WHAT-IF SCENARIOS

A possible future scenario guide for parents

smart
PARENTING

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Introduction

This document was produced in the framework of the ERASMUS+ programme, KA220-ADU - Cooperation partnerships in adult education under the project entitled: Integrative on-line Parenting Courses: Strategies for Raising Children Affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences and within the activity: A.2.3: Parenting future What-if Scenarios for different unexpected events that might affect the family.

The scope of the Smart parenting project is to act like a digital recovery plan aiming to increase parental competencies by establishing a comprehensive high-quality online model of parent support, grounded on the principles of informed decision-making and positive parenting thus contributing to the reduction in short-and long-term trauma-related symptoms of the child, and creating an inclusive environment that fosters equity and equality.

Specific Objectives:

- To foster prevention of potential adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) by offering concrete alternatives to abusive and ineffective methods of discipline and control
- To increase the knowledge and skills of non-professionals (adult parents) and of adult trainers who will locally deliver high-quality evidence-based and online parental education and support in preventing and responding to ACEs. Most importantly parents will learn about the impact of trauma on their child's development.
- To provide easy, practical strategies to help parents build strong and healthy relationships with their children and prevent problems in the family, and school.

In order to meet the above objectives, partners explored the present family challenges and unpredictable situations, that could affect the family. Each scenario

is described briefly and then we present some general guidelines for the parents on how to react in those situations. The goal is to provide parents with some extra knowledge and skills, from which the whole family can benefit in unexpected high-level stress situations. We also want to shine a light on some scenarios, that can easily be overseen or taken for granted.

We would like to point out that this guide is based on our research and is only serving as a first-aid kit for the mentioned scenarios and as a learning tool to gain more knowledge about this topic. We would like to stress the importance of handling each family situation as an individual case, that has its own characteristics and needs. This is why we also encourage you to do further research if needed and find the solutions that best suit you and your family members in case you find yourself in one of the scenarios. The guide is also in no way a substitute for direct medical or psychological advice from a doctor or other qualified clinician and health care professional.

What-if scenarios

What-if-scenarios or unexpected events can be any unplanned events or situations, that surprise a person or a family and have some sort of impact on it. They can interrupt the ongoing behavioural and mental processes, which can result in unwanted outcomes to the situation. The reactions of a person or a family vary, as they depend on the unexpected event itself, their domain expertise, similar experiences, emotional state and the contextual surroundings of the event. This means, that reactions can be anything from surprise to behavioural freezing, to even triggering alterations in neurological, psychological, behavioural and social processes. This is why training for unexpected events is required in some professions, such as medicine or aviation. However, some unexpected events in the history of humankind also raised a need for preparing all humanity for this kind of scenario, as many researchers confirmed that being prepared for the unexpected can reduce stress and help individuals or families remain in control. Some examples of these kinds of events include 9/11, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, where we already have visible results of the negative impact an unexpected event can have on the family or an individual. While this kind of training is already necessary for most high-level stressful professions, it is not always part of preparations for one of the most stressful roles a person can have, a parent.

As a parent, you are not only responsible for your own well-being but also the well-being of your child or children. But as we mentioned before, an individual's reaction to unexpected events is just as unpredictable, as the event itself, especially if the person has no knowledge or experience in this kind of scenario. This was especially visible in the Covid pandemic when families were struggling a lot while the world was on lockdown. Researchers find that some children developed serious cases of post-traumatic stress and that the parents were feeling burned out and exhausted when dealing with everything. This is why partners in the Smart Parenting project, co-funded by the European Union, have decided, that parents should be offered a

short guide on handling unexpected events or as we named them, What-if scenarios so that they can feel more prepared and in control if ever faced with such an event.

We would however like to point out, that this document serves only as a simple guide with the intent to learn more about possible what-if scenarios and possible responses to protect the family in them. Its purpose is mainly preventative and educational. No content on this document, regardless of date, should ever be used as a substitute for direct medical or psychological advice from a doctor or other qualified clinician and health care professional.

Our guide starts with very general tips on how to react and take care of your family, especially children during unexpected events. In the following chapters, we present more in-depth information in guidelines on 4 types of what-if scenarios, that are the most common in our society for the last decade.

Overall guidelines for parents on how to handle unexpected and stressful situations

Defining family stress is not an easy task, as stress can be caused by many things and manifest itself in various forms. The difference between the stress an individual experiences and family stress is that family stress is experienced within intimate family relationships and therefore has a mutual influence on all family members often disrupting everyone's well-being. Family stress can also feel more intense as family relationships typically rely on mutual help, especially when handling external stressors. Some of the most common family stressors, which are usually unexpected and out of the family's control include financial issues, work-related stress, visiting relatives, family reorganisations, marital problems, exhaustion, illness or the birth of a child.

Handling stressful situations in a family depends on the family's resilience. Family resilience refers to the system a family has developed for functioning and dealing with adversity. This includes handling stressful situations, positive adaptation and

their ability to use the resources within and outside the family. Every family is of course different, therefore their resilience also differs and has many forms, so there is no rule or method for the perfect family resilience. However, there are a few things any family can do or at least try when strengthening their resilience.

The following tips and guidelines for handling any unexpected stress that can affect the family are useful for both, those common family stressors and also the less common what-if scenarios. The tips are meant to be ideas for possible solutions or ways to remain in control, with a focus on the child's well-being:

- Pausing and making a plan → The first thing any parent or responsible adult should do, is take a moment and analyse the situation their family has found itself in as soon as the circumstances allow this. Drastic changes may require some big changes in families every day, which is why they need to be well thought about and strategically planned.

- Protecting → Parents are responsible for both, themselves and their children. This includes protecting their physical and mental health. We often forget about the latter, as emotional or mental issues are not as visible as physical ones. But in stressful situations, mental health is usually at a very big risk, and ignoring it or forgetting about it can only extend the damage for the future. As parents, the simplest thing you can do is talk to your children and ask them about how they feel, while also finding a way for yourself to express any emotions or thoughts that bother you.

- Communication → Healthy communication is one of the most important things in a family. It is the parent's job to create a safe space in the family for talking about any topic, especially the hard ones. It is also their responsibility to evaluate how much information their child can handle about a certain stressful situation and adapt to their stage of development when addressing them. The biggest mistake you can make as a parent is

lying to children and telling them everything is fine, while they can very clearly see that this is not true. Unhealthy communication forms should also be avoided, like yelling, not listening or pointing fingers at each other.

- Maintaining a routine → Most families have some kind of routine when it comes to their everyday life. Family routines have many forms and can either be very detailed or looser, depending on the family. The importance of the routine is to make everyone feel safe and comfortable, as routines enable us to know what is coming next and usually give us specific roles that keep of occupied This is why difficult or stressful times maintaining a family routine is very important, as it can give its members a sense of normality. This can be something simple, for example reading a story before bedtime or having dinner together. Sure, this does not apply to all what-if scenarios, so adaptations or establishing new routines can also be useful.

- Adapting → Some stressful situations or what-if scenarios demand bigger changes. That means, that the parents or responsible adults first need to examine the situation and then decide how to proceed. Adaptations can be any change in the family, that can be helpful for them in the given situation. In some cases, those adaptations and changes can be very big and hard on the family, which is why they should always be talked about with all the members and explained to the children.

- Keeping a positive attitude → Regulating emotions is not always easy, but when you are a parent and responsible for one or more children, completely losing your cool is not an option. You are of course allowed to feel and express any emotions you are feeling, while also making sure, that you regain yourself and be able to address the needs of your family. You need to trust your abilities and that in the end, everything will turn

out fine, even if you and your family will face some difficult challenges on the road. For calming down and keeping a positive attitude, you can find a lot of exercises, like breathing techniques, meditation, affirmations etc. You pick the one, that works for you and your family.

- Finding and accepting help → Another important part of handling stressful family situations is admitting when you need help from others. Help comes in different ways; you can rearrange the roles you have in your family and give some members more or fewer responsibilities, depending on the situation. Help can come from other family members or friends, and also differs depending on the family's needs. It is also very important for parents to acknowledge and seek professional help when needed. We tend to try to solve problems alone or with the people we trust, but some what-if scenarios can be too much for the family and this is when professionals can help. Especially as parents, your obligation is to make sure your family is well, and part of this also includes recognising situations, where your family can benefit from professional help.

- Teamwork → No matter how young or old, each family member is equally important in finding solutions and stress. Depending on their age and development, even children can be very helpful, even if just as a distraction for parents who deal with stressful situations. As long as nobody is overwhelmed by the family's issue, cooperation and mutual support should be encouraged when facing different family challenges.

Figure 1 Family teamwork, source: https://www.everypixel.com/image-12794758491624255936

These are just some general tips on how to handle a stressful family crisis or an unpredicted what-if scenario that impacts your family. In the following chapters, we present a few possible what-if scenarios and possible solutions. However, we would like to point out one more time, that these guidelines are simple tips and do not replace professional help. They should also not be followed in situations, where a family already is working with a professional and have different techniques or plans for this kind of crisis agreed upon.

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1. Stressful social circumstances - referring to situations, that shock the world/society in a wider range

In stressful social circumstances or situations that can shock the world, families may face immense challenges in coping with the immediate impacts and adjusting to the new realities that emerge. Support, resilience, and adaptability become crucial factors in how families navigate through these shocks and work toward rebuilding their lives.

Some examples of such stressful social circumstances are:

- Global Pandemic: The outbreak of a contagious and deadly disease, such as COVID-19, can cause widespread fear, health concerns, and economic disruptions. Families may face illness, loss of loved ones, financial strain, and significant lifestyle changes due to lockdowns and restrictions.

- Natural Disasters: Events like earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, or wildfires can lead to the loss of homes, belongings, and even lives. Families may experience trauma, displacement, and uncertainty about the future.

- Terrorist Attacks: Acts of terrorism, such as bombings or mass shootings, can create shockwaves of fear and grief in society. Families directly affected by such incidents may suffer the loss of family members or experience severe physical and emotional trauma.

- War and Conflict: Ongoing wars and armed conflicts in regions can cause massive displacement, loss of life, and trauma for families caught amid violence and unrest.

- Economic Crises: Global economic downturns or financial crises can lead to job losses, bankruptcies, and financial hardships for families worldwide. These situations can result in increased stress and anxiety about the future.

- Political Unrest: Political upheaval, civil unrest, or revolutions can lead to social instability and uncertainty about the safety and well-being of families.

- Environmental Crises: Events like large-scale pollution, climate change, or environmental disasters can have long-term effects on communities, affecting health, livelihoods, and overall well-being.

- Technological Disruptions: Rapid technological advancements, while beneficial in many ways, can also cause disruptions in industries and job markets, leading to job insecurity and changes in family dynamics.

- Social Movements and Activism: Social movements addressing issues like racial injustice, gender equality, or human rights can spark strong emotions and divisions within families, reflecting broader societal tensions.

- Refugee Crisis: Mass migrations and refugee crises can result from conflicts, natural disasters, or political instability, causing families to be separated, torn apart, or forced to start over in unfamiliar environments.

Figure 2 Disaster, source: https://www.alertfirstaid.com/blog/facts-about-emergency-preparedness/

These types of stressful social circumstances can have a profound impact on families, such as:

- s within the family. Some family members may want to talk about the events and their feelings, while others might prefer to avoid discussing them. This disparity in communication styles can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

- Increased conflict: The heightened stress from external events can exacerbate existing tensions within the family or trigger new conflicts. Differences in opinions about how to handle the situation or its implications may lead to arguments and disagreements.

- Change in priorities: When faced with extraordinary events, families often need to adjust their priorities. Financial, social, or emotional resources may need to be reallocated, and this can lead to further stress and tension.

- Economic strain: Some shocking social events can have far-reaching economic consequences, leading to job losses, financial instability, and increased hardships for families. Economic stress can add to the emotional burden and may result in difficulties in meeting basic needs.

- Physical health impact: Prolonged exposure to stressful situations can affect the physical health of family members. Sleep disturbances, headaches, digestive issues, and other stress-related health problems may arise.

- Family dynamics: Stressful circumstances can shift the dynamics within a family. Certain members may take on new roles, responsibilities, or coping mechanisms, altering the balance of power and relationships within the family.

- Coping mechanisms: Individuals within the family may develop different coping mechanisms to deal with stress. Some may seek support from others, while others may withdraw emotionally or turn to unhealthy coping strategies like substance abuse.

- Impact on children: Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of stressful social circumstances. They may struggle to understand the events and their implications, leading to emotional distress and behavioural changes. Parents may also find it challenging to address their children's concerns effectively.

- Support systems: The availability and strength of support systems, both within and outside the family, can influence how families navigate through stressful situations. Lack of support can intensify the challenges they face.

Guidelines for Parents

It's important to recognize that every family is unique, and the way they respond to and are affected by stressful social circumstances will vary. In such challenging times, seeking professional help, engaging in open communication, and leaning on supportive relationships can be crucial in helping families cope and adapt.

As a parent, when facing stressful social circumstances and shocking situations, the steps below can help you navigate these difficult times with your family:

1. Open and Honest Communication: Encourage open and honest communication within the family. Create a safe space where everyone can express their thoughts, fears, and emotions about the situation. Be prepared to listen actively and validate each family member's feelings.

2. Age-Appropriate Discussions: Tailor the discussions to the age and maturity level of each child. Provide age-appropriate information and avoid overwhelming them with details that might be too complex or distressing for their understanding.

3. Reassurance and Support: Offer reassurance and emotional support to your children. Let them know that it's okay to feel scared or upset and that you are there to support and protect them as much as possible.

4. Limit Media Exposure: Be mindful of the amount and type of media exposure your family receives regarding the situation. Continuous news coverage can heighten anxiety and stress. Try to provide balanced information from reliable sources and limit exposure to distressing images and videos.

5. Establish Routines: In times of uncertainty, routines can provide a sense of stability and normalcy for children. Stick to regular schedules as much as possible, including mealtimes, bedtime, and daily activities.

6. Lead by Example: As a parent, model healthy coping strategies and self-care. Children often learn from observing their parents, so demonstrating resilience and positive ways of dealing with stress can be valuable.

7. Seek Support: Don't hesitate to seek support from friends, family, or professionals if needed. Sometimes, talking to others who are going through similar situations can provide comfort and understanding.

8. Encourage Expression through Art and Play: Younger children may find it easier to express their emotions through art or play. Encourage them to draw, write, or engage in imaginative play to process their feelings.

9. Teach Problem-Solving: Involve older children in problem-solving discussions. Encourage them to brainstorm potential solutions or ways to cope with the situation. This can empower them and give them a sense of control.

10. Focus on Strengths: Acknowledge and focus on the strengths and resilience of your family. Remind each other of past challenges you've overcome together and emphasize the importance of sticking together as a family unit.

11. Monitor Emotional Well-being: Keep an eye on each family member's emotional well-being. Look for signs of distress, changes in behaviour, or withdrawal, and be proactive in addressing any concerns.

Remember that every family is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing stressful situations. Be patient with yourself and your family as you navigate through these challenges together. Supporting each other and fostering a sense of unity can help families come out stronger on the other side of difficult times.

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2. School Challenges and problem-solving strategies for parents

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is considered to have huge influence in the everyday lives of people, and it plays an even larger role during adolescence (Adeyemii, 2019; Cruz et al., 2022). Peer pressure is a phenomenon that is even more relevant today and affects mostly families with children and teenagers.

Pressure is defined as the process through which a person is influenced or obliged to do something that they would not do otherwise (Adeyemii, 2019). A peer is a person whom others consider equal in age, position, ability or have any other similarities with. When talking for children and teenagers, a peer is usually considered a classmate or another child or teen of the same age (Cruz et al., 2022).

Peer pressure is a social phenomenon and therefore it is evident as children enter school and reaches its peak in adolescence (Cruz et al., 2022). For that reason, most of the relevant literature is focused on this specific period of life. However, the following guidelines offer advice that can be applied to any age, if your children are facing peer pressure.

Figure 3 Peer pressure, source: https://www.gsineducation.com/blog/ten-ways-to-help-your-child-deal-with-peer-pressure

Guidelines for Parents

1. To begin with, it is crucial for parents to understand the changes that any age and especially adolescence brings. Children in pre-teenager and teenager years seek the approval of their peers more than their parents (Mtemeri, 2020). Furthermore, anatomically, the brain is not fully developed yet, which leads to proneness for risky behavior which makes them more susceptible to peer pressure. For example, students showed lower conformity with the protective measures for the CoViD-19 pandemic such as not wearing masks, due to online communication between the peers that urged them not to follow the measures and their desire to not stand out as "weird" (Cruz et al. 2022).

2. Parents can identify whether their child is experiencing peer pressure by closely monitoring their academic performance and observing any changes in their behavior. According to a research conducted in 2022 (Sarkar et al.), peer pressure and academic success are inversely connected. Therefore, peer pressure has more negative consequences than positive on academic performance. Moreover, researchers mentioned that peer pressure had an impact on both students' academic performance and study habits. This can be seen through low grades, disruption in their learning potentials, limitations of students' performance in classroom, and on how extracurricular activities impacted their cognitive growth and functioning. In a similar manner, other researchers suggest that peer pressure have an indirect, rather than a direct, impact on students' academic performance (Moldes et. al., 2019). The results suggest that they are influenced by various factors including social belongingness and cultural-parenting orientation. The study concludes that the effects of peer pressure depend on students' approach to interaction with their peers. Therefore, in order to help their children, parents can create a supportive environment where open communication is encouraged. They can initiate conversations about school, actively listen to their concerns, and validate their feelings. Additionally, parents must cultivate a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence in their child, emphasizing the importance of individuality and making choices based on personal values and goals rather than succumbing to peer pressure. Moreover, through the collaboration with teachers, parents can ensure that their child's academic needs are met and should always explore effective strategies for improvement. By providing guidance and a non-judgmental environment, parents can empower their children to navigate peer pressure and achieve better academic results. In order to minimize the effects of peer pressure, it would be very useful if parents provided a safe environment for their children to express their thoughts and emotions freely. According to literature, children's ability to use logic more effectively in their decisions, can be facilitated by parents' feedback, support and encouragement. It is important that the feedback

given to children and teenagers is kind and not judgmental. By providing this kind of environment, parents could provide them with the necessary tools in order to use their critical thinking in a better and more efficient way, less prone to any influence and pressure from their peers.

3. However, it is also important to note that peer pressure does not always lead to bad outcomes. Peer pressure can be either good or bad, according to literature. An example of positive peer pressure is when students see their friends performing well in school and want to do the same.

4. According to the findings of Adeyemii (2019), most students choose their actions based on their peers' approval or disapproval, regardless of age or gender. Sarkar et al. (2022) through their research however, mention that girls experience higher levels of peer pressure compared to boys. Mtemeri (2020) argues that students' career choice largely depends on the influence their friends have on them. This could be beneficial if they had correct information regarding different career paths, but harmful when they do not. Having this in mind, it could be very helpful if parents could provide their children with correct and complete information regarding their different interests, and thus different career paths. In this way, children will be able to distinguish any misinformation coming from their peers and ground their decisions on more thorough research. According to Mtemeri (2020) some schools even include students in their career counselling sessions in order to turn this phenomenon to a beneficial influence for their students.

5. Another important factor that it is often highlighted is the use of the internet. Thus, it could be very useful for parents to acknowledge the power of social media and inform children about the dangers that underlie, as early as possible. Experts suggest (Cruz et al. 2022) that online peer pressure is as important as face-to-face peer pressure. Especially during the social isolation period of 2020-2021 due to CoViD-19, children used social media as their main

form of communication with each other. Even though the protective measures have been lifted, the use of the internet and social media still plays a vital role in their lives. For example, online peer violence, often referred to as cyberbullying, involves the use of digital platforms to target and harm others psychologically. The impact of peer violence, especially online, can have detrimental effects on children's well-being, including emotional distress, low self-esteem, academic struggles, and mental health issues. In tackling these challenges, parents play a vital role, while they can help their children by fostering open communication, developing strong relationships grounded on trust, educating their children about responsible online behavior, and teaching them how to recognize and respond to peer pressure. Moreover, it is very important for parents to monitor their children's online activities. It has been proven efficient to provide emotional support and teach them strategies to navigate challenging social situations. By actively engaging with their children and promoting positive digital citizenship, parents can help create a safe and supportive environment, reducing the impact of peer pressure and online peer violence.

6. Parents should also keep in mind that peer pressure does not influence all children in the same manner. According to Cruz et al. (2022), there are specific traits that make some children more prone to peer pressure. For instance, a desire to be accepted by others is a risk factor for susceptibility to peer pressure, as well as curiosity regarding other children and their way of thinking and acting. When parents recognize these traits in their children they could be more alert for peer influences on their children.

7. In case peer pressure cannot be prevented, parents should look out for psychological effects on their children. Low level of mental well-being and symptoms of depression have been found to have significant correlation to peer pressure according to Cruz et al. (2022). These symptoms could sometimes be reduced if parents provide an environment where their children can

express themselves. Sometimes however, seeking help from a mental health professional is necessary. In these cases it is important for parents to make sure that their children know the importance of visiting a mental health professional, answer their questions and explain possible misconceptions.

To conclude, by recognizing the signs of peer violence, parents can take proactive steps to support and protect their children. Establishing open communication, educating children about safety when using the internet, and promptly addressing signs of peer violence are critical in creating a safe and nurturing environment for children's well-being and development. Since peer pressure between children and teenagers seems to come up in everyday discussions, it could be useful to keep in mind that a child can be influenced but also influence others. Thus, parents should make sure that their children have sufficient and correct information and also that they are aware of the dangers of pressuring others to follow their opinions and/or actions.

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3. Severe illness in the family context

<u>Impacts of a serious illness in the family context</u>

Most serious diseases have similar effects on family members including emotional functioning, the effect on interpersonal relationships, financial concerns disruption of social life and leisure activities. The extent of family disruption depends on the seriousness of the illness, the family's level of functioning before the illness, socioeconomic considerations, and the extent to which other family members can absorb the role of the person who is ill. The impact of serious illnesses upon children and their families can range from minimal disruptions to severe distress and functional limitations. Below we identified the most common effects:

- Emotional impacts

When diagnosed and dealing with a severe illness, it's normal for family members to feel a wide range of emotions, including worry, upset, frustration, embarrassment, despair, loss, relief, guilt, and anger. The psychological distress felt by family members often results from their feelings of the unknown and lack of control.

- Interpersonal relationships

Family relationships are commonly impacted when a person has a serious health issue:

- o Decreased time spent with other family members
- o Increased family arguments
- o Increased stress and tension

- Financial concerns

Dealing with a serious health condition may also prove costly – and it changes the family's financial picture in many ways due to an increase in family expenditure. This can include treatment costs, transport to appointments, the cost of hiring a carer, and adapting their home environment. The financial strains felt by family members of patients often lead to stress and worry.

- Social life

The social lives of all family members can be impacted due to no longer having the freedom to socialize when and where they want because they have to be home to care for a loved one with a serious illness. Also, limited finances can directly impact when and how often family members can socialize with friends outside the home.

- Disruption of day-to-day activities

Having a family member with a serious illness can impact the daily activities of family members in the following ways:

- o Significant increase in routine housework
- o Stop going away on holidays because of the patient's condition.
- o Take time off their work either to attend to the patient's needs or for hospital appointments
- o Feeling a burden from caring for the person
- o Not having time to pursue their hobbies or interests

Figure 4 Severe illness in the family, source: https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/health-illness-medical-issues

Guidelines for Parents

When a serious illness occurs, parents may be tempted to avoid discussing it with their children. But this can cause more stress and worry for everyone. Here are some suggestions that parents have to take into consideration while talking to their children about the serious illness of a loved one.

1. Plan for the Conversation

Think about when and where to have a conversation with your child, e.g., mornings rather than bedtime; sitting on a couch rather than in the car. Plan what you want to say and how you intend to say it. Look at resources before starting the conversation. Be aware of your tone and body language. Think about your child's ability to comprehend and process information.

2. **Provide appropriate information and consider the developmental stage of the child:**

Telling children that someone in the family has an illness must be done with great care and sensitivity. Younger children aren't going to be able to understand or handle the situation, whereas an adolescent can understand much more and will want and need to know much more. Communication should also be concrete and specific to avoid incorrect inferences or misunderstandings about how and why someone became ill.

- Children 0-3

They will struggle to understand things that they can't see and touch, so understanding what illness means will be difficult unless they can see it (such as someone sneezing). In this situation, parents should not use complicated explanations. They will have to stick to short sentences and focus on consistency and routine – keeping things as normal as possible.

- Children 4-7

They will understand illness in terms of simple symptoms, like a cough or runny nose. Parents can use play and stories to shape a child's understanding, where necessary and appropriate. Characters in the story can be used to correct misunderstandings. Answers do not need to be increasingly complex – if you have said enough to your child, repeat the information you have given consistently. If you are not sure or don't know, say so instead of making something up!

- Children 7-12

Children of this age have an understanding that illness can have lots of different symptoms and that medicines and following a doctor's advice can help someone get better. Concepts of time and permanence are easier to understand. Children of this age may ask

more questions about the impact of the illness on other people or wider changes in life. At this stage, parents will have to give accurate explanations and explain differences between conditions - e.g. children may have heard that having a cough might be worrying. They will need to understand that not all coughs are worrying. They also need to make sure children don't take on adult roles in a desire to help others.

- Children 13+

At this age, children have a good understanding of time and they might be more concerned with social, moral and emotional aspects of illness and how illness is having a broader impact. This might lead to more distress and sadness than in younger children. At this stage, parents can continue to offer space for support, affection and discussion, provide children with information from reputable sources 'I came across this today, what do you think of it?' and support social opportunities and discussion with peers.

3. Discuss the situation with the other parent/caregiver:

Both parents and/or caregivers should be on the same page about what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. It's also important that both parents/caregivers think together about the context of the child's life, and how the news — and the illness — will affect them so that they be ready to manage the logistical and emotional fallout.

4. Be truthful and do not hide the illness.

By talking with children about the illness, parents may relieve their fears, legitimize their feelings, and give them the message that they are respected members of the family. Parents need to be forthright, even when the subject matter is difficult and painful. Children are very perceptive and will feel that something isn't right, even if they do not know exactly what it is. Establishing

an environment of openness and honesty will help them not only process the initial news but also cope with their ongoing feelings. It is also important that children of any age should know that they can return with their questions and concerns at any time and that they are free to express their emotions. If death is a possibility, it should be acknowledged, but put into perspective life has to go on until that needs to be faced.

5. Alleviate fears.

Reassure children that nothing they did or said caused their loved one's illness. Parents shall also explain to them that they will be taken care of during the illness and at the same time build 'check-in times so that they can have more conversations, give updates, see how their children are doing, and see if new questions have arisen. Overall, they shall also try to be fully present when they are together. Parents shall also talk about the doctors and nurses and other people who are helping the person get better.

6. Maintain structure and routine as much as possible.

If routines must change, and others (family, friends, co-workers) will be added to the schedule, parents shall discuss these changes with their children and prepare them for anticipated changes.

7. Normalize Big Feelings

It is common for a child to have a wide range of feelings when acknowledging that a loved one is ill. Grief, anger, confusion, and sadness may come and go as they learn to live with the reality of a diagnosis. Parents can help their children manage these big feelings by sharing how they manage their own, and by letting them know these feelings are normal.

8. Ask for advice.

Parents should also talk with a paediatrician and/or seek advice from a mental health professional.

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4. ''The perfect parents'' - Social media pressure

The perfect parent syndrome is a colloquial term to describe the pressure felt by some parents to perform perfectly in all aspects of their parenting. It refers to the tendency to set unrealistic expectations for oneself as a parent and to strive for an unattainable standard of perfection in raising children.

Social media use exposes parents to prompts and posts, that can cause and/or amplify the perfect parent syndrome, sending the following messages:

- Idealized Portrayals: Social media tends to showcase the highlight reel of parenting, where parents share the best moments and accomplishments of their children. This image can create an illusion of perfection, making other parents feel inadequate if their own experiences don't measure up or are different from the ones visible.

- Comparison Trap: Parents may frequently compare themselves to other parents they see on social media, feeling like they are falling short if their family life doesn't match up to the seemingly flawless lives of others.

- Parenting Advice Overload: Social media is full of parenting advice, often contradicting one another. Parents may feel overwhelmed and pressured to follow every piece of advice to be a "perfect" parent.

- Fear of Judgment: The fear of being judged by others on social media can lead parents to present a facade of perfection, even if they are struggling behind the scenes. This fear can prevent them from being vulnerable and seeking support when needed from professionals, friends or other parents.

- Influence on Parenting Choices: Witnessing other parents' experiences and parenting styles on social media can sway a parent's decision-making, leading them to question their own choices and feel pressured to conform to certain standards.

- Competitive Parenting: Social media can inadvertently turn parenting into a competition, where parents feel compelled to outdo one

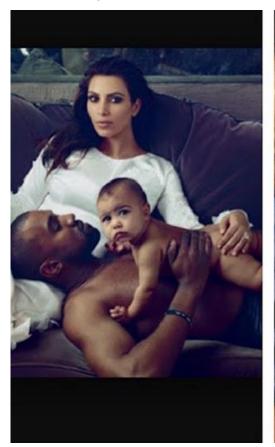another in terms of their children's behaviours, achievements, passions and goals.

Figure 5 Social media vs. reality, source: http://fashionhuntworld.blogspot.com/2016/09/10-instagram-vs-reality-this-is-how-it.html

Guidelines for Parents

If you find yourself experiencing this burden or you want to be informed you could find the following advice helpful:

1. Understand the Illusion of Perfection: Remind yourself that social media often presents an idealized version of life, including parenting. People tend to share the best moments, making it seem like everyone else has it all together. In reality, all parents face challenges and difficult moments. Understanding this can help alleviate the pressure to be "perfect."

2. Limit Social Media Exposure: Consider reducing the amount of time spent on social media, especially on platforms that trigger feelings of inadequacy or comparison. Focus on real-life interactions and cherish the genuine moments with your child, rather than seeking validation or comparison online.

3. Embrace Imperfection: Understand that it's okay to make mistakes as a parent. No one is perfect, and parenting is a learning process. Embrace imperfections and view them as opportunities for growth and improvement.

4. Join Supportive Parenting Communities: Seek out parenting groups or communities that focus on supporting and uplifting one another rather than promoting unrealistic expectations. Connecting with other parents who share similar experiences can provide a sense of belonging and reassurance.

5. Prioritize Self-Care: Taking care of yourself physically and emotionally is crucial for being a present and supportive parent. Set aside time for activities that bring you joy and help you recharge.

6. Focus on Your Child's Needs: Instead of comparing yourself to others, focus on understanding and meeting your child's individual needs. Every child is different, and what works for others may not work for your child.

7. Be Mindful of Your Digital Footprint: Consider the impact of what you share about your children on social media. Be cautious not to overshare or expose your child's private moments without their consent.

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