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## **Stay Safe in Your Imagination!**

### **3 Strategies From Kidpower**

At Kidpower, we teach children and adults alike to “Stay safe in your imagination!”

There are times when staying safe in our imaginations is more challenging than others – and I don’t think any of you would disagree that NOW is one of those times!

Staying calm, focusing on the positive, and figuring out what to do can be very challenging in the face of screaming headlines, confusing and contradictory information, upsetting stories about people being harmed, and disruptions to our normal routines.

Feeling overwhelmed about all the bad things that might happen saps our energy, diminishes our joy in life, and makes it harder to take effective action. Worry does not make us, or our loved ones, any safer – it just makes us miserable. Constant anxiety also can create toxic stress that lowers our resistance to disease – and is likely to increase the anxiety of the children in our lives as well.

So, *how* do we stay safe in our imaginations? **Here are 3 strategies that can help during the challenges and isolation caused by the pandemic– and during other intense times as well.**

1. **Do Prepare — Don’t Panic!**

When our minds are triggered it’s very hard to think clearly or to make wise choices for ourselves and others – here are many strategies we use to calm our minds, evaluate options, and protect ourselves and others from becoming overwhelmed.

2. **Be Prepared to Change Your Plan**

Deciding or accepting when plans need to change can be very difficult – and yet this may be the most important thing you can do to help ensure your own and others’ safety. Prepare for changes that are possibly very disappointing or inconvenient, while also protecting the emotional safety of children and yourself.

3. **Accept that Life Always Has Uncertainty**

A health problem, an accident, a natural disaster, or an assault can upend our lives in an instant. Use your powerful imagination and Kidpower skills to get creative and prepare for what you CAN do, and not let your imagination of what can go most wrong take control of you.

## 1. Do Prepare — Don't Panic!

When the Covid 19 pandemic first started, I saw a headline that read, “IT’S NOT TIME TO PANIC YET!”

“Good grief!” I thought. “Exactly when IS a good time to panic?” In truth, panic is not safe. When our minds are triggered, it is hard to think clearly or to make wise choices for ourselves and others.

If we do panic, **our first job is to get centered**: Take even one or two minutes to focus on calming your body and your mind. First, take a slow, deep breath. Next, sit up straight or stand with your hands free and then focus on feeling your toes pressing into the floor and the weight of your hands resting at your side or on your legs. Lift your shoulders up toward your ears and let them relax down. Imagine seeing something that brings you peace. Breathe in with a count of 5 in, and out with a count of 8, several times.

Now, with a calmer mind, you can look at the pros and cons of different options, and then focus on what you CAN do. Instead of torturing ourselves by imagining worst-case scenarios, we can start to take even small positive steps that can make a big difference.

This is a good time to review, and if needed, develop additional healthy practices that can protect us from a host of contagious illnesses. It is no accident that the most consistent recommendations from experts include what most parents tell their kids to do, “*Get enough sleep. Eat healthy food. Exercise. Wash your hands! Stay home to rest and take care of yourself when you are sick.*”

We can also follow recommendations from experts about HOW to wash your hands and how to avoid or reduce exposure to this novel coronavirus. The [CDC](#) offers step-by-step advice and free resources, including signs you can print out. You can even just write reminders on post-it notes to help yourself and family members stay on track. At Kidpower, we’ve made many [posters](#) about the skills we teach, because we’ve found that posting clear signs is a great way to help teach and remind people to follow safety rules and build new or healthier habits.

**Convert fears about the pandemic into a reminder to review your readiness and safety plans for *any* emergency. For example,**

- Do you and your kids know how and where to get help in a variety of emergency situations and in the places you frequent?
- Does your family have a clear and up-to-date plan for communicating if you aren’t together, and with extended family?
- Do you and your family have access to extra supplies, food, health or other supplements, medicine, clean water, and other necessities if you had to stay home for a couple of weeks?

**Remember that some of what we see or hear is untrue or unsafe.** Don’t waste energy obsessing about the latest headlines or checking and rechecking social media and the news so frequently that it stops you from taking positive actions or enjoying life even with new precautions.

We teach the **Kidpower Screen** as an emotional safety tool for how to deal with an overwhelming overload of information, or also false and biased information that can become dangerous if we were to act on it. Cross your fingers or just imagine a screen – like a window screen, which is meant to keep out bugs, but let in fresh air. Use this image to help you create an emotional screen to filter the information you take in from the news, social media, and even friends and family.

Then use the **Kidpower Think First** tool before you act, in order to consciously decide whether you need to move quickly, or learn more from reliable sources and to verify it, or to discard the information as unneeded or unsafe. You can check out scary rumors on reliable websites and with expert sources before buying products that may not work or help, or deciding on where to go (or not go).

Consider when it may be best to “shut the window” for a period of time; whether that is to stop harmful information from coming in, or to take a break from the 24/7 stream of information. Make sure you are able to take care of yourself and your loved ones without being overwhelmed by the news.

Choose to turn off the news, or to interrupt and stop conversations, especially if you need to **shield young children from scary information so that you can focus on giving them skills to be safe**, without letting kids (or yourself) get overwhelmed with worry. Kids may hear some scary information and want you to tell them more. If you are concerned that kids are already upset, see our article about ways you can **protect and help children regain emotional safety**.

**When you are feeling calm, ask yourself: "Are there important topics I have lost sight of while I have been focusing all my time on this?"** Remember that many things are important to your well-being and values. Put some energy into taking reasonable precautions and then give yourself permission to enjoy your life!

**Don't believe or spread rumors about people who are from different places, groups, or identities.**

Remember that **fear often inflames prejudices** and take positive action to protect yourself and others from assumptions and conspiracy theories that can lead to real harm. Talk with your kids in age-appropriate ways about this. Intervene immediately and clearly to **uphold your boundaries about how we communicate about others**. Accept that are people are dealing with a lot of feelings and may not respond as respectfully as they might otherwise. Model what it looks like give, and accept, **conscious apologies** arising from high-emotion situations.

## **2. Be prepared to change your plan!**

Deciding or accepting when plans need to change can be very difficult – and yet this may be the most important thing you can do to help ensure your own and others' safety. Remember **Kidpower's Founding "Put Safety First" Principle: *The safety and well-being of a child (and yourself) are more important than anyone's inconvenience, embarrassment, or offense.***

When I was a toddler, before the polio vaccine was developed, my mother decided to delay moving to Los Angeles to join my father who had just started a job there. Even though the move had been planned for a long time, her doctor advised that she wait because of a polio outbreak in LA.

I can imagine how lonely and sad my mother must have been to be on her own for three months with an active two-year-old, while being pregnant with my younger sister – and I am so grateful that she made the choice to Put Safety FIRST!

Even so, personally, I hate to change my plans! I hate being disappointed about needing to stop or delay something I want to do or need to do – and I hate having to disappoint others.

I have to remind myself that changing the plan does not have to be catastrophic and that I can look for new options instead of wasting time being upset. Sometimes these new options turn out to be even better than my original plan.

In deciding what to do during a disease epidemic, we all need to understand that schools, businesses, and communities may need to take preventative actions that are very inconvenient.

Families may decide to cancel or postpone long-held plans and say “No, sorry,” to invitations. Or the plans might need to change dramatically in order to manage risk. Perhaps you can suggest ways to make a beloved gathering smaller, or at another time or place. Provide ideas for ensuring more space and good hygiene that might allow the event to proceed, or find other ways to connect; like online and over the phone. Instead of getting upset about these potential changes, or being tempted to ignore necessary precautions because others are upset, we can work together figure out what to do and how to make the best of even a hard situation.

Pay attention to trustworthy sources such as your health care providers. Ask for information and advice from people who are knowledgeable and who empower you rather than trying to shock and upset you into doing something unsafe. Let go of situations that cannot be changed and see what else, that is positive and safe, can happen instead.

### **3. Accept that life always has uncertainty!**

A health problem, an accident, a natural disaster, or an assault can upend our lives in an instant. Twelve years ago, I had a health crisis brought on by extreme overwork and lack of self-care that thankfully turned out not to have been a stroke. It took a while to recover and to re-organize my life so that I could have much better balance.

During this personal time of change, I asked my sister-in-law Judy Wong, whose parents were originally from China, “Is ‘*May you live in uncertain times*’ really a Chinese curse?”

Judy smiled at me kindly and said, “China is a very large country with many diverse cultures, and very likely this has been used as a curse somewhere there at some time.”

The reality is that all of us are living in uncertain times, all the time – because LIFE is uncertain!

Finding peace with this reality can be very freeing.

Staying calm and preparing for what we CAN do; reviewing and updating safety plans; emotionally preparing ourselves to be ready to change plans, if needed; and filtering information for what is and is not helpful, all contribute to my ability to find peace in uncertainty, and I hope it helps you too.

### **But what if scary thoughts are persistent? This is a good time to get help and gain perspective.**

Find adult help to talk about persistent negative thoughts, if you have them; and ask kids in your life, every so often, "Is there anything you are wondering or worrying about that you haven't told me?" Listen to them, even if their concerns seem silly to you, in a way that's non-judgmental. Hear them out and ask if they would problem-solve with you to help make sure their worry gets addressed – and then practice skills and safety plans. See our article about [how to find a good therapist for yourself or your child](#), if needed.

No matter how joyfully and skillfully we teach Kidpower, having scary thoughts come up is normal at times when our students are practicing how to take charge of their safety!

I remember one workshop many years ago, when a young student “Russ” surprised us by suddenly asking urgently, “What if I were surrounded by bad guys who all had big guns pointing at me and were about to shoot?”

“Oh my!” I said. “That’s a very scary picture in your mind. Let’s use your powerful imagination to figure out how to *not* get into that situation. Maybe you can imagine walking down a street and seeing those bad guys – and turning around and walking into a store and getting help?”

Not to be deterred from his exciting story, Russ asked, “What if there were no stores and no people to get help from?”

At this point, his friend asked indignantly, “Where would THAT be?”

Russ thought for a moment and then said, “Hmm... on the MOON, maybe?”

His friend said, “How LIKELY is that?”

Everyone laughed, including Russ, and then we went on with our class!

Our imaginations can be a great blessing when we are in charge of them – and a great curse when they are in charge of us! As author Mark Twain once said, “I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them have never happened.”

**So, please stay safe in your imagination and help your loved ones to do the same!**

## Contributors

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Beth McGreevy, as Kidpower's Web Communications Director and a Senior Program Leader/Instructor, has been working with Irene for more than two decades to make Kidpower's world-renown child protection and safety knowledge and skills accessible to millions of people around the world via the Internet.

As the State Director of Colorado 4-H Youth Development, Jean [Glowacki](#) is deeply committed to ensuring that volunteers, [4-H staff](#), children, and families throughout the state have the opportunity to learn and grow from [4-H Programming](#) and to benefit from Kidpower skills for taking charge of their emotional and physical safety and well-being.

Gisella Gamez, who leads Kidpower Argentina and is a Kidpower trainer and professional translator who is translating Kidpower educational resources for Spanish-speaking people.

## For more resources

**Kidpower of Colorado**, which provides services for parents, educators, and their children in-person and online throughout Colorado - [colorado@kidpower.org](mailto:colorado@kidpower.org).

**Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International** [Covid-19 Safety Resources](#) and [Online Learning](#)

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