

Op-ed: The coronavirus lockdown has given us the chance to strengthen our family bonds

Dr. Sharifa Al Emadi, Executive Director, Doha International Family Institute – a member of Qatar Foundation – on why measures aimed at fighting COVID-19 are an opportunity to appreciate, and spend quality time with, our families

With the World Health Organization (WHO) having declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic, countries around the world are taking measures to curb the spread of this disease. This has led schools, restaurants and many public spaces to close, while more and more organizations are calling for their employees to work remotely.

This has ultimately meant that children are engaging in online learning, parents are working from home, and family members are spending more time with each other.

While this may be a scary and confusing time for parents and kids alike, it is important to remain positive and engaged. This is an opportunity to take advantage of this time spent at home to strengthen the bond between family members by doing healthy, creative and fun activities together.

The Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) study on The Arab Family Strength in Qatar, Jordan and Tunisia has shown that there are seven major family strengths among Arab families: responsibility, support, good communication skills, respect, conveying traditions, resilience, and love. Quality time spent with family members can be an opportunity to further build on these strengths and values.

So, what kinds of activities can families do together to stimulate kids throughout the day?

Parents can engage their kids by doing a variety of activities such as completing their school work, playing board games and other types of games, reading books, watching movies, doing crafts, and remaining physically active. This is the time to reconnect with kids and re-emphasize key family values and traditions.

Recent DIFI research showed that 32 per cent of the sample of adolescents aged 12-15 years in Qatar eat breakfast less than three times a week, while 43 per cent of adolescents eat fast food 3-7 times a week. These unhealthy behaviors adversely affect their health and wellbeing. As such, this is a golden opportunity to teach kids about good food options and healthy eating habits, and their importance to their growth and development. At the same time, this is the ideal time for parents to have three meals a day with their kids and take advantage of this time to communicate, share experiences, and offer emotional support.

DIFI's research has also illustrated that 45 per cent of the sample of adolescents aged 12-15 years in Qatar spend more than six hours a day on the internet. Meanwhile, 60 per cent of adolescents prefer to spend time online and on social media instead of with their families.

As kids are currently spending more time at home with their families until schools reopen, there is a high chance that they will spend more time on these platforms, which can be harmful to their mental and physical wellbeing. As a result, parents must encourage their kids – depending on their ages and interests

– to participate in physical activity, play video games with them, and engage in other online activities, as well as reading books with them as alternative options.

The coronavirus pandemic can make families feel scared or anxious. That's why it is important to remember that this is an opportunity to appreciate our families, and to spend more quality time with them.