

» PARENT GUIDE

---

# FROM CALAMITY TO SANITY

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES IN A WORLD  
OF WORKING AND EDUCATING AT  
HOME

---

ANDREW MOWAT  
MetaLearn Education





## Why do this?

Nobody needs to tell you that, suddenly, life is different. Now, many parents will be trying to manage and make sense of a family home where one or two of the parents are working from home, and where one or more kids are schooling from home. Outside the four walls of the home the world adds to the strain.

The aim of this guide is to develop and support new conventions that help everyone to work well together and individually. This is especially important for when times are tough, and now with \ COVID-19 crisis, the world is as tough as it probably has ever been for most of us.

Most of this guide works best with children of about 8-10 years old and above, and is dependent on some degree of self-management and awareness. For younger children, it is a similar, yet modified process that is more instructional than a negotiated conversation.

What you, the parent(s), need to build with your family is the shared ownership of managing the new and challenging home environment. When done well, this process can take a great deal of the load of handling the working-schooling environment at home.

What might possibly feel like chaos and calamity can shift to sanity with a few conversations and a little planning.



**“Nothing of any real and lasting value comes without effort and work.”**

---

Paraphrased from Theodore Roosevelt famous quote  
“Nothing Worth Having Was Ever Achieved Without Effort”



## » FROM CALAMITY TO SANITY



A central idea here is to simply have a conversation that matters. What doesn't matter is the unique mix of circumstance you are facing. You may be working, or not. Your kids might be home-schooling, or just on holidays.



Whatever your circumstances, it is almost certain that a conversation about how we should work and relate as a family will bring at least some sanity. Especially for you, if you are a working parent.

A principle of this approach is to expose emotions and difficulties - the things we normally don't talk much about - so that they are visible and acknowledged. It is also worthwhile not making this too 'heavy'. The goal is to open up the conversation, not to make it feel like a 'corporate' process.

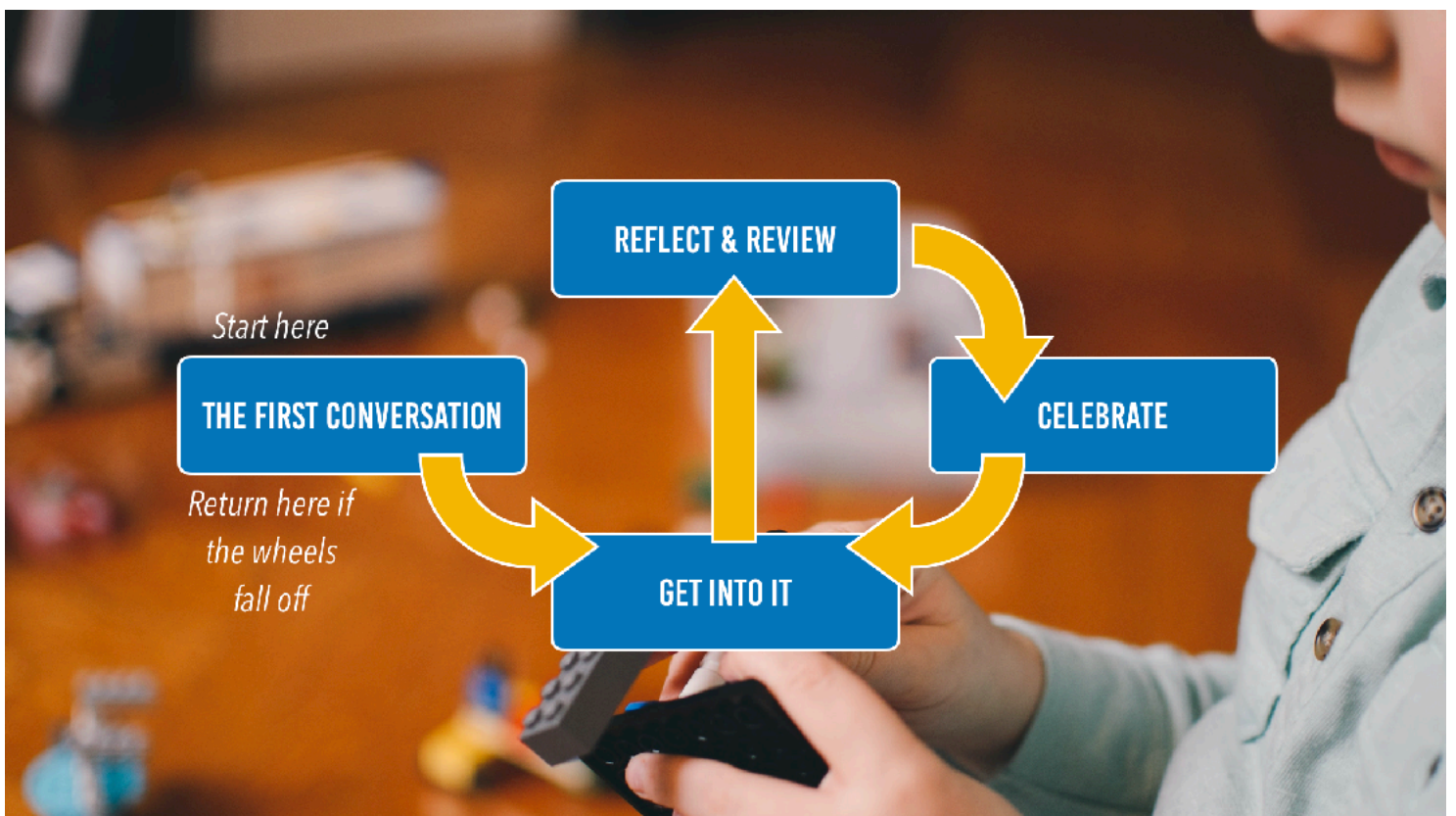
Depending on the age and personality of your family team, you should:

- Approach this situation as new learning journey for everyone
  - \* This means that some things you try will work, others will not
  - \* As you progress through your learning, be prepared to try many things, abandon some and change or keep others.
  - \* This is a wonderful opportunity for you to learn, model and teach resilience and adaptability in a real situation. Your kids will learn some wonderful life skills by doing this.
- Have someone to lead each conversation
  - \* Start with a parent
  - \* Role is to manage the conversation, not to impose opinions
  - \* Ensure everyone has a say
  - \* If possible, in later conversations, have children lead the conversation
- Have regular conversations
  - \* This is similar to a trek through a difficult rainforest - you need forge a path, yet at times you need to stop and check that you are heading in the right direction
  - \* Hence, this process is a mix of planning-reflection and action
  - \* Depending on how this is working for you, aim for a weekly family meeting, more if you have issues emerging
  - \* Make the follow-up team conversations 'light' and not too long
- Celebrate your wins, work through your issues



## FOUR STAGES

Moving from chaos and calamity to sanity involves three stages



Brains are complex, hence people are complex. And now our world, in only weeks, has been turned on its head. We are truly living out VUCA lives - volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

No simple solution can address such a situation, yet a strategy with a series of steps can help. Hence this model. The design here is to start with conversation, good conversation that matters and has impact. Then, conventions and processes can help do a lot of the heavy lifting for you. Once you have these new conversations in your repertoire you can get into the action of creating ways of working that better help everyone. Finally, as you progress into sanity, you will learn a great deal about your family and yourself, especially around the conditions that you need for you (individually and collectively) to not just survive, but to thrive.

---



## STEP 1: PLAN

### The Conversation

Needless to say, this is your most significant conversation, The aim is to acknowledge the difficulties (current and anticipated) and to design some solutions and conventions.

Depending on the ages and personalities of kids involved, this could be as simple as a round-table, using the questions below as triggers to thinking. Or it could be more structured. Success will also depend on the existing 'culture of conversation' in your family, along with any pre-existing or unresolved problems or issues.

#### **A simple conversation structure**

You need to make sure all voices are heard. Given that this is likely to be a unique and novel experience for you and your family, this conversation structure might help you start to feel your way into this sort of discussion. For those of you who are teachers, you'll recognise this, it is based on the Think-Share-Pair protocol.

1. Use the trigger questions below to focus thinking and emotions into a helpful context
2. Have each person think for a moment, maybe jot down a few thoughts.
3. For groups of three, simply share the thoughts and feelings back to the 'triad'
4. For larger groups, split into groups of two or three, share your thoughts with your pair or triad
5. Come back to your family group (if you split into groups in step 4) and see how your sharing compares - what was the same, what was different?



## **Broad stages of the First Conversation:**

1. Current reality
2. Needs and conditions
3. Forward concerns
4. Ways of working together
5. What do we commit to trying?

### **Current reality**

- What is worrying me? [In the outside world or within the home]
- What are my main feelings at the moment?
- What is difficult to manage or hard to do now? [In the home]
- Is there anything that is better?

### **Needs and conditions**

- Generally, what needs do I have? [E.g. work, school, space, acknowledgement, hugs/ reassurance, exercise, play, relaxation]
- Think about when I am at my best doing the work I need to do. What are the things that I need to be at my best? [E.g a timetable or structured times, quiet, space]
- What things get in the way of being at my best? [E.g technology, an untidy house, toys on the floor, noisy play]
- What distracts me the most?

### **Forward concerns**

- What are the things that I have to get done? [Things that you don't have a choice or option, e.g. online work meetings, online course work]
- What will we have to work hard to maintain? [E.g. tidy house, fun, good humour or moods]
- How can we manage technology so that we stay on task when we need to?
- What do we already know about how our family works that we should consider or





### Ways or woking together

- Thinking about all of the previous answers, what attitudes and behaviours should we try for?
- How do we organise our working spaces?
- How do we organise the time we work?
- What can we be doing to help each other and contribute? (Service)
- What do we do when quiet time is needed [E.g. when mum is on an online meeting]
- What can we do to make the house a good place to live and work?
- *What do we do when we have conflict or arguments?*
- *What should we never give up as a family?*
- *What should we not tolerate as a family?*
- What should we try to improve as a family?
- How do we manage technology to stay on task and to maintain access? [E.g. streaming or downloads during online meetings might be an issue]
- What will be our working and relaxation times? [It will probably be helpful to have a structure of timing, a timetable]
- How and when do we celebrate our effort and progress?
- How do we check in on how we are going [Suggested weekly catchups - review and set up the forward week]
- *What do we agree to?*

### **This last one is the key: "What do we agree to try?"**

- Attitudes and behaviours
- How to work and apply ourselves
- Acknowledgement of emotions, mistakes and efforts [By parents and kids]
- How to manage raised emotions and frustration

*Note - there are too many questions above to consider them all. I have added a signifiant of questions so that you can engage with the ones that make sense in your context. Questions in italics are critical questions to consider.*

Once this is in place, try to work through the commitments over the course of the rest of the week. It is super important that you and your family understand that this is not a set of rules, but a guide where you are flexible enough to learn from mistakes or things that did not work well. It is likely that you have never been in this situation before - see this as a learning journey for the family.



### Some bigger ideas to include in your discussion

I have the privilege of associating with some wonderful thought leaders, and just today at the time of writing), the gorgeous Lisa O'Neill provided a critical webcast for surviving the multitude of lockdowns and restrictions. She spoke of several key ideas, and they just fit so well in the context of this guide. See more of her work here: <https://www.lisaoneill.co.nz>

#### Idea #1

Each of the family members (again, depending on age and capability) needs to commit to making sure these four elements are each day, if not across the week.

Service is about contribution, Solitude is recovery and recuperation, Work is the stuff that needs to get done, and Activity about brain or physical activity, or both. It's a neat way of making sure that the family culture is balanced. Work with it, see how each element demands on the other and shape your an answer that uniquely your family's culture.



#### Idea #2

Lisa's next idea has the same flavour about it, but rather than things to make sure we do as a family, this is more about what each person should be doing, each day.





## The SCARF Test

What ever you agree to, it should pass the SCARF test.

SCARF is a model based on social learning and engagement that has emerged out of recent neuroscience. As the leader of this family conversation, you need not explore this as a group - this is designed more as a checklist for you. It will help you stay on track towards success.

The author of this model, Dr David Rock, has several books and articles on SCARF. His book, *Your Brain At Work*, is a recommended read, and you can see a short YouTube video on an explanation of SCARF here: <https://youtu.be/HbkfjBJpEBw?t=333>

Use SCARF to ensure that you give rewards when you can given the pre-existing threats.

|          |             |  |
|----------|-------------|--|
| <b>S</b> | Status      | Does what we have agreed to allow us to learn and be acknowledged?                       |
| <b>C</b> | Certainty   | Is what we have decided clear to everyone. Do we have certainty on what to do or not do? |
| <b>A</b> | Autonomy    | Do we have the room to make our own choices?   |
| <b>R</b> | Relatedness | Does our plan help us to maintain or improve our family bonds and relationships?         |
| <b>F</b> | Fairness    | Is our plan fair to everyone?  |

### A few final thoughts on the First Conversation...

As a parent, also be vulnerable and humble enough to call yourself a visible earner - you will need to be modelling the aspiration behaviours and attitudes that you all agree to. Do your best to create an ethos of care and adaptability. You want to be able to challenge anything that turns out to be unhelpful, be it something you try or someone's behaviour or attitude.





## Step 1 With Younger Kids

The process above, as mentioned, works best with children in middle primary/elementary years and above, If you have younger children, you need to give less autonomy (more rules than principles or agreements) and more clarity (make it simply understandable).

If all of your children are in lower Primary/Elementary or below, talk about the new situation and give them clear directions and 'rules'.

- Help them make sense of this with stories and illustrations.
- Have plenty of visuals around the house to help them
- Keep your guiding rules to a minimum to make it easier for them to understand the way we work as a family
- Discuss (beforehand) what will happen when 'rules are broken' or difficulties arise.
- Be prepared to use processes and resources that help kids make the best choices. For instance, you might have a place in one of your rooms for 'quiet recovery time'. We live in a small (by Western standards) Singaporean 2-br unit, and for our 10y.o. boy, there is an area to go and be when he is making poor choices, More on this later, but give them autonomy by saying "When you are ready to join us again, you can come out of this area/room/space." Sometimes it may take a few goes at this before your child is truly ready to rejoin people.





## STEP 2: ACTION

Just get into it

A friend and colleague of mine, Col Fink, often quotes "clarity follows action". This is going to be very much what happens here. There will be some things happen that you expect, and some learning that emerges that, maybe, you could never anticipate. You will see the best and worst of each other. Don't fight this, accept it, work with it. Note what works, challenge what does not.

It may be helpful of using a whiteboard to capture thoughts as your plan progresses. This also can work well for introverts in your family. Suggested 'headings' could be:

Plus/Minus/Interesting  
Worth keeping/worth changing

Diaries and journaling also helps a great deal when you come to reflect and review progress (Step 3).

I suggest that at least one person captures the good, the bad and the ugly in an objective way. Better if a few people do it, especially kids who are in the 8-10 years and above age range,

This will later teach the integration of different perspectives and observations.

Journaling itself is also a powerful tool to stay on top of challenging situations - it has many benefits for the brain.

Photo by [Hannah Olinger](#) on [Unsplash](#)





## STEP 3 - REVIEW

Clarity Follows Action

Photo by Ben White on Unsplash

A friend and colleague of mine, Col Fink, often quotes “clarity follows action”. This is going to be very much what happens here. There will be some things happen that you expect, and some learning that emerges that, maybe, you could never anticipate. You will see the best and worst of each other. Don’t fight this, accept it, work with it. Note what works, challenge what does not.

A process that often works well in other contexts is to start the week with a quick catch up on how the plan is going. You could start the session with a small game that gets people engaged and connected. Whatever you do, make it light and relatively short.

Your main aim is to capture learning, acknowledge the things that worked and change the things that did not. A quick set of questions to help you here are:

- How did the last week go? What did you notice?
- How did you feel then, how do you feel now?
- What did you/we learn?
- What unsolved problems do we have?
- What will we keep doing?
- What will we stop doing?
- What could we change or tweak?
- What do we agree to do for the next week?

A final thing to check in on is anything important happening, in terms of work or school tasks? For instance, mum might have an important webinar to present on Wednesday 10am. This sort of thing could be captured on a weekly planner.

From here it is ‘rinse and repeat’ - a cycle of get on with it and reflection-review. If things fall apart, go back to step 1, the initial conversation and start over, including the things you have learnt so far.



## STEP 4 - CELEBRATE

Acknowledge the learning

Photo by NeONBAND on Unsplash

In some ways, this is not the last step, but it needs to be somewhere in your coping cycle. Ideally, at the end of the week or into the weekend, you should do something that acknowledges the effort and learning during the week. What this celebration is will depend very much on what matters to your family and what the outside world is demanding or constraining.

Whatever your celebration, it is an opportunity to further build family cohesion, and things like movie nights, multi-player digital games and old-fashioned board games come to mind. But this is collectively and individually your reward. It could be that the reward is about alone time to recharge and recover.

This next list is far from exhaustive, and is here only as a trigger for thinking. There are a heap of ideas and examples on YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter and Facebook. Keep an eye out for new and fun ways of connecting using our virtual technologies.

Ideas include:

- Movie nights
- Board games
- Cooking sessions
- Maker spaces, art and crafts
- Online game time, solo or group
- Outside walks (depending on isolation/quarantine requirements and weather)
- Kick to kick (depending on isolation/quarantine requirements, available space and weather)
- Youtube drama creations

There is no doubt that this is a difficult context in which to think about rewards, but celebration is a necessary sanity builder.

Thinking back to the SCARF model, celebrating the growth and the 'potholes' gives big brain rewards in Status, Relatedness and Fairness. It helps prepare all of your brains to 'do it again' next week.



## RESOURCES

Some ideas

Photo by NeONBRAND on Unsplash

### Daily Structure

If we go back to SCARF, in a world full of uncertainty, you can offset this with certainty within your four walls. This could be simply knowing the family rules and how you will apply them, yet there is also an opportunity to bring structure into your family culture.

We can sometimes forget that kids lead highly structured lives at school - their days are heavily timetabled. Coming home to an unstructured environment can be the cause of some unwanted behaviours - kids love the certainty of structure and can 'kick off' if this is missing.

Start by planning some sort of simple 'timetable' or schedule, and reflect on this in your weekly conversation. Be prepared to shift and tweak elements of your schedule, from how long they are to when they should happen. Even better, combine your schedule with the Pomodoro Technique.

There are some other key systems and processes that will continue to make managing the home culture easier for you.

One of these I have been successfully using for some time, well prior to the COVID-19 situation.

The **Pomodoro Technique**, works well for both me and my 10 year old boy here at home. This technique suggests that you set up timed 'sprints' of work, with short breaks in between. To easily get an hour of work done, I use timed cycles of:

- 15 minutes of work
- 5 minutes of rest

Shorter sprints work well for younger kids, whilst longer intervals might work better for older learners. You can even build in longer breaks after a number of repeated cycles. The keys to this are to time each of the intervals - the sprints and the breaks - and stick to the timer.

A really good short video on the Pomodoro Technique can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/1l4w7uHdNaQ> - understand the principle and then adapt it to your circumstances and needs.





## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS AND HELPFUL HINTS

### Wellbeing

Depending on the age of your child or children, and depending on the family circumstances, it is likely that it will be up to you to lead and manage your family unit. Each of you should know (or for young kids, you should know) what sustains and motivates you. This is the fuel that you will need to keep going.

In other words, if (e.g.) your sanity needs 30 minutes a day to do some reading, prioritise this into each day. If you need your yoga or meditation session each day, work out a way to make sure you get this. Once you begin to sacrifice these central needs that you know you have, you are on the downward spiral to further chaos and calamity.

### Language

The language you habitually use may actually, itself, be contributing to unwanted and unhelpful responses.

When making observations of others in your family, try to avoid ‘always’ and ‘never’ in your feedback.

*“You never help when I need it!”* will not really help you resolve a conflict. Instead, try *“What I notice is that you don’t often help me when things get a little crazy.”* This can be followed by *“What are your thoughts?”*

This softer observation is more objective and reduced the chance of the reply starting with *“But...”*. It also invites the other ‘brain’ to consider what you have said, If you need to strengthen your observation, add *“and the impact on me is ...”*

To see more on how to better give feedback, send me an email or visit my website for a white paper/guide on language and approach.





## CONCLUSION

Principles, not rules

This guide is an attempt to help families adapt to new and challenging circumstances by giving some processes and structure to navigating the unknowns. People who read this will do anything from following it to the letter to simply grabbing a few helpful ideas.

Take what you need and adapt it to your own circumstance. Research and read - give yourself the best chance of leading your family through this by skilling yourself up in the new roles of leader and educator at home.

From time to time I will be running webinars and other learning opportunities. If you want to stay in the loop around ongoing learning opportunities, please add yourself to my mailing list. You can do this by visiting my webpage - <https://www.andrewmowat.com> or by adding your details to this link: <https://gettalk.at/conversations> You can also download my book and other goodies for free from either of the two links above. Please also reach out if you want any of this guide explained in more detail, or if you feel you need to bounce ideas or thoughts.

Take care, ride the bumps, but take the opportunity to build a strong family culture. Your kids may well remember this as much more positive time than you think.



*Be kind to yourself.*

*Allow those moments where emotions and voices are raised.  
Acknowledge, forgive, and more than anything, keep talking, keep listening.*

» ANDREW MOWAT

---

# CONTACTS

WEB LINKS:

<https://www.andrewmowat.com>

E-MAIL:

[andrew@andrewmowat.com](mailto:andrew@andrewmowat.com)

SOCIAL

Twitter: @anmowat

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrewmowat/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/metalearnedu/>

