

Heroes in Your Home: Finding, Encouraging, and Celebrating Them

Thomas G. Szabo, Sarah Richling, Dennis Embry, Tony Biglan, & Kelly G. Wilson

The authors are behavior scientists and members of Nurturing in Place, a consortium working to assist families in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Portions of this article appeared previously in *Behavior Analysis in Practice*.

Over the past fifty years, behavior scientists have amassed a wealth of knowledge about ways to empower children, aid their learning, generate everyone's cooperation in the home, ensure safety, and most importantly, have fun as a family. An overwhelming number of studies show that simple recipes described below can be applied by families to produce positive changes during difficult times. Taken together, these studies show the importance of three strategies: 1) creating consistent routines with built-in play, 2) celebrating the things others do that work, and 3) building connections to make every member of the family a hero. In essence, we'll experience the most satisfaction when we shift our thinking from how to solve the problem of raising kids during social distancing to how we can channel their "superpowers" and bring out their heroism. Below, we offer a thumbnail for how to use these three recipes to transform your family from being helpless to being heroes.

Creating Consistent Routines with Built-In Play

Research demonstrates that routines help to promote stability in uncertain times. Providing visual family "Rule Reminders" can help you make desired behavior easier to remember. You and your kids might also create colorful "Sight Schedules" to promote structure and facilitate activity transitions. Another strategy is to make chores and transitions fun by playing "Beat the Timer." This is a game where everyone wins and earns something fun when individuals beat their last time at completing a task. An additional research-based practice "tootling," which kids quickly learn is the opposite of tattling. Give each of your family

members cards with spaces for writing another person's name and what they have done. Instruct them to look for others being helpful and to write a tootle to be posted on the wall, read aloud, or placed in a photo album of praiseworthy moments. Making a visual reminder of family rules, a sight schedule, beating the timer, and offering tootles to others are four heroic practices that you can adopt to build playful structure into your family's daily routines.

Celebrating Each Other's Successes

Dozens of studies have shown the powerful impacts of families setting behavioral expectations together, establishing brief intervals in which to meet the expectations, and celebrating. You can begin this "Good Behavior Game" by asking every member of your family what they'd like to see, hear, feel, and do *more of* and also *less of* in the home. Make a colorful map together of these things. Then, establish an expectation such as "we will all work on our chores," set a timer for one or two minutes, and begin. If everyone works for the entire interval, celebrate with giggle fests, tickles, or game time. The next step is to increase the work time by adding two minutes and making sure everyone succeeds before increasing the requirement again.

Other research has demonstrated the importance of letting individuals make choices about what they will do, when they will do it, and what they will earn. "Giving Choices" can be tricky. When asked if we would work longer to get something great or work just a bit and get a smaller reward, most of us will opt for the smaller reward now. But a simple hack for teaching kids to delay gratification is to offer a single reward when they opt to work for shorter periods and a rich platter of rewards to select from when choosing to work longer. This is important, because if kids opt to work longer for the platter of rewards, it leaves you more time to do things you need to do.

Building Connections to Make Everyone a Hero

We've all heard the benefits of having family meals, but sometimes getting kids to the table is tough. Sitting still at mealtime can be challenging for many children. An exercise called "Jumble Jar" provides structure to mealtime and a simple way for members to connect with each other. Fill a jar with sentence starters or "jumbles" to take turns removing and discussing during meals. Instruct everyone to use superhero listening skills, (e.g., "I hear you saying that you dream of snorkeling to see colorful ocean creatures") and use their superpowers to expand on shorter answers that they offer. Here are a few examples:

- "Write two things you thought about doing that you can wait on & do some other time"
- "When I'm really down, my feelings are as big as a ____ and as heavy as a ____."
- "Something I used to be scared of but now I like is ____"
- "When I'm all alone, I pretend I'm a ____ because then I can do this ____."
- "I dream of doing this with my friends ____"
- "So that I can someday do something really great, right now, I practice this ____"

Another strategy that has strong scientific support is to begin the day with a "Vision Statement." Begin your day together by reciting a written statement of your family vision and constructing a list of activities *for the day* – consistent with this vision. Combine this with the creation of sight schedules, as described earlier. The vision statement should express your position on how to face challenges, increase connectedness, and reduce unsafe behaviors (e.g., "Our family steps up when things get tough and we do our part to safely help others").

What to Do When Tempers Flare

You may be doing all the things we've outlined above and then, seemingly out of the blue, you lose it. Or your kid leaves for the park unchaperoned. Here are some strategies to help in these scenarios.

"Stop, Redirect, Praise" is an evidence-based practice that works because it informs someone acting out what they must cease doing and what they should begin doing, plus it offers encouragement for following through with the expectation. For example, when Marilyn is hitting her brother, use a firm voice to say, "Marilyn, stop hitting. Cross your arms and sit down." As soon as she begins to follow through with your instruction, say, "Thank you; I appreciate it when you calm yourself down."

But what if it's you that is getting agitated?

This is where you are called upon to show *your* superpowers. Living in cramped quarters for prolonged durations is likely to increase the frequency of verbal conflicts between adults. Children observe and do as the adults do, so we should not be surprised when they squabble as we do. But a strong body of evidence shows that *just pausing* for just a few short minutes when agitated can lead to more productive dialogue. "Pausing When Agitated" like this facilitates a shift from trying to change each other to changing how we respond to disagreements. Conflicts are not bad; they are the inevitable outgrowth of being different. Managing conflicts with warmth shows our heroic commitment to walking through these hard times together. If you can model this one thing for your children, you will have imbued them with a skill that will benefit them, their future life partners, and their children.

Over the course of many years, our work has shown that cooperation is truly the cornerstone of heroism. Let's use our superpowers to bring cooperation and kindness into our homes.