

The Strain of Sheltering in Place: How to Reduce Family Tension and Strengthen Relationships

by Heidi Wheeler, Psy.D.

Parent: "You made that mess; now, you have to clean it up!"

Child: "No!"

Parent: "Either clean up that mess or go to your room!"

Sound familiar? Many families are experiencing increased conflict and tension during these uncertain times. Children feel stir crazy and restless under the shelter-in-place directives—as do many adults. Attempting to simultaneously balance home and work responsibilities has been wearing on parents. Family members may feel the need to walk on eggshells around each other so as not to set off yet another family argument that seems to result in nothing but tears. Even the healthiest of families feel the strain of this global crisis as anxieties about what the future will hold abound. Reducing family tension and strengthening relationships is no simple task, but there is a tried and true technique that can put you on the path to greater harmony if applied consistently over time.

When arguments arise, start by listening to your child first. Ask for their perspective on the problematic situation and focus in on their feelings. Validate their experience. This does not mean that you have to agree with their behavior, but you can acknowledge that whatever they are feeling is very real to them. Let them know that their experience makes sense; they can be understood. Only then will you be able to share your perspective with a significantly reduced chance of being met with defensiveness or hostility.

Parent: "The kitchen is a mess. What happened in here?"

Child: "I wanted to bake some cookies."

Parent: "They do smell good. I can't wait to taste them. But what about the kitchen?"

Child: "Baking the cookies was a lot of work, and I forgot where everything goes back."

Parent: "I'm pretty impressed that you managed to find all the right ingredients and bake the cookies without any help. I get tired, too, after cooking or baking, and it feels tiresome to have to put everything back."

Child: "Yeah."

Parent: "I have to cook dinner in here pretty soon, but it's frustrating that all the counterspace is taken up with containers that need to be put away and dirty dishes."

Many parents will jump in at this point and supply a solution to the problem, only to be met with resistance from their child. Instead, give your child a chance to find a workable solution.

Parent: "So, what do we do about this mess?"

Child: "I'm tired."

Parent: "I hear you. You're tired. So, what do you think would be a good solution then?"

Child: "I'll put everything away later."

Parent: "Sometimes that could work, but since I have to start dinner here in just a few minutes, do you have any other ideas?"

Child: "I'm too tired to remember which cabinets each of the ingredients came from."

Parent: "You're having a hard time remembering where to put away everything."

Child: "Yeah, if you could show me where, then I think I could put them away."

Parent: "Sounds like a plan."

This approach, known as **Collaborative Problem Solving** developed by Think:Kids at Massachusetts General Hospital, is a proven method for managing conflict with children in chronically stressful situations. Essentially, it involves

- 1) listening to your child's perspective and validating his/her feelings;
- 2) sharing your understanding of the problematic situation; and
- 3) allowing your child to brainstorm a mutually agreeable solution.

The key component to this seemingly simple problem-solving approach is recognizing that all "kids do well if they can." Problems result not because a child does not want to do well but because the child lacks the requisite skills to behave well. Skills can be taught and learned, and therefore, a solution can be found.

For more information on understanding the principles and objectives of Collaborative Problem Solving, see <http://www.thinkkids.org/>, or if you would like personalized support in implementing this approach, Morrissey-Compton Educational Center psychologists are available to help you reduce family tension and strengthen your relationships.



A Letter from the Executive Director



Dear Friends,

I would like to wish all of our families a Happy New Year! At Morrissey-Compton, we are approaching 2021 with cautious optimism. Although the COVID infection rate remains high, the roll-out of vaccinations give us a glimmer of hope that our lives may return to normal later this year. But I wish I could say we have an easy path ahead. The reality is that the next months will likely continue to be stressful. Many students are facing virtual learning until the end of the school year and parents will likely continue working from home juggling multiple roles as parent, teacher, and employee. In our work at Morrissey-Compton we are seeing the toll that the stay-at-home order has on families. Increasingly, we are working with students who are anxious, lonely, and/or depressed. Parents are also reporting heightened stress related to juggling their multiple roles and struggling to keep up. I hope that our lead article written by our post-doctoral fellow, Dr. Heidi Wheeler, will help families navigate heightened stress at home.

Our clinicians at Morrissey-Compton are available to help you. We continue to offer most services either in person (when San Mateo County mandates allow) or online, including consultations, evaluations, psychotherapy, educational/executive functioning therapy, and speech therapy. We encourage parents to reach out to us if you need guidance or assistance.

We will not look back at 2020 with many fond memories. Many businesses, and in particular non-profit organizations, were extremely challenged and tested. Morrissey-Compton was able to navigate these difficult times with the help of our staff, our board of directors, and our families. We consider ourselves fortunate that many families continued to donate to our scholarship fund, which has allowed us to offer all of our services at a reduced cost to families in need. With the high rate of unemployment and closure of businesses, the demand for financial aid has been high and we are grateful for our donors' generosity in helping us sustain our mission to families who could not afford our services.

As we approach our 40th year of operation, I am happy to say that Morrissey-Compton is ready for the challenges that lie ahead. We are here to help you and look forward to helping students and families navigate the year ahead and beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John T. Brentar, Ph.D." The signature is written in a cursive style.

John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

Openings with Dr. Ariel Marrero



Dr. Marrero currently has openings for individual and family therapy starting in January 2021. She operates from an integrative framework, but heavily utilizes an attachment and relational lens when working with children and families. Her specific areas of interest include trauma, emotion dysregulation, identity issues, and parent-child relationship stress. In treatment, she uses a collaborative and culturally informed approach to meet the unique needs of her clients. Dr. Marrero works with toddlers, school age children, teens, and young adults. She also provides parent consultation services for a variety of issues including managing tantrums, parent self-regulation skills, understanding trauma, and navigating the special education process. Interested in therapeutic services with Dr. Marrero? Contact our office today at 650-322-5910.



Morrissey-Compton staff are available and accepting appointments for psycho-educational evaluations, executive functioning coaching, tutoring, and other services. Please call our office at (650) 322-5910 with a confidential inquiry.

Openings with Sandra Burke



Sandra has been at Morrissey-Compton since November 2019. She has over 20 years of experience working with individuals with special needs and communication challenges. She received her BA in Communicative Disorders, with additional study in Special Education and Linguistics at San Francisco State University. She went on to receive her Master of Science in Communicative Disorders with an emphasis in Speech and Language Pathology.

Her therapy services include but are not limited to speech and language evaluations, individual sessions, parent and teacher consultations.

Speech-Language Services:

- Speech Therapy (Articulation & Phonological Disorders)
- Language Therapy (Receptive and Expressive Language Skills)
- Writing skills/Written expression
- Oral Motor Strengthening
- Early Language Stimulation
- Reading Comprehension Intervention
- Auditory and Language Processing Intervention
- Assistive Technology/iPad Consultation and Training

Conquering Anxiety and Worries Group (4th-6th grade)

Group meets over Zoom • Group size limited to 5 participants
Tuesdays, 4:00-5:00 PM • February 9 - April 27 (12 weeks)

Many children have anxiety or worry that is more intense than is typical for their age or circumstances, causing these children to feel distressed. This can lead to avoidance of the anxiety-provoking triggers, resulting in the child having a reduced opportunity to face and conquer the feared situations.

In this group, children will learn how to observe which situations trigger their anxious feelings and manage the triggers. Strategies we will practice include how to prepare for a situation that is likely to be anxiety provoking, mindfulness and breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, self-talk, challenging beliefs/fears to determine how likely they are to occur and utilizing a step by step method for solving problems. Through discussion, role-plays, games, activities, YouTube clips and lots of practice, children will become increasingly effective at conquering anxiety.

For descriptions of all of our groups and to register, please visit: http://www.morrissey-compton.org/group_programs.php

Submit a brief on-line "Group Registration" form and you will be contacted by Sue Garber, M.A., Director of the Social Skills Groups Program and Parent Education

If you have questions, email sue.garber@morrcomp.org.





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Our Mission

It is the mission of the Morrissey-Compton Educational Center to empower those with learning, behavioral, and social-emotional challenges to succeed throughout their educational journey. In a supportive environment, Morrissey-Compton Educational Center, a nonprofit, provides the highest quality diagnostic, intervention, and treatment services through innovative programs with scholarship opportunities.

www.morrissey-compton.org