

## **Top 10 List for Parents: How to “Normalize” our Lives when Life is Far from Normal**

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Over the course of my 31-year-career in education, I was fortunate to work as a K-12 teacher for 17 of these years. I started my career as a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, then spent 15 years in middle school, and 2 at high school. I was trained as a mental health counselor while working in a middle school in Ft. Lauderdale, and it was there that I learned about what is now labeled as Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching. Trauma-Informed Schools/Classrooms are rooted in the medical profession and our judicial system, and lessons learned from these evidenced-based approaches have been directly applied to education (McInerney, M. & McKlindon, 2014). The training I received was intense, but it still did not prepare me for the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., when the plane that hit the Pentagon flew over my middle school, completely changing the school environment, as several students lost parents and other family members. The following year at that same school, we experienced the D.C. Sniper Attacks, which forever changed the way I perceived trauma and education.

Unlike the 9/11 attacks, this unprecedented time of quarantine during COVID 19 involves being isolated with our children, many of us juggling our jobs through electronics, while feeling the stress of knowing we need to place our children first and continue their education when many of us have no training in the field.

In providing readers with researched-based trauma-informed instruction, I want to borrow from the comedic approach of David Letterman whose comedy is forever a part of our culture and use a “bit” from his nightly routine. The Top 10 List might be his most famous of all, and it is an approach that Letterman knew was effective, as it keeps things short yet sweet. Already in our nation, trauma is possibly the largest public health issue facing our children today (CDC, 2019). Lucky for us, teachers in our

community know this and have been working with researchers and psychologists that specialize in strategies to assist our children. Based on these strategies, I offer my Top 10 list to inspire and assist during this trying time.

- 1) Routine, Routine, Routine:** You might feel discombobulated yourself. The best way to allow your children to feel a psychological sense of safety is to spend time working with your children to plan their schedules. If they feel some sense of ownership in this, then success is more likely. One of my favorite literacy experts, Jennifer Serravallo, uses this Reading and Writing Facebook Community to share ideas and says to “KEEP IT SIMPLE.” This is a learning curve for parents, so spend time daily talking about the agenda created, even if this agenda shifts due to the rapidly changing world around us, kids will feel more at ease when they have this connection with parents/guardians each day. Allow your children to check off as they complete assignments and provide them with a timer to keep them on task. This time together provides us a unique opportunity to teach our kids how the work force really operates and allows you to model organization and completion of daily tasks in working towards success in accomplishing goals.
- 2) Planning for Success:** As my own daughter starts back at school, each of her 6 teachers have sent emails to her, outlining what she needs to complete for each class. If you are not receiving information, check the district’s site or email the school. Use these outlines to help organize the daily agenda. I use a technique that works well, which I call the Essential 7’s. Each night, spend time with your child organizing the school’s required work, creating a list with the top 7 due. What tools will they need? Make a list of these supplies and organize them together before bedtime. Model this process for them and make it a challenge for you both to complete the first assignment on your personal Essential 7’s List without distraction. Successfully completing this goal is a huge motivator to continue on with the list for the day. This method will keep our young ones focused. This is a

method that also helps parents stay focused (and sane). Remember, we are not immune to this crisis, and our children's eyes are on us as we navigate our now vastly different daily lives.

**3) It Takes a Village:** What we know to be true with children, is that behavior of our kids is often person-dependent (Jennings, 2018). What might be difficult for adults to swallow is that person might not always be us, the parents. You might have already seen signs of your children/young adults being defensive or defiant, and as Jennings teaches us, this is a way they feel a sense of control. Now is the time to rely on others. Are you not a math wizard? Do not forget about your child's older cousin in Ohio who could lead that session for you through Zoom. Do you not feel comfortable reading aloud to your child? Authors like [Mo Willems](#) and other authors are providing [free read-louds daily](#). Additionally, book publishers have started providing [story time](#) with various authors. Authors of Young Adult Literature are stepping up to help, as well. Chris Crutcher is working on compiling read alouds for middle and older students, so keep an eye on his [site](#). Are you struggling to talk to your kids about literature? Use [this model](#) to help guide you. Educators and authors have been extremely generous in providing resources for free. All of these resources can be used to plan your daily agenda with your child. Quite honestly, this is a true benefit for your child. How many times do kids get one-on-one help with planning and instruction, as well as instruction from education's greatest gurus and authors? We are in a unique position to provide our children with needed life-skills they often do not receive due to large classroom numbers. Your child's school community has gotten vastly smaller (your house probably feels like it is folding in on you about now) and creating a cohesive community should be the FIRST priority for your children. This does not have to be left to you. This is too much for one person, so reach out to your village!

**4) Technology:** Is technology an issue for you? First, if you do not have the needed internet or computer for instruction, contact your school district. Both of our neighboring districts have prepared information for our community. Santa Rosa County provides the [Resource Page](#) to help parents and guardians. [Escambia County](#)

does, as well. If you are not in the local area, search your county's web page. If you need to learn such programs as Zoom, [this video](#) and many others on YouTube are available. Be careful not to get bogged down. Learn ONE new tech skill and learn it well. Remember that Essential Rule of 7? Fewer items on the list will make the tasks manageable. Feeling successful will leave all of us with a feeling of security and satisfaction.

- 5) Remember, We are All Different:** In every class in which I have taught and in every class I teach to future teachers, the first weeks are spent on “Creating a Community” and “Teaching and Learning.” Teaching is all about getting to know your students personally and learning their strengths and weaknesses. The community allows a spirit of teamwork to pervade the classroom and allows children to use their strengths to demonstrate knowledge successfully. The Flexible Framework for Trauma-Sensitive Practices in Schools (2005) states we must support our children in how they like to learn and demonstrate their understanding. The Corporation 3M has an excellent initiative for employees. They allow their workers to dedicate time to their passions. Google made the [20% Project](#) known, and instead of teaching to the state tests, there would be no greater dream for teachers than for us to allow our students time to pursue their passions. The objective of the 3M program is to inspire innovation and participation, and through this project, an employee actually created post-it notes. If your school district is not giving you a curriculum to use at home, consider this as an option for your children.
- 6) Communication is Key:** We have known this without having to face a crisis, but it is more important than ever. Remember, behavior is a way to communicate. Even bad behavior is communication. As I learned in my trauma-informed training, approach communication from an empathetic stance in order to preserve the relationship with your child. “I am sorry you are upset” is acknowledges feelings without triggering a trauma response. Also, beware of using time with you as an incentive. “If you finish this, then we will watch a movie together” can actually backfire. Even young children are intuitive and

understand when we try to manipulate their behaviors. Especially now, they need to know that we love them unconditionally. Every teacher I have talked to these past two weeks (hundreds) have expressed their need to connect with their students. I have been teaching 12 years online, and I still do not know how to use the learning platform as effectively as I could be using it, and classroom teachers are juggling both their own distress over our current situation with learning a new skill. If your child needs that connection, do not hesitate to communicate this to the teacher. My daughter admitted yesterday that the most difficult part of online school is not feeling connected to her teachers. With one email to her favorite educator, this teacher wrote Elena a short email message that made my daughter beam with pride. Our teachers are the best partners around, so do not hesitate to problem solve with them.

- 7) **Take Breaks:** In an [article](#) written by Jennifer Serravallo, partnering with technology experts, Kristin Ziemke and Katie Muhtaris (2020) these education gurus remind us of the need to take breaks from learning. Her excellent advice is to allow them to get outside in the yard to get some fresh air. In fact, you can even suggest sitting outside and work, if that helps. This flexibility will keep kids motivated. Children will need LESS time each day to complete their work. She recommends two or so hours is usually enough. One helpful tool I have used is [TedTalks for kids](#). When my daughter has been intensely staring at the screen, I will send her a link via text and tell her to take a break and listen. Many times I will send her funny videos, like There is a [Monster at the End of this Book](#) or a song like the [Muppet's Rainbow Connection](#). It is amazing how students can use these childhood memories to “read deeply” and make inferences. The conversations we have had are some of our best ever! Plus, these pieces of text make us ALL smile. These cognitive distractions (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012) are incompatible with negative thoughts. This allows use to “change the channel of thinking” during a break. Sometimes these breaks are scary, as it gives all of us time to think about our perilous situation.

- 8) **Find a Purpose that is BIGGER than the Virus:** This is a lesson I learned from a 7<sup>th</sup> grade student who was in my class during the 9/11 tragedy in our school community. Emily came rushing into the classroom and told me she finally understood why this tragedy had happened. She said she watched [Oprah](#), and on the show was a young man named Mattie Stepanek. Mattie was a young peacemaker and author who worked until his early death to bring people together. His [books](#) inspired my students to create their own “Heartsongs Across the World”, and they were able to meet Mattie and present him with our creation. This project gave us a purpose. It allowed us to grieve through reading books and writing poetry. It saved us. Finding what your child or young adult is interested in and pursuing through utilizing his or her talents is truly medicine for the soul.
- 9) **Grace, Hope, and Love:** Find a family word for this time. Staying positive and focused on this word will be a reminder of better times to come. When you feel like your day is unraveling, give yourself some grace. When your child has had a rough day at home, give him or her some grace. When the classroom teacher is struggling to get technology to work, again, grace. We need to give the people around us the kindness that we need and deserve. Over the past three years, my focus word has been “Hope.” My daughter and I have shared reading stories from *Hope Nation* by Rose Brock. Matt de le Pena, Newbery-medal winner and New York Times Bestselling author has a coffee-table worthy book entitled *Love*. On [Matt’s site](#), he has letters written to our kids and asks for them to write letters back. What an opportunity for students to express themselves in writing! Audio books are just as effective and use the same parts of the brain as reading text, and there are so many great ones out there. Just this week, [this list](#) was published for secondary students. [Audible](#) has some available for free, so you might want to try this resource.
- 10) **Commit to Connect 20/20:** This time in history is surreal for all of us. Before the pandemic began, I had noticed over the past 10 years that many factors have contributed to our disconnect from our own kids, me included. I know busy lives and added technology have been a factor, but instead of pointing fingers, I feel blessed that this

time allows for us to reset, reconnect, and reprioritize. As David Letterman always left the best for last, I leave you with this. During this time, let's commit to 20 minutes of shared reading with our children and young adults and 20 minutes of discussion. Just this week in the "New York Times", award-winning fiction author Ann Patchett used her column as a platform to admit to her readers she had been a "jerk" for not reading middle-grades novels. Once she started reading the work of Kate DiCamillo, she wrote about these books being "...the most satisfying literacy adventures of my life." For a renowned author who does not have kids of her own, this statement speaks volumes. Her recommendations during this trying time is to read these books as a family. The "incredibly calming" effect of these books are perfect for us at this time of uncertainty. Ann Patchett understands that these trauma-informed practices (McInerney & McKlindon, n.d.) can help our children and us. And, after all, we are in this together. Reading together is the antidote for what ails us. On my [Facebook page](#), and [site](#), I share videos about books for all ages, and I supply fun, engaging activities for all. Some of these additional resources will help us not only survive but ensure we thrive.

Please feel free to contact Dr. Susan Densmore-James at [sjames1@uwf.edu](mailto:sjames1@uwf.edu). She has a plethora of resources in addition to the ones included on this article. We are in this together.

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Life is a gift of god. It is beautiful yet unpredictable. If at times you have enjoyed life to its fullest there will also be times when you are let down. We all go through hard times. No matter how satisfied you are, everyone goes through the most difficult situations...<sup>^</sup> A part of you seems to have died too. Not knowing how to react you might end up going under depression. Loss of a loved one comes as a matter of shock. Facing a loved one's death leaves you in despair. As more parents live longer lives and more adult children seem to relocate for work or other reasons, the number of "long-distance caregivers" (a person living more than an hour away) continues to...<sup>^</sup> Assess and address living conditions. When you live far away, you probably only get to visit occasionally and usually with advance notice. This can make it easier for your parent(s) to mask problems going on at home.<sup>^</sup> Prepare a list of questions for yourself, and help your parent with questions he or she may have. If you are already actively involved in the organization and management of important matters while away from your parent(s), you can accomplish more during your visits. Advertisement. About 1 in 10 moms have a kid they don't keep in regular contact with, according to her studies. Psychologist Joshua Coleman, PhD, believes a vast shift in parenting practices and a divorce boom since the 1960s has set the stage for this type of relationship. Because we don't have as many institutional and communal forces tethering families together in our modern era, "the primary thing that binds today's adult children to their parents is whether the child wants the relationship," he says.<sup>^</sup> How to fix it. If you're really unhappy about the distance between you and a parent, there are measures you can take to reconnect.<sup>^</sup> Disagreements are more common when the adult child depends on the parent for a great deal for support. Miller LM, et al. Life is full of big moments and big decisions. But fret not, from deciding where to live to finding your true calling, here's some advice to help you along the way.<sup>^</sup> Life is full of big moments and big decisions. But fret not, from deciding where to live to finding your true calling, here's some advice to help you along the way. 10. Choose a College Major. Advertisement. The first big decision you'll probably have to make in your young adult life is which college or, even earlier, high school to go to, but that might also depend on the area you're interested in studying. Overall, college rankings aren't that dependable, so the more important question might be: what do you want to major in?<sup>^</sup> For more, check out our Weekend Roundup and Top 10 tags. Advertisement. Share This Story. Disparaging comments can truly ruin the lives of children because it makes them grow up believing that they're always a disappointment to their parents. 7. "Open up to me but don't be surprised at ridicule." Toxic parents force their children to be sincere and sometimes even make them feel guilty if they don't want to share their feelings.<sup>^</sup> Parents want their children to succeed but they don't care how they're going to do it. For example, they can expect their child to build a successful career just as long as they never leave the house. A narcissistic parent will get excited about their child's achievements for only 2 reasons<sup>^</sup> Children shouldn't cut their parents out of their lives and take their help for granted. What was it like for you when you were growing up?