

We Can Help Shape How Our Children Remember the Pandemic — and Foster Their Future Happiness

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My kids won't be in school full-time this fall, so, like most parents, I will be thinking about how to keep them occupied and content. But I'm also a memory researcher, and that makes me wonder how they will recall these odd times decades from now. Naturally, I hope those memories will be more pleasant than miserable.

That goal sounds uncomplicated — happy kids should grow into adults with happy memories. But reminiscences aren't a simple averaging of experience. I'm not out to manipulate my kids, but knowing how memory works helps me shape what my children will recall of 2020.

What's a desirable "normal" of the pandemic? For my kids — three teens — I want to minimize bitterness about the restrictions on our lives and maximize gratitude for our health and well-being. I hope for less frustration at being separated from friends and more pleasure at spending time with family. These emotions and attitudes not only lead to better mood today; they are also associated with happiness in the long term.

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How will these practices influence what my children recall decades from now?

A memory summarizing months or years, for example, "the pandemic" or "attending Wilson High School" is not the heading of a mental file containing details of that time. It's an isolated fact.

The rich detail resides in *episodes*: [memories](#) of events that last hours, not months. Episodes like "trying out for basketball" or "taking the SAT" include mental images and sounds, as well as the feeling *this happened to me*.

Remembering "my Wilson High days" means constructing a story from episodes of that time. You can't use all of them, so you pick episodes that fit with broader beliefs about yourself. For example, if you think you were "a good son" at 17, you'll summarize high school with episodes showing that theme.

This desire for memories to seem logical is heightened when we relate them to others. People think of their life story as just that — a story — and so they tell a good one, [filling gaps](#) and editing out-of-place events as needed. We even edit individual episodes to make them more logical. For example, if a story about a restaurant visit doesn't mention the patron ordering, people [falsely remember](#) that happening: If the customer ate, he must have ordered.

