

# The Sydney Morning Herald

NATIONAL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

## 'It's a tinderbox': rescue kits to end COVID-19 family wars

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By **Julie Power**

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Hundreds of Australian psychologists are rolling out new programs to end COVID-related family wars triggered by uncertainty and too much togetherness during lockdown.

Meanwhile, new resilience bootcamps developed by Dr Danielle Einstein, a clinical psychologist and researcher at Macquarie University, are showing Sydney students how to defuse "uncertainty time bombs" before they cause lasting damage.



Billie Ronis, a PLC student, and her younger sister Jamie. Billie, in blue, has been participating in a new online course COVID 19 Chilled and Considerate Bootcamp developed by Sydney psychologist Dr Danielle Einstein. STEVEN SIEWERT

"There has never been a time where one universal experience has brought the world to a standstill and taught us the importance of managing uncertainty," said Dr Einstein, whose research over two decades has studied uncertainty, and how to build resilience.

Psychologist Mark Dadds described the months in isolation as a "tinderbox" for families with the risk that the tiffs and explosions could create dangerous patterns with momentum beyond lockdown.

Often people would find themselves saying hurtful things, said Professor Dadds, the co-director of Sydney University's Child Behaviour Research Clinic. With everyone home, occasional explosions – where someone may "lose it" over something as routine as a messy kitchen – were escalating.

When everyone was together, it was easy to pay attention to negative behaviour, and forget the positive stuff, he said.

Senior psychologists at Barrington Centre in Melbourne have developed and launched "family makeover" sessions to broker peace where "family wars" had erupted in lockdown.

The centre had received increased calls from people needing help, said Rhonda Andrews, Barrington's managing director. GPs had also referred clients who were highly emotional, and lawyers had called to seek mediation for families who had sought advice on separation or divorce.

"The challenges of spending every waking minute together, on top of the stress and anxiety in uncertain times, have pushed some families to their breaking points," she said.

The family makeover sessions, part of the government's telehealth initiative, will be subsidised by Medicare and delivered by more than 300 psychologists across Australia.

One family's teenage son had a voice booming through a house where everyone was working, said Ms Andrews. "They were yelling at him to keep quiet, and that had a triggering effect where yelling was happening everywhere," she said.

The family makeover gave families the tools to identify the hotspots that triggered family arguments. It looked at what families were willing to do, and sacrifice, to reach a common goal.

Dr Einstein said her bootcamps were designed to build resilience in students, teachers and families by showing when and how uncertainty would set someone off, and learning how to slow down instead of responding with anger.

Many parents may be exhausted after weeks of managing work and family, some may be worried about finances, and lose their temper over small things.

Where families had built up goodwill and attachment, these explosions would be forgiven. "Our children do forgive us, and we can be imperfect parents."

A range of schools, including Sydney's PLC, have already rolled out Dr Einstein's COVID-19 Chilled and Considerate Bootcamp to help students manage their emotions.

Billie Ronis, a PLC student in year nine, said the school had implemented "Power Up Wednesdays" – now online – where students talked to peers and a teacher about their worries. "We all agree that being at home and online can be very lonely," said Billie, who lives in Georges Hall.

"We are going through a time never experienced before, because of that there's uncertainty.

"I can sometimes be much more worried than usual, asking questions like 'What if I got the virus? What if I pass on to someone else?'," said Billie. The course had helped. The uncertainty time bombs hadn't disappeared but dissipated, she said.

The COVID 19 crisis has created a greater urgency to ensure that students had the resilience, optimism and problem-solving capacity to cope with the uncertain future, PLC's principal Paul Burgis said. "Our students are knowledgeable and well informed about the current COVID-19 situation. They are not panicking. They are simply getting on with their learning," he said.

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