

STRENGTHENING THE MENTAL IMMUNITY OF CHILDREN IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

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What can we as parents do to strengthen the mental immunity of our children? As I am a co-parent at home in the time of pandemic restrictions in a household of five people, the request to write this article sent me into self-observation, reflection and conversations with myself, friends and colleagues who are in a similar position. I asked myself and others: What is it that makes this situation liveable, productive, hopeful and strengthening for me, for my wife and for my close colleagues who are living with children, teenagers and young adults?

We do live a productive, hopeful and strengthening life with children at home, in the middle of these challenging conditions. How do we actually do it? How can we learn something from it that can help other parents? The conclusion I reached was surprising. It was not directly connected to specific details of lifestyle, routine, activities, extra teaching or fitness. It had to do with the broader connection to our life as a whole, our creative work, to the meaning of it all, to the deep values that we believe, live by and manifest in our life, relationships and work. I am not trying to idealise myself; I am trying to be practical. This is not just a philosophical musing for me, it is a practical, personal and professional challenge in my position as a life-coach, counsellor and trainer of personal and social development. More so, because my major work is the professional training of coaches and counsellors through Skola Empatie in Slovakia.

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the acute suffering our children, adolescents and young people are going through in these challenging times with normal social life being restricted for so long. No online learning can be a real solution for the inevitable isolation resulting from the closure of schools and the restriction of the social life for our young ones. No family life, however loving and beautiful, can possibly replace the essential social needs of children and adolescents. Many of the solutions that we, as adults, can find and create for ourselves, including these reflections here, are not available for them.

***I wish to state decisively that what we, as parents, do with our own lives,
has a decisive impact on the life and the mental wellbeing of our children.***

To be clear, adults also suffer in these conditions: No online socialising is a real replacement for the in-person interactions we lost in this pandemic; for many adults, the isolation is very painful. This is the time when creative solutions are urgently required by everyone. The pandemic itself, I believe, will be over at some point, even though many people are now thinking it is here to stay; but no one will be the same as before. There isn't a full perspective on it all as yet, though some noticeable changes are taking place and are already visible, especially in relationship of people to their work and

in re-evaluating major life priorities. We, in Skola Empatit had to move much of our intensely interactive training programs online. It comes with some surprising benefits, like being present in people's actual living rooms and coming to know their children, their partners and even their cats and dogs, which in normal in-person situations we would never come to know. It is a strangely intimate situation in spite of the physical distance. People from far away locations can meet in the same virtual room and that a student from England or Germany can be counselled by a student from Bratislava or Kosice, makes the world a much smaller and more intimate place.

However, our young ones are suffering, and the above question is an urgent one: ***What can we, as parents, do for the mental health resilience of our children?***

*The best we can do for them
is to be ourselves on a deeper level (YT)*

Children need us to be the solid rock on which they stand, lean, model, a source of unconditional support, for their daily needs and for their growing trust that adult life is something worthy and good and exciting to look forward to, to grow towards. I am well aware that many parents don't believe that they can live up to these expectations. Their parents could not do it for them, they cannot do it for themselves—how can we be that solid rock for our children?

Working with adults on their own personal development is my profession. I have no illusion that most people do not feel qualified to even be themselves. However, I am describing what children of all ages need from their parents. We, the parents, are the *welcoming committee* for our children to this life. There could be other role models of adulthood that our children can adopt, but none of them will ever be as close to them as their parents, none of them can replace us, the parents. The fact that we don't feel qualified to be the solid loving rock our children need from us does not change the fact that this is what they need from us. Therefore, the best we can do for our children is to take ourselves seriously and be ourselves on a deeper level.

They need it from us much more now than in their previous normal non-pandemic lives but where is it to come from? Where can we find this solidity, strength, positive outlook, when so much of what was our normal life is taken away from us? Most parents do not have enough of these qualities even in normal times. The only possible answer is: our own depth of being comes from within, from our unused personal human depth.

Dear parents, our awareness of our children's needs from us can remind us of the deeper dimension of being a human being, which we may have forgotten about in our busy normal life. We live so much of our time on the surface of human existence. It is busy on the surface, contradictory, exhausting and

stressful. Chronic stress is how we became vulnerable to covid-19 in the first place: 80% of humanity suffers from chronic stress in the workplace (86% in China!)¹. How many people possess the skill to switch off work stress when they come home? Hardly anyone, and then stress continues to accumulate day and night, at work and at home, with the speed of everything accelerating all the time. We have no time to be connected to ourselves. Chronic stress destroys the immunity: the stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol are immunity suppressant. No wonder we get sick.

Suddenly, with the pandemic, it is more peaceful outside. Some of us are more busy surviving, but most of us had to slow down because of the pandemic. This can be another cause of stress, or it can be an opportunity for something new: to stop and remember who you are, what you are doing here, what keeps you going, what is the point of it all, what is the value of your life, your time, your relationships, your family? What is the meaning of your human life for you? There is currently a chronic shortage of workers in major companies around the world. It already severely effects the supply chain, from food and drinks to fuel. This is not just because of the restrictions, as essential services were allowed to continue. This is because more and more people don't want to go back to work as it was before. They have started to realize that they were wasting their life in meaningless, low paid jobs, serving someone else's economy. They realize that they were cheated by work and by money, because their life is deeper than this, because their life has got an intrinsic value that they forgot about, and they want their lives back.

Life on the surface is unstable, exhausting, stressful. That is the case equally for the oceans, for the forests, for the human soul. The changing winds, changing weather, changing moods, emotions and incidences of human life, create periodical storms. Surfaces are volatile, unstable, dependent on external factors which are out of our control. Our lives are unsustainable, weak and dependant on the surface. To be resilient, fruitful, rich inside, with some spare energy, heart, and spirit to give to our partners and our children, we have to go deeper into ourselves.

Only in the depth is there hope of stability and strength: the depth of the ocean, the roots of the trees, the depth of the human soul, they are stable. In times of crisis, like the one we are all going through for the past 2 years, stability is impossible on the surface: as new virulent variants of the virus can overwhelm us, and our stability and plans drastically and destructively can change, with unpredictable consequences. Planning is fast becoming a joke. Who can plan anything these days?

However, there is more time to listen to our children, to hear them on a deeper level, to let them express themselves more, to know them on a deeper level, and to develop real empathy with them. In order to be able to do that, we have to create a deeper connection with our own inner being.

¹ www.therecoveryvillage.com/mental-health/stress/related/stress-statistics

I will begin the fashion, less without and more within.

(Shakespeare, Leonato Posthumous, Cymbeline, Act 5 Scene 1)

More than ever, we need to go deeper. There exists in the depth of everyone's soul a deeper dimension of individual existence in which pain and pleasure, highs and lows, success and failure, health and sickness, even life and death, are all of equal value, from the point of view of the ongoing process of individual, social and spiritual development. We will lose it all completely sooner or later, but our real human development we will not lose. That is where real resilience can be found: in our individual deeper meaning and deeper humanity. We can all choose to go there.

This strength is what our children need from us in these stressful times: an inner depth, resilience, inner calmness, independence from the ups and downs of the pressures of daily life. From the strength that comes from remembering the deeper dimension of life itself. From this, new resources can come with which to fill the growing gaps in our children's normal life, creative human resources for relationship and activities that we neglected to make use of before.

Don't get lost in the prevalent addiction to the shiny little or big screens with their ready-made content, our telephone and computer screens, that offer so readily to fill up our existential emptiness. If you don't want your children to get lost in this addiction, get out of it yourself. These external contents do not really fill the gap in our souls, they just make it bigger.

I will conclude with the words of Leonatus Posthumos (the *undying lion*) in Shakespeare's play Cymbeline, speaking after a near-death experience (in simplified English):

Let me make men know,
There is more courage in me than my normal life show.
Gods, put the strength of the Lion in me!
To expose the surface lie of the world, I will begin
The new way of being:
Less from the outside, more from the inside.

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