

LIFE



Matter of life and death

Pandemic provides opportunity for parents to help children cope with the awareness of mortality and manage their emotions, **Li Yingxue** reports.

In February, Wu Qi, associate editor-in-chief of Sanlian Life Week, posted a handwritten mind map on Sina Weibo, sharing with her young daughter how she deals with misfortune.

She told her daughter how to face a problem and how to manage emotions in different steps.

Wu returned to her hometown Wuhan, capital of Hubei province, to celebrate Chinese New Year on Jan 17. Four days later, she moved to a hotel next to Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital together with two colleagues, from where they reported on the fight against the novel coronavirus for the next three months.

Her mind map outlined to her daughter how Wu faced the psychological challenges she encountered and how she managed the accompanying emotions.

According to Huang Zheng, associate professor at the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, for parents who communicate with their children well in daily life, the extra hours and days spent with their kids due to the suspending of economic activities and the closing of schools have strengthened their relationships.

“But for those who already have friction with their children, or teenagers who are in their rebellious phase, the relationship might be more intense,” Huang says.

Huang says Wu’s mind map is a useful way to communicate with children how to understand and manage emotions and similar to the social and emotional learning course taught in schools and kindergartens.

“It’s necessary to teach children how to manage their emotions, which can also be done through reading related picture books or stories,” she says.

But, she says, the frequency should not be too much, lest it overwhelms children.

Huang says children may get curious and scared when they hear about the virus and that COVID-19 kills people, but says: “Parents should not avoid these questions about life and death, as learning about death is compulsory for everyone.”

According to Huang, children usually become aware of death at the age of 4 or 5, “much earlier than parents think”

“If they have pets that die or relatives pass away, they may realize the existence of death more directly, and furthermore, they might worry death could happen to them,” Huang says.

Huang says if a child asks about death due to the pandemic, it’s a good time to discuss the topic with them because it shows the child’s interest, otherwise there is no need to bring up the topic.

“Life education is combined with experience, when they ask, it means they are emotionally prepared, whether curious or fearful, the emotion will make sure the knowledge they learn is not just cold concepts but an experience connected with emotions,” Huang explains.



**Top:** A medical worker who returned from Wuhan after supporting the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic tutors a student about anti-virus knowledge in a class in Xinjianlu primary school, Taiyuan, Shanxi province, on May 18. **Below:** A parent takes her children to Wuzhong Museum, which opened in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, in late June, on July 22. Many children are using the summer vacation to broaden their knowledge by visiting museums.

For children of different age groups, Huang thinks parents should use slightly different ways to talk to them about death.

“For preschool children, a psychological barrier needs to be built between them and death,” Huang says. “They need to feel safe.”

Children’s fear of death won’t be eased in one go and the key to reassuring children is for parents to answer their kids’ questions with a calm attitude each time.

“If the parents are impatient or reject the questions, the attitude will transfer the parents’ fear more directly than words.”

For school-age children, Huang recommends parents have a sincere discussion with them, and search for answers or information together with them in books or on the internet.

For teenagers, some may be overly defensive against death, denying the possibility of any personal danger, although they are told certain behaviors such as smoking or drinking may harm them.

Huang says for teenagers, parents should emphasize the danger of the pandemic and ask them to pay attention to the epidemic prevention measures.

“It’s not horrible to talk about death. Children at any age may have questions about life and death, and the parents should answer them patiently,” Huang says. “It’s not good for children to reject the topic of death.”

Lin Chun, deputy director of psychological consultant working committee of Chinese Psychological Society, says besides offering the chance for parents to talk to their children about death, the pandemic has also given parents an opportunity to cultivate their children’s ability

to deal with a crisis.

He says it’s normal for people to be afraid and anxious because of the uncertainty of the pandemic, and both feelings have a positive side of keeping people alert to danger.

“If the kids are anxious, parents could guide them to embrace their emotions and learn scientific epidemic prevention methods to reduce their fear,” Lin says.

Lin says information overload is a problem people are facing when learning about the pandemic. He encourages parents to search for accurate and useful information together with their children.

The pandemic is something that both parents and kids want to know about, so it’s a good time for parents to inform themselves while helping their kids to figure out how to find accurate information amid all the online messages.

One way to do that is to contrast the information from medical professionals or authoritative institutions such as the WHO and articles on other websites, which will reveal how some reports or rumor-mongers sensationalize or misrepresent the situation to gain attention.

“Critical thinking is needed, and we can use the pandemic to train children to always question the information they receive,” Lin says.

Some news reports and science popularization materials can also inspire kids to imagine and feel the vulnerability of life and the anguish of disease, which lets them understand the importance of health and the inevitability of death.

Lin also says parents can learn more about the virus with their kids, such as the routes of transmission, how the virus infects the cells, and the relationship between such pathogens and wild animals and why cli-

mate change is increasing the risk of such viruses emerging.

“By telling them that human’s knowledge is still limited which needs scientists to explore further can also trigger the kids’ curiosity about nature and their interest in science,” Lin says.

Children may not be used to the lack of outdoor activities and playing with their peers, and Lin says the pandemic is also an opportunity to discuss with children the importance of society.

“Parents could tell the kids that because of the medical workers’ round-the-clock efforts, patients were saved and recovered, and the pandemic has been controlled because of the front line epidemic prevention personnel, together with people from other professions, and by the rest of us staying home,” he says.

As the summer vacation has arrived and the pandemic is basically under control in China, Lin encourages parents to create more opportunities for their children to communicate with their friends.

“There are many things the children can only learn from each other, even from fighting with each other, so social contact with their peers is necessary,” Lin says.

“Children should not only communicate through the internet. Families can socialize together.”

Lin says there are multiple roles that parents play besides being an educator, and the pandemic has strengthened those roles because of the time spent with the children.

“Parents should also be good observers, companions, demonstrators and leaders,” Lin says.

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Owners must act responsibly and care for their pets

By LI YINGXUE

A female Siamese cat was confirmed to be infected with the novel coronavirus in the United Kingdom in July. Previously, in March, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region confirmed a Pomeranian was infected with the coronavirus.

The news about pets being infected in different places has caused panic among some pet owners.

But Sun Quanhui, a scientist from World Animal Protection, suggests there is no reason for pet owners to be unduly worried, and they should not abandon, abuse or even kill their pets because they fear they might become infected.

According to the World Health Organization, the risk of animals spreading the virus to people is considered to be low.

The WHO recommends people who are sick with COVID-19 and those who are in close contact with them limit contact with companion and other animals, and always implement basic hygiene measures, including washing hands after handling animals, their food or supplies, and to avoid kissing their pets and sharing food with them.

The pandemic has given more time for owners to spend time with their pets while on the other hand leaves less time for the cats to stay alone and dogs to go out and play.

Sun says cat owners should create some quiet corner or cat climber to give their cats a choice when they want to be alone and try not to disturb them.

“Both cats and dogs need a certain amount of exercise. With limited opportunities to go outside, owners can use toys and play with their pets,” Sun says.

“Using a cat teaser to simulate bird or tiny animal can let the cat enjoy the happiness of hunting, and sufficient and high quality exercise can reduce the behavior of biting people or destroying furniture,” he says.

In February, a photo of a cat wearing a blue mask with eye holes cut out of it on a street became a hit on micro-blogging platform Sina Weibo.

The cat was made into a sculpture by a young Japanese amateur sculptor who goes by the pseudonym Meetissai and the sculpture was manufactured and sold online in China. The money is to be donated to Wuhan, Hubei province, which was the main battleground for China’s war against the virus.

According to Sun, putting masks on cats or dogs will interfere with their breathing and cause them unnecessary stress.

“For some dogs whose noses and mouths are flat, such as pugs and bulldogs, wearing masks may cause heatstroke,” Sun says.

Sun says pet owners should avoid their pets having unnecessary contacts with other pets or humans during the pandemic, and when returning home from outside, pet owners should wash their hands first before touching their pets.

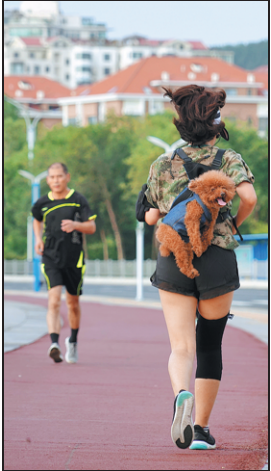
“After walking the dogs, owners should wipe the dogs’ hair with wet tissue, especially their faces and claws. They should also bath them and get rid of parasites regularly,” Sun says, adding that pet

owners also need to be aware whether the disinfecting wipes include elements that are poisonous to animals.

Sun advises pet owners not to bring pets to the wild to lessen the opportunities for contact with wildlife, and to not let the pets go near other pets’ faeces.

He says cats and dogs have provided companionship for their owners during home quarantines and he urges owners not to abandon their pets under any circumstances.

“Animals should not be the victims of this pandemic. Abandoning pets not only brings unnecessary pain but also causes further panic. It’s not the solution for this pandemic,” Sun says.



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Suan Quanhui, scientist, World Animal Protection

Stray dogs have higher risks of being exposed to zoonotic diseases such as rabies which pose potential threats to people.

“We call on all pet owners to treat their companion pets nicely. The pets are their responsibility once they decide to have them,” Sun says.

Sun says adopting stray animals can fulfill people’s wish of raising a pet and also reduce the number of stray animals and give them a new home.

“Good-hearted people can call local animal shelters to ask if there are dogs to be taken care of during the work from home period due to the pandemic, which can provide a temporary place for stray dogs before they are adopted,” he says.

Sun also notices there are news about owners abandoning wild animals that they have been keeping as pets. He thinks wildlife is neither suitable nor right to raise as pets.

“Raising wildlife pets can be a threat to people’s health. Their natural characteristics mean they are not suitable as pets,” Sun explains.



**Top:** A resident jogs in the morning carrying her dog in Yantai, Shandong province, on Aug 1. **Below:** Li Wenqi, a health volunteer during the COVID-19 pandemic, runs with a dog she adopted in Shenzhen, Guangdong province.

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