



**Well@Work Podcast
Season 2, Episode 19:
Healthy Family Conversations
Helping Extended Families Survive and Thrive During COVID**

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith gives some tips for helping extended families survive and thrive during COVID.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith. Recent census data indicate that as many as 30% of US households are multi-generational, more than triple what was seen a decade ago. Recently, many households combined as a result of the COVID pandemic, seeking the benefits of cost sharing, improved mental and physical health, and social support that these households offer. In this podcast, I'll share some healthy communication goals, explain the benefits of clearly set boundaries, and offer tips on ways to meet the needs of multi-generational households that may vary widely in ages and stages.

Emerging research shows that being raised in a home with a parent and a grandparent improves academic attainment and buffers against family stress. The cost sharing common in these households has been shown to increase spending on education, hobbies, and activities for children. This increased spending influences future health, emotional, and developmental outcomes for children. Multi-generational households also buffer against the poorer health outcomes associated with childhood adversity from childhood through adulthood.

Adults benefit from living in a multi-generational household too. The combination of households is often the result of support needed during a crisis, like the COVID pandemic, and creates a safety net for all generations. Support is more than financial, although there is clear evidence that cost sharing, reduced cost of child care, and other economic assistance is beneficial for all. The social and emotional support offered can buffer stress from challenging relationships between parents as well as the stress associated with unstable housing, food access, or family economics.

Multi-generational households also offer benefit to older adults. As many older adults choose to age in place, living independently in retirement, there is clear evidence that those who live alone may see a more rapid decline in physical and mental health, as well as cognitive functioning. Multi-generational households can slow that decline, a study released early in 2022 described the benefits for older adults who might have lived alone if they had not combined households. Across races, regardless of cultural or social backgrounds, older adults who lived in multi-generational households reported greater well-being, mental health, and physical health. Additionally, many grandparent-led households are able to rely on a strong network of social support, both in and outside of the home, which benefits all members of the household.

Like many families, Sophia, Luis, and their two daughters have struggled during the COVID pandemic. The girls both had trouble adapting to virtual school. While the parents, deemed essential workers, often worked overtime and worried about COVID. Sophia's mom, Maria, has also struggled; she lost her job early in 2020 and struggled to find meaningful and consistent work since then. So they invited her to move into their home. To make it work, Isabella, who is 17, and her sister, Sonia, who is 12, were asked to share a room so that Maria could have her own space. This caused a lot of conflict between the sisters. But grandma smoothed a lot of family squabbles, relying on her experience from her own childhood, when her abuela moved in with her family. Over time, everyone seemed to be a little bit more at ease after they became accustomed to the new family dynamic.

So what are some ways that you can help your multi-generational household thrive?

Tip 1: have family meetings, because communication is key. Disagreements and squabbles can quickly turn more serious without healthy communication. If you ask anyone in Sophia and Luis's household, there were a lot of challenges early in the process of combining households. It took some time and effort to ensure everyone's needs were met, something that didn't happen until the family started to have regular meetings. Set ground rules together and stick to them. Emphasize the need to listen, the importance of showing respect, and the value of clear, constructive communication. Model healthy communication by settling a disagreement with other adults, apologizing when you're wrong, and keeping conversations productive.

Tip 2: respect privacy. Combining households can be challenging for older adults, who may miss the independence and solitude of living alone, and for children, who no longer have their own bedroom. In smaller spaces with many shared areas, there are still ways to give each other needed personal space. Not everything needs to be a group activity. Make time for one-on-one time with others. In crowded homes, a schedule can ensure everyone has needed privacy. Privacy can also be found in moments of solitude, listening to music through noise-cancelling headphones or taking a walk alone can provide that needed quiet time.

Tip 3: define responsibilities. When expectations are left unsaid, others cannot live up to them. When households are combined, decide together who is responsible for which tasks. Talk openly about COVID health, finances, needs, expectations, and fears to limit the challenge of unmet expectations. Leaving things unsaid can result in hurt feelings, unexpected problems, and other challenges that can limit the benefits of a multi-generational household.

Tip 4: set priorities. Care of some may take priority over others. Perhaps an older adult needs extra help with technology, memory, or care. Or there may be small children in the house that need help with almost everything. Be sure teens and adolescents still get the time and attention that they deserve. Express how important they are to you and others in



the household. Ask for their input on keeping the whole family safe during COVID and make sure they understand how much you value the ideas that they share with you.

Tip 5: remember there is strength in our differences. Each person has their own unique role in the household with different priorities and goals. Living together gives each generation the opportunity to learn from one another and the chance to share their knowledge and talents, which can strengthen family resiliency and boost well-being. The differences in ages and experience can foster growth and lifelong learning, which supports and improves cognitive abilities.

Many found their living arrangements changed as a direct result of the COVID pandemic, leading to an uptick in the number of multi-generational households in the US. Living in a household with people of different ages and stages in life can offer big benefits for all, but it can also be challenging. Healthy communication, clear expectations, and well-defined priorities can help multi-generational households thrive.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.