams and recognize which of these can become life projects to which they can commit. For example, a 13-year-old girl tells her mother that she wants to be a dancer.

The mother listens to her and asks her what she wants to do to realise this, the daughter replies that she has to think about it, for now she watches many videos on TikTok. This is an example of a dream that the teenager is not yet clear on how to realise.

During the lockdown periods, many teenagers also nurtured their dreams through the use of the Internet, exploring many possibilities for personal fulfilment online. Having overcome the times of severe restrictions due to the pandemic, teenagers are now coming to terms with the real possibilities of realising their dreams. Some dreams are blurred, others need to be translated into projects they can commit to. It is also the task of parents to accompany their children on the path that translates dreams into projects, step by step by focusing on personal commitment. In the example above, the mother may suggest to her daughter that she enrolls in a dance school, thus better understanding whether that activity is for her.

#### **4.10 And about sex education?**

Among the topics of dialogue between parents and adolescent children must be sexuality.

Be careful not to talk about sex only in terms of risk or problem. Sexual experiences are a normal aspect of adolescence and then adult life. Helping children think of sexuality as an important, beautiful, and exclusive aspect of intimate romantic relationships is crucial to giving importance to this dimension of life.

Many parents do not talk about sex with their children, and it is usually the mothers who talk about it with their children, both boys and girls. It should be known that children who can talk about sexuality with their parents are less involved in risky sexuality, use contraceptive methods more frequently and experience sexuality more peacefully.

During the pandemic, the use of online pornography by adolescents increased. Many of them stated that they consulted pornographic sites to increase their knowledge about sex. The sexuality understood through pornographic sites is distorted, unrealistic and often characterised by pre-

varication. In view of this, dialogue between adolescents and parents on issues related to sexuality is even more important. To help adolescents deal with sexuality, it is important to:

- know that sex is usually a very interesting but at the same time embarrassing topic for teenagers to discuss with their parents
- devote time and attention to dialogue with adolescents, taking what they say seriously and letting them express themselves freely; this is already a first way of helping them
- do not judge with either words or 'the look'
- do not talk about sex only as a risk
- remember that the restrictions due to the pandemic may have made adolescents more insecure and less used to dealing with peers, especially with respect to intimate relationships

#### **4.11 Adolescents and peers**

In adolescence, the role of peers takes on central importance to the well-being of boys and girls. Belonging to a group of friends and having a good best friend usually makes teenagers happier. However, there are also adolescents who like to be alone and perform activities on their own. Restrictions related to the pandemic have reduced and often cancelled teens' opportunities to hang out with their friends. This has often been experienced with great discomfort and has sometimes fostered social isolation. Today, many adolescents struggle to resume face-to-face relationships with peers. For some, staying locked in their rooms and meeting others through social and video games is reassuring and less tiring than getting involved in face-to-face experiences. Many parents are concerned about their children's isolation. Sometimes it is necessary to seek professional help.

#### **4.12 Adolescents at school: what family role?**

Together with the family, school constitutes one of the main contexts of adolescent development. The importance that boys and girls attach to school is closely related to the importance attached to school by parents. Parental monitoring can reduce school-related problems and increase self-responsibility. In addition, parental involvement in their children's learning promote adolescents' motivation and engagement.



### 4.13 School disengagement

Distance learning in the pandemic years has fostered adolescents' estrangement from school. In pandemic period, learning, relationships with teachers and peers experienced through PC have reduced adolescents' engagement in all school-related activities and fostered school dropout. When adolescents leave high school before graduating, they approach life with important deficiencies that compromise their economic and social well-being. Some suggestions to promote positive student outcomes:

- Encourage adolescents to learn new knowledge, emphasize the importance of learning and the school experience
- Be involved: exhort children to tell how they feel in class and how they experience relationships with classmates
- If the adolescent has problems with organizing schoolwork and homework, help them plan activities to be done according to due dates
- Support children autonomy in learning and self-regulation processes, help them identify goals appropriate to their developmental level
- Help children experience a school failure nonetheless as an opportunity for learning and further engagement, rather than an exclusively negative experience
- Be positive. Let your children that you know they can do well and overcome difficulties
- Be sensitive to your children's unique characteristics: each adolescent is different

### 4.14 Adolescents and risk

Adolescents may engage in risky behaviours to experience new emotions, prove themselves as adults, transgress rules, and establish bonds with other deviant peers.

In particular, adolescents' involvement in cigarette smoking and alcohol use increased during the pandemic period. This increase in risk involvement is most likely associated with stress caused by isolation and is strongly associated with increased use of social media. During the pandemic, adolescents generally experienced a major lowering of life satisfaction.

To counter an adolescent child's involvement in risk, it is important first to

notice what is going on. Therefore, attention should be paid to children's behaviours in order to identify any early signs of risky behaviour (for example, catching the smell of cigarettes on clothing or observing signs of alcohol impairment) and be willing to talk to them about it.

Some suggestions:

- Know what the child does when the parents are not supervising him (when he is away from home but also when he is alone in his bedroom). Parents can use three ways for this: a) self-disclosure by children b) asking questions and when children don't comply, c) snooping.
- Do not ignore signs of involvement in psychoactive substance use (for example, excessive use of money; smoking odor; alcohol impairment, etc.)
- Address the problem through dialogue with the child, trying to understand the reasons for the problem
- Explicitly disapprove of the conduct while maintaining an attitude of understanding
- Consider seeking help from a professional without feeling inadequate parenting

#### **4.15 Depression in adolescence**

The prevalence of depressive feelings among adolescents has been increasing for some years now; the pandemic and associated restrictions have further increased this dimension of risk. More females are exposed to more depressive feelings than males, particularly when they have high levels of empathy but poor ability to manage the emotions they feel. Females tend to have a more negative mood and are more concerned about self-image (especially in reference to the body). The role of adults, through dialogue and emotional closeness, is critical in helping adolescents manage their emotions.

Some suggestions:

- Remember that the mood of parents affects the mood of children
- Emotional support is central and is achieved through dialogue and gestures of affection (a caress, a hug, a genuine smile, etc.)
- Always leave space open for dialogue
- Try to persuade the child to obtain professional help and do not abandon them after professional help has commenced



## 5. Glossary

**Burnout:** “physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion accompanied by decreased motivation, lowered performance, and negative attitudes toward oneself and others. It results from performing at a high level until stress and tension, especially from extreme and prolonged physical or mental exertion or an overburdening workload, take their toll.” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023)

**Emotional Competence:** “set of abilities that allow a person to recognize, understand and coherently respond to others’ emotions and regulate one’s own emotions.” (Albanese, 2008)

**Empathy:** “understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one’s own, or vicariously experiencing that person’s feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Empathy does not, of itself, entail motivation to be of assistance, although it may turn into sympathy or personal distress, which may result in action.” (APA, 2023)

**Mentalization:** “the ability to understand one’s own and others’ mental states, thereby comprehending one’s own and others’ intentions and affects.” (APA, 2023)

**Regressions:** “a return to a prior, lower state of cognitive, emotional, or behavioral functioning. [...] An individual may revert to immature behavior or to an earlier stage of psychosexual development when threatened with overwhelming external problems or internal conflicts.” (APA, 2023)

**Resilience:** “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.” (APA, 2023)

**Secure Base:** “a place of safety, represented by an attachment figure (e.g., a parent), that an infant uses as a base from which to explore a novel environment. The infant often returns or looks back to the parent before continuing to explore.” (APA, 2023)

**Self-Efficacy:** “an individual’s subjective perception of their capability to perform in each setting or to attain desired results.” (APA, 2023)

**Self-Esteem:** “the degree to which the qualities and characteristics contained in one’s self-concept are perceived to be positive, across life in gen-

eral and its various contexts. Self-esteem develops through individual, familial, and social variables” (ISS, 2023). It is based on one’s way of being and in the feedback received about it from role models, family members, or people outside the family context.

**Separation Anxiety:** “the normal apprehension experienced by a young child when away (or facing the prospect of being away) from the person or people to whom he or she is attached (particularly parents). Separation anxiety is most active between 6 and 10 months of age. Separation from loved ones in later years may elicit similar anxiety.” (APA, 2023)

**Stress:** “The psychological and physiological response that the organism enacts when faced with tasks, hardships or life events evaluated as excessive or dangerous. The feeling of a stressful situation is of strong mental and emotional pressure” (Istituto Superiore di Sanità [ISS], 2023). It can be positive, functional (eustress) or negative, dysfunctional (distress).

### **References:**

- American Psychological Association (2023). APA Dictionary of Psychology. Available at <https://dictionary.apa.org/>
- Istituto Superiore di Sanità (2023). La salute dalla A alla Z. Available at <https://www.issalute.it/index.php/la-salute-dalla-a-alla-z>
- Albanese, O. (2008). Competenza Emotiva Tra Psicologia Ed Educazione. Franco Angeli.







## **PART 3 – Additional resources**


The following is a curated list of documents, guides, tools, recommendations, tips, and tricks that expand on the themes of this booklet. They are sorted by target (families and professionals) and language. If you want to know more, please feel free to explore the contents of this list either by copying the links, searching for the site on search engines or scanning the relevant QR code, which will take you directly to the resource.

## Resources for families


### ■ Multiple languages



The following resources are available in multiple languages. Please check on the website whether your spoken language is available.

Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
Eurofamnet	COVID-19: 24/7 PLAYFUL PARENTING	Evidence-based playful parenting tips available in more than 100 languages	<a href="https://www.covid19parenting.com/#/home">https://www.covid19parenting.com/#/home</a>	
UNICEF	Parenting tips	Expert tips to help families deal with pandemic parenting challenges	<a href="https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19-parenting-tips">https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19-parenting-tips</a>	
Network for the Rights of the Child	Stress management in the coronavirus period	Resources with activities and information, for children, teenagers, and parents, to handle stress and difficult situations during COVID-19 or pandemics	<a href="https://ddp.gr/useful-material-for-coronavirus/">https://ddp.gr/useful-material-for-coronavirus/</a>	
■ English	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
Save the Children	A guide to building healthy parent - child relationships	Parenting and learning guide for parents for the creation of positive relationships with children	<a href="https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/6182.pdf">https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/6182.pdf</a>	





Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
UNICEF	UNICEF Parenting	Parenting tips through videos, articles, and trainings for the effective communication of parent with children (babies, teenagers) in different topics	<a href="https://www.unicef.org/parenting/">https://www.unicef.org/parenting/</a>	
Save the Children	A guide to building healthy parent - child relationships	Parenting and learning guide for parents for the creation of positive relationships with children	<a href="https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/6182.pdf/">https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/6182.pdf/</a>	
Association Coface	Skills4Parents Hub	The Skills4Parents Hub is an online platform which hosts five Learning Packages for parents which include articles, case studies, videos, digital resources, quizzes etc.	<a href="https://hub.skills4parents.eu/">https://hub.skills4parents.eu/</a>	
<b>■ Spanish</b>				
Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
Save the Children	APRENDER A EDUCAR: EL RETO DE LA EDUCACIÓN EN POSITIVO	The objective of the guide "Learning to educate: the challenge of positive education" is that mothers, fathers, and families live the experience of educating fully, positively, and free of any kind of violence. To understand what happens from an emotional point of view and that we have practical resources that help us to act in a respectful and positive way for everyone.	<a href="https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2021-07/aprender_a_educar_curso.pdf">https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2021-07/aprender_a_educar_curso.pdf</a>	



<p>Acción Familiar</p>	<p>MEJORANDO LA CONVIVENCIA</p>	<p>Adolescence is often accompanied by changes in behaviour and attitudes that require a certain transformation and rethinking of the relationship between parents and children. Children begin a process of disengagement from the family in search of new spaces for interpersonal relationships, and parents gradually grant increasing autonomy in decision making and responsibilities. The widespread belief that adolescence is a particularly difficult stage of life stems precisely from the fact that these changes are sufficiently intense to provoke situations of conflict and family tension.</p>	<p><a href="https://accionfamiliar.org/mejorando-la-convivencia-2022/">https://accionfamiliar.org/mejorando-la-convivencia-2022/</a></p>	
<p>Save the Children</p>	<p>CRECER SALUDABLE (MENTE)</p>	<p>Mental health problems in childhood and adolescence in the community of Madrid: before and after the pandemic. The debate generated about mental health, including that of children, is enormously positive in terms of destigmatizing the problem and promoting public action in this regard. However, we cannot forget that children living in poverty or at risk of social exclusion face a double penalty in terms of mental health. On the one hand, children and adolescents living in households with lower incomes or in a situation of unemployment have a higher incidence of mental health disorders. On the other hand, the most vulnerable children face greater obstacles in accessing quality specialized care, given the problems of access to the public system and the impossibility of defraying the costs of the private system.</p>	<p><a href="https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2022-04/Creceer_saludablemente_vComunidadMadrid.pdf">https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2022-04/Creceer_saludablemente_vComunidadMadrid.pdf</a></p>	




UNAF	ESTUDIO DE CONCILIACIÓN	Co-responsibility and reconciliation of work, personal and family life in Spain. Inequalities and transformations after COVID-19.	<a href="https://familiasenpositivo.org/system/files/unaf-estudio-de-conciliacion_vdig-ital.pdf">https://familiasenpositivo.org/system/files/unaf-estudio-de-conciliacion_vdig-ital.pdf</a>	
UNAF	PREVENCIÓN DE CONDUCTAS DE RIESGO EN ADOLESCENTES	Program to prevent risk behaviours in children and adolescents related to technology abuse, drug use, eating disorders, violent behaviour, school failure and sexuality.	<a href="https://unaf.org/prevencion-de-conductas-de-riesgo-en-adolescentes/">https://unaf.org/prevencion-de-conductas-de-riesgo-en-adolescentes/</a>	
ALDEAS INFANTILES	RECURSOS	Various resources from Aldeas Infantiles	<a href="https://educa.aldeasinfantiles.es/re-cursos-todos/">https://educa.aldeasinfantiles.es/re-cursos-todos/</a>	
<b>Portuguese</b>				
<b>Authors</b>		<b>Title</b>		<b>QR Code</b>
Maria Juliana Vieira Lima & Fernanda Gomes Lopes		COMO COMUNICAR ÀS CRIANÇAS A MORTE DE UM ENTE QUERIDO POR COVID-19?		
		This is a short guide for parents to advise them on how to communicate to their children that a loved-one has died from Covid-19		<a href="https://app.mhps.net/?get=359/como-comunicar-as-criancas-a-morte-de-um-ente-querido-por-covid19-pdf">https://app.mhps.net/?get=359/como-comunicar-as-criancas-a-morte-de-um-ente-querido-por-covid19-pdf</a>

Escola de Psicologia, Universidade do Minho	Adolescer em tempo Covid-19: GUIA DE BOAS PRÁTICAS PARA ADOLESCENTES EM DISTANCIAMENTO SOCIAL	This is a guide to help families with adolescents to better support them during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic	<a href="https://www.aecelheiros.pt/attachments/article/621/Adolescer%20em%20tempo%20COVID-19.pdf">https://www.aecelheiros.pt/attachments/article/621/Adolescer%20em%20tempo%20COVID-19.pdf</a>	
Universidade de Coimbra	COMO SORRIR EM TEMPOS DE ISOLAMENTO SOCIAL?	This is a guide addressed to students to support their mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also suggests a variety of activities	<a href="https://app.mhpsps.net/?get=359/manual-dos-estudantes.pdf">https://app.mhpsps.net/?get=359/manual-dos-estudantes.pdf</a>	
Portuguese Government	GUÍA DE RECURSOS SOBRE SMAPS DURANTE A COVID-19	This is a compilation of existing resources to support people with mental health during the Covid-19 crisis. It has a variety of materials addressed to different publics including children, adolescents, the elderly, migrants...	<a href="https://www.chpl.min-saude.pt/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2020/08/Guia-de-Recursos-sobre-saude-mental-e-apoio-psicossocial_covid-19.pdf">https://www.chpl.min-saude.pt/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2020/08/Guia-de-Recursos-sobre-saude-mental-e-apoio-psicossocial_covid-19.pdf</a>	
<b>■ French</b>				
<b>Authors</b>				
UMONS	Home Stress Home	Tool developed by researchers from the University of Mons in Belgium in response to the corona virus crisis. Briefly, the participants when visiting the website, can easily find: - information about Covid-19 and anxiety that can face children, teenagers and parents while in crisis; - an evaluation tool for anxiety by age; - a questionnaire (to do with a parent or alone) → the results give an idea of the level of anxiety that children/youth face and how to help them overcome this anxiety.	<a href="https://www.chpl.min-saude.pt/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2020/08/Guia-de-Recursos-sobre-saude-mental-e-apoio-psicossocial_covid-19.pdf">https://www.chpl.min-saude.pt/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2020/08/Guia-de-Recursos-sobre-saude-mental-e-apoio-psicossocial_covid-19.pdf</a>	<b>QR Code</b> 

■ Greek Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens School of educational sciences Department of Primary Education, Psychology laboratory	Psychosocial Support for children and adolescents Instructions for parents	Guidelines for parents to help them providing psychosocial support to children in times of crisis	<a href="https://blogs.sch.gr/pekesipeir/files/2018/11/Fylladio_gia_goneis.pdf">https://blogs.sch.gr/pekesipeir/files/2018/11/Fylladio_gia_goneis.pdf</a>	
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, School of Medicine, First Psychiatry Clinic	Guidelines for children and families for dealing with the COVID-19 restrictions	Guidelines for parents to help them providing psychosocial support to children in times of crisis and social isolation	<a href="https://eody.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/odigies_paidia.pdf">https://eody.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/odigies_paidia.pdf</a>	
Health Ministry	We stay home but... we stay physically active and eat healthily	Guidelines for remaining healthy during lockdown conditions, with chapters dedicated to children and teenagers	<a href="https://eody.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/covid19-askisi-diatrofi.pdf">https://eody.gov.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/covid19-askisi-diatrofi.pdf</a>	
Network for the Rights of the Child	Discussing with our children the changes brought by COVID-19 in our daily lives	Article on how to discuss with children, based on their age, the new realities brought by COVID-19, both informing and reassuring them	<a href="https://ddp.gr/syzitontas-meta-paidia-mas-gia-tis-allages/">https://ddp.gr/syzitontas-meta-paidia-mas-gia-tis-allages/</a>	



Network for the Rights of the Child	Discussing with our children the changes brought by COVID-19 in our daily lives	Article on how to discuss with children, based on their age, the new realities brought by COVID-19, both informing and reassuring them	<a href="https://ddp.gr/syzitontas-me-ta-paidia-mas-gia-tis-allages/">https://ddp.gr/syzitontas-me-ta-paidia-mas-gia-tis-allages/</a>	
The Smile of the Child	We stay home... keeping the family balance and peace	Article with tips for parents on how to face the lockdown as a family	<a href="https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/menoume-spiti-diatrontas-tin-olkogeneiaki-isorropia-kai-iremia/">https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/menoume-spiti-diatrontas-tin-olkogeneiaki-isorropia-kai-iremia/</a>	
The Smile of the Child	Talking about COVID-19 with the children: Useful tips for parents	Article on how to discuss with children, the new realities brought by COVID-19, both informing and reassuring them	<a href="https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/sizitontas-me-ta-paidia-gia-ton-koronoo-covid-19-chrismes-simvo-ules-pros-tous-goneis/">https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/sizitontas-me-ta-paidia-gia-ton-koronoo-covid-19-chrismes-simvo-ules-pros-tous-goneis/</a>	
The Smile of the Child	Before the bell rings: After covid, will they hang out with me?	Article on how to prepare children to go back to school in the new reality of COVID-19	<a href="https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/prin-chtipisei-to-koudouni-meta-ton-koronoo-tha-me-kanoun-parea/">https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/prin-chtipisei-to-koudouni-meta-ton-koronoo-tha-me-kanoun-parea/</a>	
<b>■ Italian</b>				
<b>Authors</b>				
TAGES Onlus	The family in emergency: reflections on conflict resolution	Tips on how to deal with familial conflict	<a href="https://www.tagesonlus.org/2020/03/30/famiglia-confitti/">https://www.tagesonlus.org/2020/03/30/famiglia-confitti/</a>	
			<b>Link</b>	<b>QR Code</b>
			<b>Short Description</b>	
			<b>Title</b>	

Guida Psicologi	Children, adolescents, and families in time of emergency	Tips on how to deal with adaptation difficulties in times of emergency	<a href="https://www.guidapsicologi.it/articoli/bambini-adolescenti-e-famiglie-in-un-periodo-di-emergenza">https://www.guidapsicologi.it/articoli/bambini-adolescenti-e-famiglie-in-un-periodo-di-emergenza</a>	
Ministero della Salute	Consultori	Searchable list of family counselling centers, national list	<a href="https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/donna/consultoriDonna.jsp?lingua=italiano&amp;id=4524">https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/donna/consultoriDonna.jsp?lingua=italiano&amp;id=4524</a>	
Istituto Superiore di Sanità	COVID-19: Coping with stress at home and in the family	List of tips for managing stress in the COVID-19 pandemic	<a href="https://www.epicentro.iss.it/coronavirus/sars-cov-2-gestione-stress-ambito-domestico">https://www.epicentro.iss.it/coronavirus/sars-cov-2-gestione-stress-ambito-domestico</a>	
Unicef	Eight tips for parents to talk about conflict	Offer parents some suggestions for dealing with the emergency in Ukraine with their children	<a href="https://www.unicef.it/media/otto-consigli-per-i-genitori-per-sostenere-bambine-e-bambini-violenza-conflitto/">https://www.unicef.it/media/otto-consigli-per-i-genitori-per-sostenere-bambine-e-bambini-violenza-conflitto/</a>	
Unicef	Climate change: six tips on how to talk to children about it	Some suggestions on how to have a conversation with children about climate change, without ignoring the reality and scale of the problem.	<a href="https://www.unicef.it/media/cambiamento-climatico-sei-consigli-su-come-parlarne-a-bambini-e-bambine/">https://www.unicef.it/media/cambiamento-climatico-sei-consigli-su-come-parlarne-a-bambini-e-bambine/</a>	


National Geographic	Eco-anxiety: how to help children face the fear of climate change	Suggestions on managing the fear of climate change in children	<a href="https://www.nationalgeographic.it/famiglia/2021/04/eco-ansia-come-aiutare-i-bambini-ad-affrontare-la-paura-dei-cambiamenti-climatici">https://www.nationalgeographic.it/famiglia/2021/04/eco-ansia-come-aiutare-i-bambini-ad-affrontare-la-paura-dei-cambiamenti-climatici</a>	
Dipartimento per le politiche della Famiglia	Early childhood education and care services	Child benefit, birth allowance, birth premium, other economic contributions to families.	<a href="https://famiglia.governo.it/politiche-e-attivita/contributi-economici/">https://famiglia.governo.it/politiche-e-attivita/contributi-economici/</a>	
TAGES Onlus	The family in emergency: reflections on conflict resolution	Tips on how to deal with familial conflict	<a href="https://www.tagesonlus.org/2020/03/30/famiglia-conflict/">https://www.tagesonlus.org/2020/03/30/famiglia-conflict/</a>	
<p>■ Turkish</p> <p><b>Authors</b></p>				
ACEV (Mother Child Education Foundation)	The Mother Support Program	The Mother Support Program include trainings that increase mother's self-confidence and their effective role in their children's development. They also serve to provide children with supportive environment where the mother has an increased sensitivity for child development and hence an increased role of an educator in their children's lives.	<a href="https://www.acev.org/en/mother-support-program/">https://www.acev.org/en/mother-support-program/</a>	
			<b>Link</b>	<b>QR Code</b>

# Resources for professionals




## Multiple languages

Authors		Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
Equ iMundo (formally known as ProMundo)	Program P: A MANUAL FOR ENGAGING MEN IN FATHERHOOD, CARE-GIVING, AND MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH	Program P is a resource developed as part of the global MenCare campaign coordinated by Promundo and the Sonke Gender Justice Network. It identifies best practices on engaging men in maternal and child health, caregiving, and preventing violence against women and children, through the lens of gender equality. Through the main focus of Program P is to engage men via the public health sector, the manual also provides tools and resources for individuals and organizations that want to work more generally with men as caregivers and fathers to prevent violence against children and women and to promote gender equality. It was designed and developed by its authors for use by health workers, social activists, nonprofit organizations (NGOs), educators and other individuals and institutions that aim to promote men's involvement as caregivers as one of multiple strategies to promote maternal and child health, family well-being and gender equality.	<a href="https://www.equimundo.org/resources/program-p-a-manual-for-engaging-men-in-fatherhood-caregiving-and-maternal-and-child-health/">https://www.equimundo.org/resources/program-p-a-manual-for-engaging-men-in-fatherhood-caregiving-and-maternal-and-child-health/</a>		
Authors		Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education	Family Learning Works The Inquiry into Family Learning in England and Wales	Research on Family Learning Approaches and Activities	<a href="https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/files/es/downloads/53_NIACE_Family_learning_works_report.pdf">https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/files/es/downloads/53_NIACE_Family_learning_works_report.pdf</a>		





<p>UNICEF</p>	<p>The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting, and caring for children's mental health,</p>	<p>The report seeks to deepen knowledge and raise awareness of key issues affecting children and advocates for solutions that improve children's lives</p>	<p><a href="https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/reports/state-of-the-worlds-children-2021-on-my-mind">https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/reports/state-of-the-worlds-children-2021-on-my-mind</a></p>	
<p>Laure Bera, Mathilde Souchon, Audrey Ladsous, Vincent Colin, Jorge Lopez-Castroman</p>	<p>Emotional and Behavioral Impact of the COVID-19 Epidemic in Adolescents</p>	<p>This review of the literature aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown on teenagers' mental health. We distinguish two groups: adolescents who had already been diagnosed with a mental disorder and the general population of adolescents.</p>	<p><a href="https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35102536/">https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35102536/</a></p>	
<p>Konstantina Magklara, Helen Lazaratou, Anastasia Barabouni, Konstantinos Poulas, Konstantinos Farsalinos, Coronavirus Greece Research Group</p>	<p>Impact of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures on mental health of children and adolescents in Greece</p>	<p>Mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown measures are expected to be profound. The aim of the present study was to investigate the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on children's and adolescents' mental health in Greece.</p>	<p><a href="https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.18.20214643v1.full-text">https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.18.20214643v1.full-text</a></p>	
<p>Université Catholique de Louvain</p>	<p>"The cult of the child: a critical examination on parents, teachers and children"</p>	<p>The research "highlights a radical change in child representation" in our society.</p>	<p><a href="https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/3/141">https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/3/141</a></p>	

<p>European Commission</p>	<p>Governing quality Early Childhood Education and care in global crisis: first lessons learned from Covid-19 pandemic</p>	<p>This report explores the different ways in which European Union (EU) Member States (MS) have attempted to ensure high-quality ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) for children and families in the era of COVID-19. The rationale for the report builds on the Conclusions of the European Council concerning the fight against COVID-19 in education and training, which stipulate that Member States should share information and best practices and continue exchanging information about possible ways to adapt to this new situation at the level of education and training (Council of the European Union, 2020).</p>	<p><a href="https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f85b5bc8-e516-11eb-a1a5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en">https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f85b5bc8-e516-11eb-a1a5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en</a></p>	
<p>■ Spanish</p>				
<p>INSTITUCIÓN NACIONAL DE TECNOLOGÍAS EDUCATIVAS</p>	<p>EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR ONLINE LEARNING</p>	<p>This space offers information and access to different types of resources (didactic itineraries, educational videos, mathematics guides, curricular materials, ConectaTIC, good practices and recommendations, etc.), available for online use. It was launched in March 2020, on the occasion of the crisis caused by COVID-19 and has been growing and enriching over time.</p>	<p><a href="https://intef.es/recursos-educativos/recursos-para-el-aprendizaje-en-linea/">https://intef.es/recursos-educativos/recursos-para-el-aprendizaje-en-linea/</a></p>	

Familias en positivo	VARIOS	The Guide to interprofessional competencies in positive parenting proposes a structured commitment to transversality and aims to contribute to achieving good interprofessional training for working with children and families.	<p><a href="https://familiaspositivo.org/noticias/presentada-la-guia-de-competencias-interprofesionales-en-parentalidad-positiva">https://familiaspositivo.org/noticias/presentada-la-guia-de-competencias-interprofesionales-en-parentalidad-positiva</a></p> <p><a href="http://familiaspositivo.org/politicas-familiares-buenas-practicas-europa">http://familiaspositivo.org/politicas-familiares-buenas-practicas-europa</a></p> <p><a href="http://familiaspositivo.org/monograficos/guia-de-buenas-practicas-en-parentalidad-positiva-un-recurso-para-apoyar-la-practica">http://familiaspositivo.org/monograficos/guia-de-buenas-practicas-en-parentalidad-positiva-un-recurso-para-apoyar-la-practica</a></p>	
ALDEAS INFANTILES	RECURSOS	Various resources from Aldeas Infantiles	<a href="https://educa.aldeasinfantiles.es/recursos-todos/">https://educa.aldeasinfantiles.es/recursos-todos/</a>	
UNICEF	Protective Environments: Resources to facilitate the implementation of the Law for the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents from violence	Almost a year after the approval in June 2021 of the Organic Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Violence (LOPVI), UNICEF Spain presents the Protective Environments project, which includes a series of resources to contribute to the implementation of the law and the generation of protective environments for children and adolescents.	<a href="https://www.unicef.es/sites/unicef.es/files/communication/guia-ver-para-proteger.pdf">https://www.unicef.es/sites/unicef.es/files/communication/guia-ver-para-proteger.pdf</a>	





## ■ French

Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
Office National de l'Enfance	Pour un accompagnement des familles en situation de vulnérabilités psychosociales	This is a reference tool on the theme of support to parenthood intended for all professionals in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. It was co-designed with professionals from various sectors. The reference toolkit "For a thoughtful support of families" is envisaged as a tool inviting professionals to reflect. It contains scientific knowledge, principles of action, shared values, and concrete examples	<a href="https://www.one.be/fileadmin/user_upload/siteone/PRO/SOUPA/Accompagnement-des-familles-en-situation-vulnerabilites-psychosociales.pdf">https://www.one.be/fileadmin/user_upload/siteone/PRO/SOUPA/Accompagnement-des-familles-en-situation-vulnerabilites-psychosociales.pdf</a>	
Parentalité.be	Pour un accompagnement réflexif des familles	A public referential to help professionals support parents	<a href="https://parentalite.be/index.php?id=52">https://parentalite.be/index.php?id=52</a>	

## ■ Greek

Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
UNICEF and European Network of Ombudspersons for Children- ENOC	The impacts of COVID-19 restrictive measures on the rights of the Child	Analytical research on the impact of lockdowns and other measures against COVID-19 on children's rights, and recommendations to mitigate these impacts.	<a href="https://www.unicef.org/greece/media/1981/file/e%CE%99%CF%B9%20%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B9%CF%80%CE%84%CF%8E%CF%B3%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%82%20%CF%B8%4%CF%B8%9%CE%BD%20%CF%B8%0%CE%B5%CF%B8%1%CE%B9%CF%B8%1%CE%B9%CF%B8%2%CF%B8%20%CE%AD%BA%CF%8E%CE%BD%20%CE%BC%CE%AD%19%20%CF%B8%1%CF%84%CE%B1%20%CE%B4%CE%B9%CF%B8%1%CE%B9%CF%B8%4%CE%BC%CE%84%CE%B1%20%CF%B8%4%CE%B8%CF%85%20%CE%AD%CE%B1%CE%B9%CE%B8%4%CE%B9%CF%8D.%20%20.pdf">https://www.unicef.org/greece/media/1981/file/e%CE%99%CF%B9%20%CE%B5%CF%80%CE%B9%CF%80%CE%84%CF%8E%CF%B3%CE%B5%CE%B9%CF%82%20%CF%B8%4%CF%B8%9%CE%BD%20%CF%B8%0%CE%B5%CF%B8%1%CE%B9%CF%B8%1%CE%B9%CF%B8%2%CF%B8%20%CE%AD%BA%CF%8E%CE%BD%20%CE%BC%CE%AD%19%20%CF%B8%1%CF%84%CE%B1%20%CE%B4%CE%B9%CF%B8%1%CE%B9%CF%B8%4%CE%BC%CE%84%CE%B1%20%CF%B8%4%CE%B8%CF%85%20%CE%AD%CE%B1%CE%B9%CE%B8%4%CE%B9%CF%8D.%20%20.pdf</a>	

■ Italian

Authors	Title	Short Description	Link	QR Code
Elena Zambianchi	Support to parenting: Typologies of intervention and educational paths	Systematic review of the main typologies of intervention and training that support parental activity.	<a href="https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322531921.pdf">https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/322531921.pdf</a>	
Ministero per il Lavoro e per le politiche sociali	Interventions with children and families in situations of vulnerability	Guidelines for administrators, political decision-makers, public and private professionals, associations, network actors that deal with children and families in vulnerable situations	<a href="https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/poverta-ed-esclusione-sociale/Documents/Allegato-2-Linee-guida-sostegno-famiglie-vulnerabili-2017.pdf">https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/poverta-ed-esclusione-sociale/Documents/Allegato-2-Linee-guida-sostegno-famiglie-vulnerabili-2017.pdf</a>	
Save the Children	CUIDAR - Cultures of disaster resilience among children and young people	Proposals, methodologies, and activities for building a participation path on risk reduction with children and adolescents	<a href="https://s3.savethechildren.it/public/files/uploads/publicazioni/cuidar-la-cultura-della-resilienza-ai-disastri-tra-bambini-e-adolescenti.pdf">https://s3.savethechildren.it/public/files/uploads/publicazioni/cuidar-la-cultura-della-resilienza-ai-disastri-tra-bambini-e-adolescenti.pdf</a>	
Università di Pavia	VII Training Italiano certificato sul protocollo video-feedback intervention to promote positive parenting and sensitive discipline (VIPP-SD)	The VIPP-SD is an evidence-based positive parenting support intervention inspired by the theory of attachment. It aims to increase parental sensitivity, promote the ability to use sensitive and effective discipline strategies and to prevent the development of behavioral problems.	<a href="http://lag.unipv.it/en/formazione/vipp-sd/">http://lag.unipv.it/en/formazione/vipp-sd/</a>	



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# Europe's Parents Stand Up



Make  
Mothers  
Matter



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