

Dear RPA Families,

Below find some food for thought as we all seek to find the best ways to navigate our current reality. Caveat: Don't delay, but be thoughtful about the timing of the below-referenced conversations and personally seek professional help when needed.

Caring for Ourselves and Each Other

Despite the various responses we, as complex and unique human beings, can have during times of crisis and significant change, there is usually a single, defining, shift at the core of the experience for all of us. So, let's be unapologetically honest: Life is simply not the same. Life is not the same, for anyone. There are additional layers to that reality which are important to acknowledge as well: Life is not the same...and, we didn't choose this...and, we don't know when things will return to "normal" and what that "normal" will look like.

These seem like obvious statements, so why am I taking your time to point them out? Because a shift so profound to our way of living merits time to process. At the great risk of sounding cliché, given the course of events around the world and in the U.S., we are in the midst of a marathon, not a sprint. If we pull from what other places have been experiencing, we can assume that the changes and uncertainty we are facing at a societal level will more likely last for months, not weeks. ...don't let me lose you on that sour note, stick with me and keep reading to the end.

It is important that we each sit and simmer in those profound truths for a bit, what impact they have had on each of us, and then talk about it with the meaningful people in our lives (those you can both touch and those you can now only see or hear). Why? Because even if you refuse the need to acknowledge it, or acknowledge it but don't give it processing time, you are still experiencing the impact from it. Its like the bully in the classroom that we decide we are just going to ignore. We all know that the bullying continues to do damage, even when we pretend it doesn't hurt.

It's important to reflect and share, because the changes occurring outside of ourselves are affecting what happens inside ourselves...our thoughts, our moods, our feelings, our expectations and thus, our interactions with those around us and our ability to be the best parents we can be. We are all aware of a lot of stressors that people are facing, from financial strain, childcare, health issues, etc. For those of you working outside of your home, you face the workday with increased stress of insecurity and exposure. For those who now find themselves home all day with their child or children, your day to day life and ability to accomplish other household or professional tasks has just been significantly compromised. If you're a single parent, you may have both of those roles meshed into one. Each family has its own set of circumstances and stressors. In a nutshell, we may not be able to accomplish

and do everything we used to do, how we used to do it, or be exactly who we used to be, for now.

So, if we are in this heightened state of stress for the foreseeable future, what can we do to help ourselves along? Running a successful marathon requires training for a solid foundation of skill and stamina, with the wisdom of knowing how to pace yourself. The same can be applied here. We are all in this together, so why not help ourselves and each other do the best we can with it? That means being honest with yourself, being honest with others, being a good listener, and seeking professional help when needed. Practicing patience and forgiveness is extra important, as we all need more of that right now even though, right now, they may be harder to give. Be prepared to hear unexpected things from people you've known forever and to find yourself in a place, mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually, that you've never been in before. After all, this is uncharted territory for us as a society, as a community. Good days and tough days are to be expected, as are shifting thoughts and reactions to events as they continue to unfold. Doubts in your personal beliefs or your faith can happen too. It's all par for this course and these are the growing pains. It is helpful to engage in honest self-reflection about the impact of these changes on ourselves and learn how loved ones are being impacted too. If you share daily responsibilities with someone, having these conversations may help to arrive at a deeper understanding of each other and, practically, to develop new, more realistic expectations of each other, which will hopefully relieve some pressure. Truly beautiful parts of us can emerge when we are being stretched in ways we didn't anticipate. It's okay to take some time to breathe and reassess our roles, goals, and family life.

The Present State (and Stress) of Educating our Children

Let's now focus on the topic of goals, particularly regarding education. For some, remote learning has been a welcomed set of activities to engage our children in and you are hungry for more. For others, it has become one more "new" thing to navigate adding stress upon stress; others may find themselves fluctuating between the two. As a school, RPA aims to provide our families with the opportunity for continuous learning. The administrative team is persistently working together to develop the educational structure and resources that will be shared with our students and families in the coming weeks. That being said, as Mr. Baier shared, your leadership team understands that each of us will implement these resources and learning materials within the realistic contexts of our individual family circumstances. If you find yourself feeling stressed about the expectations or responsibilities of implementing remote learning in your home, I'd like to offer a perspective that I have found comfort in. Since I've been feeling the stress of trying to figure out how to roll with all of these changes, I took a step back and pulled from my early days of training. I revisited an old friend, Maslow, and his Hierarchy of Needs (<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>). Look it up, scroll through it; it gives a brief explanation of the original model (1943) and

expanded model from the 60s and 70s; there is a section on Educational Applications as well.

Essentially, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a theory in psychology referring to what humans need, including children, and in this case, their impact on learning. When we're struggling to do it all, what really are the most important things our kids need from us before true learning can occur? Three months ago, we could conquer that entire pyramid for them...now, in a time of crisis and significant change, it can help us focus on what the essentials really are. First, it is important to acknowledge that our children are also experiencing a near complete change in their worlds; no school, no sports, no play-dates or social events, and for some, no more visits from other family members including beloved grandparents. They may be feeling a new kind of stress that, depending upon their developmental level, they may not quite understand or know how to communicate. However, even in the face of such change, children can be resilient and can thrive when they have their basic Biological/Physiological, Safety, Love/Belongingness, and Esteem needs met with consistency and security. In other words, they need to be healthy and feel safe, loved, and respected as a member of the family with opportunities to have fun together. If we are able to consistently and easily meet those essentials, then we can move up the pyramid to Cognition, Self-Actualization, etc. As a school in the Catholic Faith, I would add that our children both learn from our spirituality and teach us from their's. Keeping your family's faith present in day to day life can also be a source of both need and support. If you're feeling overwhelmed with juggling it all, try slowing down your pace and using your time to focus on providing your child/children with these basic needs, and the rest will eventually come.

To ease anxieties about long-term educational impact, I have these thoughts to share. As a school psychologist and an expert in cognition, learning, and mental health, and referring to education in general and not specifically RPA, I am not concerned about our children's educational state in the long-term. Though we had just begun the fourth quarter, our children are capable of eventually bridging any gaps in skill or knowledge that may develop as a result of schools being closed and the implementation of remote learning. Educational institutions and systems may have to utilize patience and wisdom in adjusting some goals to accommodate the impact of our present educational state, but eventually, the ripple effects of the next few months will be smoothed out and our kids will be on track again. Last I checked, however, there is no educational system that can repair your marriage, repair your relationship with your child/children, or bring anyone back from the dead. My hope, is that I just made you laugh, but in case I didn't, please forgive me for attempting to use humor to drive a point home in writing, which I acknowledge is always a risky move.

My point in all of this is that we currently find ourselves in a period of continual adjustment in response to both external and internal factors. I pray and hope for each and every one of us to find the patience to maneuver these changing times, to find strength in the

foundation of our beliefs, and to seek joy in the smallest of moments. The outlook can be more promising if we try to thoughtfully pace ourselves, dial it back to basic human needs, set realistic goals for ourselves and our families, and hopefully base it on reflecting and communicating with each other regularly. We seem to be in the midst of the most important race for the well-being and future of our human family, for the freedoms our nation was built upon, for the choices and the resources we have built our lives around, for the loved ones and friends whose company we find so enriching. There will be bumps and bruises along the way, but with the grace of God, patience with ourselves and each other, I truly believe we can run our best race yet.

On behalf of our Board of Directors together with your Administrative team, I want to assure you that we are working hard to protect the current and future state of the RPA education that we have all come to love and cherish. We are going through this right alongside you and will keep you in our thoughts and prayers as we move forward with each and every day.

With all my love and faith,

Jackie Balandra, Ed.S.

Reference:

Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper & Row.