

## Fear of Stigma



It was the second day of school after the COVID lockdown period ended. The confinement was sometimes pleasant, because as a family, we were all together, breaking with our usual and sometimes stressful way of living. Of course, it was disturbing at the beginning, with the uncertainty of the whole situation (school, work, family, and friends) but in general we were calm, and the children seemed to adapt very well.

Sometimes we talked about the pandemic. I was deeply trying to tell them the importance of being flexible and prepared to make changes. Just a few times, the children asked troubled questions regarding the fact that people were dying– but because they were not listening to the news on TV or the radio, they remained on the side of reality, even if this can also cause harm.

Finally, summer arrived and also the end of lockdown. I was happy to see a sort of normal life coming back. We spent the hot months by the sea with few restrictions, before the children readied themselves to return to school. However, it became an anxious time again for everybody, as everything felt still unprepared, unforeseeable, and dense.

“So, how was today?” I asked without intention, under my uncomfortable mask.

My daughter gave me a thumbs-up. It is true that with wearing face masks, non-verbal language, especially with our hands, makes more and more sense– but still the eyes give us a lot of information, and my daughter’s were not as shiny as usual.

“What will happen if I get ill?” she asked with a tiny voice.

“Well, we will all stay at home for two weeks,” I answered calmly. But at the same time, my thoughts were racing and I thought – but didn’t put into words– the rest of my answer, “In the best case, we will all just stay at home for two weeks, but if the virus affects you badly, you would go to the hospital and be there until you hopefully recover.” These kinds of omissions were common for me, as I never wanted to scare them, or be too dramatic or excessively concerned.

“And what would happen with school?” she continued.

“We would tell the school, and everyone in your class would go home. Then home-schooling would start for two weeks, and you would go back once you were feeling better.” Details were unknown to me and all the mechanisms around this really started to irritate me.

“I don’t want to get ill,” she said, her eyes now nearly filled with tears. “Everybody will know it was me!”

“Anybody can get infected with COVID, and it is not a crime, dear,” I told her. “Sooner or later one of us will probably get the virus, and you don’t have to be ashamed. Would you be pointing out someone in your class because they got sick from COVID?”

I was prepared to hear a negative answer and already had mine in mind. Still, I was in shock when I heard her say, “Yes.”

My heart sank with a let-down feeling, a sort of education failure. I haven’t been able to transmit the empathy or courage to my daughter that she needs to face her fears. But I also understood the heavy weight of stigma, and I was furious with the whole society and with myself.

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