

Lebanon News

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Lebanese families, teachers try new methods to find normality in abnormal times



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BEIRUT: The Lebanese are finding new ways to maintain the daily rituals and traditions that give young children a sense of normality while coronavirus wreaks havoc worldwide.

To do this, parents, teachers and cultural workers are pushing back against calls for "social distancing" and are going online to strengthen social ties within their communities.

Nadine Touma and Sivine Ariss normally host their interactive storytelling sessions in gardens, town halls and public spaces across Lebanon. The pair behind Beirut-based publishing house and cultural platform Dar Onboz have since made those sessions virtual, live streaming daily at 7 p.m. on Facebook.

"The first day I was so scared and nervous, even though I've done like 1,000 performances before. But then you pick up and go into your own world," Touma told The Daily Star. "We've always been a multi-disciplinary platform ... and [we use] a variety of mediums including art, science, anthropology, oral tradition and storytelling."

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In working around Lebanon’s wide-reaching coronavirus lockdown measures, Touma and Ariss have found themselves not just a dedicated local following of children and parents looking for structure and connection while we are all keeping ourselves physically distant from each other. They have also tapped into an audience of Lebanese people living in the diaspora who are hungry for meaningful stories in Arabic.

“We’ve been getting families telling us that it’s become like their ‘sacred time’ at 7 p.m. every night to sit and watch. It’s been very, very moving,” Touma said. “We literally have covered the whole world and we’re getting private messages from Brazil, to Australia, to America, to all of Europe, Africa, Asia. It’s a beautiful way for the Lebanese diaspora to connect with their mother tongue.”

Encouraging these forms of quality interaction can help parents ward off the possible negative effects on children of uncertainty in the wider environment and of being withdrawn suddenly from school.

Under these circumstances, children can often become “very clingy, needy, or act out and be more defiant,” said Tania Bosqui, a clinical psychologist at the American University of Beirut.

“It’s a little bit inaccurate to try to present this as a normal situation as it really isn’t,” AUB lecturer in developmental psychology Maliki Ghossainy told The Daily Star. “Instead, this is a really good time to give children the opportunity to appreciate parents as a secure base. This comes from being actively engaged, but also allowing them freedom to explore on their own and not always being on their case.”

Ghossainy said that this can be done by introducing structure and routine at the start and end of the day, with free play in between. During that free play, she recommended that parents fashion everyday objects around the house into a game or learning exercise.

“You could fill a tub with water soap and bubbles and have them wash their toys like Lego. This can keep them entertained for a good stretch of time but also helps them understand hygiene.”

Schools are also adapting and playing their role in keeping Lebanese children learning.

Brummana High School has been experimenting with holding online pastoral sessions for its kindergarten-aged students – sessions which they say are “some of the first in Lebanon.”

“The relationships that develop between a teacher and the children are so important in a child’s sense of self and security,” Sage Ball, the school’s vice-principal for pastoral care told The Daily Star. “The current closures are not planned and this can be confusing for young children. It’s so important for their well-being that they have contact with their teacher. It represents consistency and stability for them.”

Racha Murr is one of the teachers who has been leading the school’s virtual sessions from her Mansourieh home. Each morning she brings as many as 29 kindergarten children together for two 20-minute bouts of storytelling, circle time and show-and-tell.

“It’s really about keeping the classroom and morning rituals up. I’ve set up one of my rooms at home so it looks similar to how it was at school. They feel safe with this routine and environment,” she said.



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student picks and presents something from their house for five minutes.”

Murr said that she had “more or less full attendance” and that she anticipated her students would be able to take the sessions without their parents’ supervision next week. She said, however, that scheduling was difficult and that the children would concentrate better if they were at school. Whether or not the children’s interest could be maintained into the future was also on her mind, as she feared that the novelty may wear off.

The sustainability of such initiatives and the extent that young children are able to weather the kind of disturbance they are currently facing eventually comes down to family and parental capacity. Cramping days full of activities or homework in this context is going to have a negative effect.

“The vast majority of parents are trying to work and school their children at the same time, so they are under stress,” said Bosqui, who is also a parent. “Children are highly resilient in contexts where the families are managing. They pick up on what’s being talked about around them. If it’s framed in a way that’s manageable, they will also pick up on that.”

Calls for the government to step in and provide families with cash-based assistance, or impose rent or electricity fee freezes have grown after Cabinet doubled Lebanon’s lockdown period to four weeks until April 12. Strapped for cash and swimming in debt, the Lebanese state says it has little room to maneuver.

“In a way the support should be more on parents. We can’t ignore that people are more stressed because they are at home, not making money and may have already lost their savings. It’s hard to alleviate that stress in the middle of an economic crisis,” Bosqui said.

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