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**Contact:** Mike Maggio  
ABAI Public Relations  
312-968-9199

## **AT-HOME STRATEGIES UNITE FAMILIES DURING PANDEMIC** *Study Suggests Parents Tap Into the “Superpowers” of Their Children*

By tapping into their own “superpowers” and bringing out those of their children, parents can turn closed schools and lengthy home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic into a significant opportunity for uniting their families.

That’s the conclusion of behavior scientists, who published their findings the week of April 6 in a special issue of *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, a journal of the Michigan-based Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI). In their article [“From Helpless to Hero”](https://bit.ly/34pSBAI) (<https://bit.ly/34pSBAI>), the researchers suggest long-term parental success involves mixing expectations, games, and plain family fun with discipline, simple routines, chores, activity schedules, and “conscious efforts to make every member of the family a hero.”

“Parents managing their home environments during government-ordered stay-at-home periods are likely needing new skills for occupying their children’s time with activities that promote health and emotional well-being,” writes lead author, Thomas G. Szabo, Ph.D., assistant professor, School of Behavior Analysis, Florida Institute of Technology. He recommends parents enlist the help of their children in this effort “by framing [the children’s] behavior in terms of their hidden superpowers.”

The scientists’ recipe for parenting success, which Dr. Szabo calls “grounded in evidence-based principles, strategies, and essential units of behavioral influence,” is threefold:

1. **Establish simple daily schedules and routines and build in games**, such as “Beat the Timer,” in which each child receives recognition or a small congratulatory reward for completing a specific chore before the timer goes off.
2. **Promote family values and norms by celebrating what family members do that works well.** “Fifty years of research has shown repeatedly the powerful,

lifelong impacts of establishing expectations together as a family, setting brief intervals in which to meet these expectations, and then celebrating,” Dr. Szabo states.

In the study’s description of a computer/video game, children help clean the house, but decide for themselves how much they want to work in order to earn computer or video game time. If they clean for 10 minutes, they might receive 20–25 minutes of video play; 15 minutes or more of cleaning, 40–45 minutes of time on the computer. If a child finishes early and helps a sibling complete a chore, they may earn additional computer time.

- 3. Increase positive reinforcement by creating connections to make every family member feel like a hero.** One strategy with strong scientific support is to begin each day with a family vision statement and “construct a list of the day’s activities consistent with the vision,” Dr. Szabo says.

The “vision” may be as simple as specifying how the family faces challenges, with supporting activities focused on “increasing connectedness and reducing unsafe behavior,” like leaving the house without permission to go to the park or visit friends.

One approach proven to work when a child misbehaves is called “stop, redirect, praise.”

“The strategy lets someone who is acting out know they must cease what they are doing, indicates exactly what they should begin doing instead, and offers encouragement for following through with the expectation,” Dr. Szabo says. “If a sibling is hitting another, a parent uses a firm voice to tell the child to stop the action, ‘cross your arms and sit down.’ As soon as the child follows the instruction, a parent can acknowledge the behavior change by simply saying, ‘Thank you, I appreciate when you calm yourself down.’”

But what if the parent is the one becoming agitated?” Dr. Szabo asks. “This is where you are called upon to demonstrate your superpowers. A strong body of evidence indicates that just pausing for a few short minutes when upset can lead to more productive dialogue. Managing conflicts with warmth shows our heroic commitment to walking through these hard times together. Be the role model for behaviors you want your children to emulate.”

Other practices helpful to parents might include designating different areas of the house for specific activities to minimize the boredom that comes with remaining in the same room, having children spend time petting a pet, hosting five-minute daily meditations for the entire family, and avoiding use of a mobile phone or other distractions when giving attention to a child who needs help with a task.

Putting such suggested exercises into daily use and teaching children that compliance with positive behaviors and expectations are nothing short of “heroic” serve as a kind of “vaccination, inoculating families against toxic and unsafe behaviors,” Dr. Szabo and colleagues write.

The COVID-19 pandemic “has created an unprecedented demand for positive parental support, with no lead time,” the scientists conclude in the study.

“Our study focuses on ways to promote pro-social conduct in the home by showing how these actions reflect the superpowers possessed by children. But, in truth, parents are the unsung heroes of this era,” Dr. Szabo says.

“The most important superpower of all is that, with all the stress of the moment, a parent continues getting up each morning and being...a parent.”

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#### **About the Association for Behavior Analysis International**

The Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) contributes to the well-being of society by developing, enhancing, and supporting the growth and vitality of the science of behavior analysis through research, education, and practice. Established in 1974, ABAI has become the hub of the behavior analysis community, with more than 9,000 members worldwide, and affiliated chapter membership of more than 28,000. Among ABAI’s services to the field are events, online learning, and publication of peer-reviewed journals that promote dissemination of the science. Services to members include job placement and support of more than three dozen special interest groups and 93 affiliated chapters worldwide. Go to <https://www.abainternational.org/> for more information.