

Covid 19

Parenting Survival Guide



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Introduction

Welcome to the Covid 19 Parenting Survival Guide. As we face unprecedented times with social isolation, a virus that is shifting as we speak, and governments that seem unable or unwilling to do what is necessary to help end the risk, we, as parents, have the added burdens of trying to keep young kids not only alive, but thriving in this unique set of circumstances.

How do we do this? How can we tackle the burden of parenting when we don't even know what is going on out there? How do we provide for our kids when there is so little to provide?

I won't pretend to have all the answers, but I do hope that this guide will make things maybe just a bit easier and provide some ideas and context to situations that may seem overwhelming right now. At the end of the day, this is unfortunately not likely to be the only pandemic (or epidemic) we see in years to come. If scientific predictions mean anything, this type of situation has been expected for the past few years (with scientific agencies warning many countries they were ill-prepared for it) and many don't believe this will be it. If they are right, we are ushering into a new era where our definition of "normalcy" will be put to the test.

BUT... this doesn't mean we all run out in a panic. It also doesn't mean we don't think about the lessons we learn from this situation in the here and now. What comes will come and the best we can do is to take our days one at a time and hopefully learn various ways of coping in order to provide the best possible environment for our children. In many ways, you may be surprised to find that what you can provide may be exactly what your child needs.

The guide is divided into the following sections in case you feel like jumping ahead, though the entire thing isn't too long:

Section 1: When Will Things Return to Normal?

Section 2: Coping With Our Stress and Theirs

Section 3: Working From Home with Kids

Section 4: What Do Our Kids Really Need?

I wish you all the best of luck and remember that although we may feel isolated and alone, we are all in this together.

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Tracy

Section 1: When Will Things Return to Normal?

The short answer unfortunately seems to be: Not anytime soon.

This can be hard for families to fathom, especially as so many of the measures currently being put in place are starting as temporary ones with a short duration. The schools close for two weeks and families assume that means they are closed for *only* two weeks. But as lessons from around the world emerge and we get a better picture of exactly how poorly this virus has been managed in most Western industrialized nations, we see that this short time-frame is probably woefully inadequate.

There are really a few possibilities here and it's worth looking at all of them, just as many models have done recently to map various outcomes. Why look at these? I think it's helpful for us all to have a realistic expectation of what we're heading into. Greater frustration comes when we have unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, we are often happier when we set our expectations about as low as they can go and then get pleasantly surprised. With that, here are some outcomes based on different paths taken by governments:

1. **Social distancing for a set period of time (be it 3, 6, 9, or 12 weeks).** These are possibilities as governments attempt to gain control of the spread of the virus. You have probably heard of this as being referred to as "flattening the curve", which is true. If we get R_0 value to be less than 1 (which means each new infection causes less than 1 new infection), the idea is that we will see a decline and we can lift measures of social distancing and life can return.

Unfortunately, that's not quite what newer models are showing us. However long we end up with strong social distancing measures in place, if we do not set up better systems to tackle covid 19, the epidemic we are looking to flatten returns just as quickly after the fact¹. Because the spread has been so quick, we now actually *need* strong social distancing, but it is not *sufficient* to deal with the outbreak itself.

2. **Intermittent social distancing.** In this model, we social distance for a spell and then ease up when R_0 is less than 1, but then reintroduce strict social distancing when it rises above 1. This can keep the virus at bay, but would require us to spend up to 75% of our time in strict social distancing *and* this would need to go into 2022². I don't feel that many of us want to go this route. Again, with no other measures put in place, we would then see the strong epidemic we're looking to avoid if we don't keep social distancing in place each time that R_0 value rises. Of course, that would also have strong implications for the economy and people's financial well-being.

¹ <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/42638988>

² Ibid

3. **Let it all go and run its course.** Given this is the current strategy being suggested by some in some governments, it's worth exploring. The idea here is that if we let it run its course and lots of people die, many will become immune and we can all move forward. Catastrophic? Potentially. Save the economy? Not likely. Easiest? In some ways, yes, but also no.

The idea is not to constrain R_0 , but let it peak and hope that those of us that survive develop herd immunity as a result. If we look at this one a bit more, the first issue is that of who gets sick enough or even dies. Because the initial reports said the virus was almost exclusively harmful to the elderly, some people have felt that we should just let it ride out and it's a lot of death, but we'll take that hit to save the economy. I won't even comment on the morality around this because I don't think it's necessary to say what I believe about this view. However, we should examine its validity. At the time of this writing, the risk for all age groups is above 0 even though it remains lower for younger individuals. In the USA, rates of hospitalization rise to around 14% for those between 20 and 44 even though the mortality rate remains very low at around 0.1%³.

Why does hospitalization matter over mortality? Because in a free-for-all scenario, the resources of our hospitals will be taxed. This brings us to the second issue of side effects or unintended consequences. If a hospital system becomes taxed through more cases of covid 19 (even in younger people), those who are sick with *other* conditions, may not be able to receive the treatments they need. The dangers in society for those with underlying conditions becomes so great their ability to work or even leave the house may be compromised indefinitely. We risk not only the older folks at higher risk for covid 19, but everyone who gets sick along the way. Your child with bronchiolitis? You may not get adequate health care for him. Your spouse with cancer? We don't know that she'll get all treatments needed without risking greater infection. These are the risks.

The third issue is that of potential mutations. The reason we face the flu each year is that it mutates making our immunity to previous versions obsolete. Now, the effects of mutation can be overstated and so we have to approach it with caution⁴. Let's start with the fact that all viruses mutate and it's no surprise that covid 19 has as well, but the minor mutations thus far do not seem to be causing any differences in incidence, mortality, or spread⁵. The assumption that we can go back to normal and we'll simply wipe out covid 19 or build herd immunity is based on the logic that it will not mutate further or in ways that make our immunity irrelevant, but it's so new, we haven't had a chance to test this. In fairness, the SARS virus (of which coronavirus is related) did not mutate in significant ways and thus the hope is this wouldn't either, but we don't know.

³ <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/23/21190033/coronavirus-covid-19-deaths-by-age>

⁴ <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/mutations-can-reveal-how-coronavirus-moves-they-re-easy-overinterpret>

⁵ <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2236544-coronavirus-are-there-two-strains-and-is-one-more-deadly/>

4. **Social distancing PLUS testing, tracking, and vaccination.** Testing and tracking (along with quarantine for infected individuals and early treatment for those at-risk) were the key components to what South Korea did and they so far have been the only country to truly get this under control with no real social distancing measures put in place⁶. They are, of course, still susceptible to another outbreak, but their success was in early detection through massive testing and then tracking people's movements to identify who was potentially exposed and then focusing on testing and quarantine measures for those who were sick. By testing early and often, they were able to keep it from spreading widely, they got people in for treatment early, and ended up with a mortality rate just above 1%, much lower than other countries (for comparison, the mortality rate is currently above 8% in Italy and in the UK it's above 4%). Similarly, Germany is showing much lower rates of mortality and the two key features they have implemented were tracing of professionals and mass testing (though still not to the degree of South Korea)⁷.

Unfortunately, most experts agree that for many Western, industrialized nations, we are too far into this to avoid the need for social distancing. But if we implement other measures *while* social distancing - including mass testing, tracing, and continued work on a vaccine - then we stand a chance⁸. The question is how long this will take, and we don't have an answer because it really depends on how quickly governments can get things in order and how well citizens abide by the rules. But even in the best circumstances here, we are likely looking at a couple months of strict social distancing while our best case scenario plays out in terms of identification and the development of a vaccine.

Okay, so we have (at least) four potential paths and in all cases, we have to accept that this is not going away anytime soon, but my hope is that it's all done for our benefit as various vaccines are being tested and faster testing measures are developed and deployed. I realize this is probably a depressing way to start, but we need to think about this in terms of months, not weeks. If we're lucky, it ends early and we're off the hook. But if the models are correct, we should be as prepared as we can be. As the old adage goes, "Expect the worst, but hope for the best".

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/world/asia/coronavirus-south-korea-flatten-curve.html>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/germany-low-coronavirus-mortality-rate-puzzles-experts>

⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/how-we-beat-coronavirus/608389/>

Activity: The Two-Month Plan

In line with “expecting the worst”, I recommend taking some time to sit down with household members or friends (online or over the phone) and planning out what life will look like if you’re in strict social distancing for two months (8 weeks). Think about what life would look like for this time. We’ll get to our specific stressors in Section 2 so you don’t have to necessarily worry about those now, but definitely just take time to consider a longer-term outcome here and what this looks like specifically for you. If you want to, write down what it looks like under different categories such as finances, work, relationships, children, etc. Importantly, you don’t have to have answers now to the struggles you’ll think of, but just start to comprehend what the next couple months will probably look like. The more we visualize this, the more “real” it becomes and the better able we are to tackle it.

Section 2: Coping With Our Stress and Theirs

There are several key areas of stress that I think are worthy of discussion. You may not be facing all of them, but I imagine we're all facing *at least* one of them. The key areas I see include (but are not limited to):

- Stress from being isolated
- Trauma-related stress
- Financial stress
- Health-related stress
- Worry about our kids
- Work stress

The last two have their own sections here, but I wanted to talk about stress in general here, especially as it relates to how we cope. Let's start with our awareness. I know most people are acutely aware of the financial and health-related stress they are experiencing. Parents are also worried about their kids and this new "work from home" thing. But the first two stressors on the list - isolation- and trauma-related - are ones that I think permeate our daily lives and have a huge impact on what we are feeling and experiencing with respect to the other stressors, so let's cover them first.

The Effects of Isolation and How to Help

Generally speaking, humans are social creatures. We have thrived in large part due to our social nature and our ability to rely upon others to get us through times of stress or difficulty. By being connected with others, we reduce the burden of the hard times. This doesn't mean every individual is social or wants to be around others. A large portion of our population are introverts, but even introverts need others to thrive (just not a lot of others).

Historically, the crises we have faced have involved humans *coming together* to overcome. And we do this brilliantly. If you have the time, I strongly recommend reading *Tribes* by Sebastian Junger for a more comprehensive exploration of how we rely upon our "tribes" in order to make it through hard times. In *The Book of Joy*, both the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu speak of our need to think and be with others as our antidote to negativity, stress, and sadness.

Today, however, we are being asked to separate from our tribes. We are isolating in the smallest possible groups we have - the "family" unit (which may simply be a single person in many cases). Some have even suggested family members living together should avoid contact as much as possible. Contrary to our usual connection in times of crisis, we are losing that sense of togetherness.

Why does this matter?

I personally believe the worst part about this is that it brings our focus and our stress inward, which can have a couple of negative effects on our overall mental health. First, it means we can become highly preoccupied with the stresses we face because that is what we are closest to.

What I mean by this is that we end up thinking that what we are going through is worse than it is because we fail to have better context that is gained by being with and thinking of others. When your child is refusing to do any schoolwork and you can't get the time you need to get work done and the bills are piling up and you don't know how to handle it, you can become singly focussed on this because there's nothing else around for you to obsess over.

Being cut off from others means we can focus or obsess over disaster scenarios around us in the broader sense. We can catastrophize what is happening, increasing our worry and anxiety because we have no context to put things in; we see the news that seems scary as hell and can ruminate and worry about it as we stay away from everything and everyone. The media - and social media - tends to disproportionately focus on the negative because it sells or it leads to shares. Fear is beneficial for many, but in this fear and focus on the negative, we miss out on what is good. Without people around us to remind us of this, we can wallow in this fear.

I know many may wonder if all is lost given we are going to be stuck in these small units for an extended period of time, but I want to be clear - it's not. Yes, we are in *physical* social isolation, but it does not mean we are truly isolated. We can already see humans finding their way to connect when we see Italians singing to each other across balconies or people in retirement homes doing social distancing bingo in their doorways or friends setting up daily coffee chats online.

Thus, the very first thing I ask you to do is find your social connections. You need them, just as they need you. Activity: Finding Your Social Network

The amount of social time we need will be highly variable and only you will know what is best for you. The key here is to make your social time as routine and regular as you would normally do outside of these unique circumstances. First consider the types of social time you can engage in:

- At-a-distance neighbourhood chats (person to person)
- Virtual get togethers with those further away
- Phone calls
- Write letters/emails regularly

Once you know the types of social time you want/need then you have to look at your days and figure out how you're going to fit it in. Unfortunately for many working from home, it can seem like there isn't time because you're so busy getting things done (especially with kids), but I can't tell you how important this social time is for your mental health. You need to prioritize it now or you this time will feel even longer and more difficult. In some cases reconnecting with your social network may just be a phone call with your morning coffee or a virtual get-together each weekend with friends, but try to start with even one weekly event that you can add in and then build from there.

I want to make a special note about the suggestion to avoid as much contact as possible with family members. *If you are sick or believe you are, this is essential.* However, for families with young children, the devastation of being separated emotionally and physically from you is too much at this time. Your children need contact and comfort and so if you can have contact with some family members safely when you know you are very low-risk of being ill, I suggest you make sure their mental and emotional health is considered a high-priority as well as their physical health. I realize this is a delicate balance, but many of our kids need regular contact, especially in times of stress, so please don't go too far to the other side if it isn't necessary from a safety perspective.

The Effects of Trauma and How to Help

The other type of stress that many of us are unaware of is stress that relates to trauma. Some will be thinking that they aren't experiencing trauma because they aren't sick or know anyone who is. They may acknowledge stress, but not trauma. I will tell you now that you are very, very likely experiencing trauma. The uncertainty and fear that permeates us creates trauma and our body responds to trauma in specific ways.

First and foremost, please know it is very normal to feel added stress, anxiety, depression, panic, confusion, despair, and more. These are normal and natural responses to the upheaval to our lives that is happening. Humans thrive on predictability and that has been thrown out the window so we are left in a state of regular agitation. You can't reason your way out of this because we don't know what's reasonable anymore and this causes further anxiety.

Add to this, for many of us, we *can't actually do anything*. That's right, we're watching the train coming and we're helpless. Feelings of helplessness result in a shutting down, or freeze response, because that's the only logical thing for our body to do. You don't want to expend energy that may be needed later when you might be able to do something, but you also can't run away because there's nowhere else to go. So mentally you freeze.

Second, because of these psychological reactions, we can also start to experience physical reactions. When our mind is on high alert all the time, we get forgetful, we get tired or lethargic, we get distracted easily, we may find ourselves crying for no apparent reason, and more. Many people are talking about how they are struggling to be as productive at home as they are in the office, even though there are fewer distractions. Parents are talking about being short-tempered with their kids. Work, schooling, cleaning, errands, and everything else that just isn't happening.

What are you to do?

Start by realizing that this response, this struggle, is *entirely normal*. There is nothing "wrong" with you that isn't affecting everyone else too. Look at the people around you (again, moving away from you to others) and see that so many are in the same boat. Social media can be excellent at this time for highlighting what so many people are experiencing and feeling to help you know that it's not you, it's the time we're living in. (Just please avoid the disaster stories of

what is going on as that can be more triggering.)

Once you know it's normal, please find ways to be compassionate with yourself. Don't add to your stress by feeling awful that you didn't get all the work done you planned or your kids ended up with a day off school or watched too much TV. The normal rulebook has already been thrown out the window and we need to allow time for our brains to process what is going on and develop a new "normal".

You must also work on staying as mentally healthy as possible. This includes: getting as much sleep as you can (which may be affected by your experience of trauma, but keep trying), eating as healthy as possible (again, this can be harder when finances are tight and supplies at grocery stores run thin, but do the best you can), exercising (even just daily walks can be a saviour), and then finding the things that centre you and engage in them daily. This is not the time to feel that a daily bath is bad - if it helps you feel better, take two a day if you need to. Focus on what it is that will help you in these moments and then work that in daily to help you cope.

Overall, the key here - at least for the foreseeable future - is to give yourself compassion and realize that you are facing something that can be as devastating as war to our psyche, but without the sense that you can do much about it, which can make it worse.

Activity: Healthy Habits for Trauma

For this activity, you want to take a look at the four daily components that can have a strong impact on your mental health in these times - sleep, diet, exercise, and centering activities - and figure out how you are going to work them in. It can seem overwhelming so I find it's often best to focus on small steps, like picking one healthy thing to eat each day if you've been bingeing on chips (which I don't blame you for) and slowly building up those healthy habits. Some ideas for you:

Sleep: cut down on screens in bed; go to sleep 30 min earlier; let yourself sleep in 30 min later

Diet: add one healthy meal a day; replace one bad habit with something healthier; reserve bad foods for one particular time; focus on portion size instead of eliminating

Exercise: go for a walk every day; do an online yoga or aerobics class daily (even a 10-min one); start adding in various weight-bearing exercises throughout the day in small bursts

Centering: have a daily bath to relax; read a good non-fiction book; take up a craft you've wanted to try; journaling; take on a household project you can put your energies towards when you need to release that tension.

Shifting Mindsets

As we now know, being alone can increase our stress due to rumination and self-focus while living in a traumatic time will have additional physiological and mental health effects. Seeing and engaging with others can help as can being kinder to ourselves to accept where our limitations are (so we don't cycle the stress), but we also have to do the mental work to help us get out of this mindset. Those who engage in mindfulness or meditation practices tend to fare better under times of stress.

What are some of these mental tricks or tips that help us cope with intense stress?

1. Consider others. If nothing else, just take a moment to look at your stress and close your eyes to think of all the other people feeling just as you are. Some of them perhaps are worse off than even you. You know the saying "misery loves company" and it's true, but namely because the company actually helps reduce the misery (even if all you're doing is bitching). Remember that if you know you aren't alone, that sense of dread and fear can be lessened because, well, you aren't alone.
2. Focus on your actual locus of control. Too often we worry about things we cannot control and this causes us a great deal of stress and anxiety that we need not have. When we find ourselves worried about the many things we face, the first question we need to ask ourselves is, "Do I have control over this?" In many cases, the answer is actually no (though sometimes we erroneously believe we have control when we don't, like in thinking when our kids should sleep longer stretches or through the night). And when it is no, the only solution for us is to put the worry aside because no amount of worry or stress is going to change things. Now if the answer is "yes", then we move to the next trick...
3. Move from stress to challenge. If you have established you have control over the situation you worry about, then you may find yourself getting worked up and in a panic. This is because we tend to focus on the problem and hope it will resolve itself. Stressed financially? You wish for more money. Unfortunately, this isn't a very practical solution to the problem. Findings from Dr. Elissa Epnel and colleagues have found that when we reframe stressful events from catastrophes, which we tend to view them as, to "challenges", we actually limit the negative impact on telomere length (shortened telomere length is linked to cellular aging and stress and depression, whereas longer telomeres are linked with better cellular health)⁹ and we tend to be happier and more successful at solving these stressors!

Now don't get me wrong, I will be the first to say that none of these practices are easy. In fact, these may be some of the hardest things to do, period. It takes a lot of practice and you're bound to get it wrong more times than right at the start. To help, let's take a look at how these

⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3057175/>

mental shifts can help you with one of the more common stressors occurring at the moment - financial stress.

Many of us are facing very tough times financially as jobs are lost or reduced, yet bills still need to be paid. When we have financial stress it can be very hard to consider others. You may hear people say, "Think of the starving families in Africa!" to which you can tell them to bugger off because often that's not the type of thinking of others that will help in this situation (though to be fair, for some it can be helpful to realize that relatively speaking they may not be in *that* bad a situation,; however, the differences in general situations make that less likely).

Instead, you want to first think about the people close to you. Who do you know that is also struggling? When you think about people you know and care for having a hard time, it can help reinforce the invisible bond between you as well as feel less lonely, *especially* if you're open to talking to them about it. If you can open up about your struggle, it helps lessen it and you may even have some advice coming to you from others who are in the same boat. Even if you can't think of someone you know who is struggling, you can go online and read stories of families facing similar financial concerns and know that you are not alone in this. And when you know you aren't alone, you can let some of that stress go as that fear that comes from isolation is no longer really applicable.

Next you want to consider what control you have over your financial situation. This will be highly variable as some people will actually have control over ways to bring money into the house in these difficult times, but many won't. At the very least, you may have control over your ability to look for grants, loans, deferrals, funds, and more that are out there to help people. Knowing you have control can allow you to take charge without freezing, but if you truly realize there's nothing you can do, put your efforts elsewhere.

Finally, you need to shift your thinking to see challenges rather than stress. This looks like the shift from, "Oh my god, we're not going to have enough money this month!" or "We just need more money to make ends meet!" to "How can I bring in an extra \$500 this month to cover some expenses?" or "How many different programs can I find to apply to in order to help with finances in this crisis?". In the former, we are experiencing stress that we treat as us having no control over, but if we know we have control over it, then we need to shift our thinking into *how* we have control over it. Once we are able to do this, the path forward becomes clearer and the stress starts to abate.

Activity: Control and Perspective

In order to be as mentally healthy as you can during this crisis, please take the time to write out all the big things that are causing you direct stress. Whether they are big or small, you want to get them out on paper. Now divide them into two lists: the things you believe you have control over and those you don't believe you have control over. I use the term "believe" here because you may be surprised to find you have more control than you think or less than you think when you start to develop your plan.

Start with the list you believe you have control over and for each item, shift your thinking to a challenge mindset by writing out the stress as a question of challenge. That is, you want to shift from "I'm stressed about my kids getting sick" to "How can I limit the chance of my kids coming into contact with coronavirus?". You may realize here that you do not have full control, but you can start to see how you may affect at least some change. Once you have reframed your stressors as challenges, then over the course of time, consider them and write out your solutions to these challenges. In cases where the challenge is one you cannot solve, put the item on the "have no control" list for the time being.

For the list that you believe you don't have control over, look at the items you know you obviously have no control over and make mental space to put them to the side. That is, acknowledge they are scary and awful, but be clear that you are not going to let them take over your head space. For example, if you are worried about whether or not your job will be available when this ends, but there's truly nothing you can do about it, recognize a scary, scary thought, and that it will be there whenever you want to panic about it, but that you need to put it aside in order to focus on the things you have identified above as having control over. People find various ways to make space and let go of these items and I recommend finding whatever way works best for you, even though it may take time and practice.

For the items that aren't as clear cut, I recommend taking some social time to ask others how they might approach these fears or concerns. Sometimes solutions are hard for us to come up with because we're too close to the issue, but others can provide us with some ideas that help us see that there may be things we can do and that gives us hope. Remember that we as humans are social creatures and our problem-solving and survival is intricately linked to having contact with other human beings.

Remember that this activity is not going to happen all at once. It is something you should be returning to from time to time or whenever you feel your stress rise. This is an ongoing practice and is not supposed to be easy, but with time it does get easier.

Section 3: Working From Home with Kids

If you're trying to work from home with kids around (trying being the operative word), this can be infuriating and frustrating and lead to a cycle of resentment, anger, and lashing out between you and your children. Even if you aren't trying to work from home, you can find yourself completely overwhelmed and exhausted by lunchtime. In order to facilitate better days for you and your kids, I recommend trying to implement some of the following strategies to help you through this time of attempted work and parenting simultaneously:

- Set times for your work and isolate yourself as much as possible. If you can't isolate from the kids, set up a visual reminder for the kids that this is their time to play without you so that you can get some stuff done. Some people make signs showing kids that this is a "no bother" time or a visual schedule for what is happening. If you need to use screens, go ahead, desperate times call for desperate measures. A note that younger kids (3 and under) will struggle with this more and you may need to be creative in your times in that you work when they nap, are watching something, or in the evening after they've gone to bed. This can be tiring - no doubt - but it is what it is. And tell your employer that this is just the reality given the situation you're in.
- Work in smaller chunks and see what you can do in 30 minutes then take a break to be with the kids again. Our children do best when we focus exclusively on them. Even short periods of this time with them can fill the well enough to let them give us a bit of a break after to get work done (even younger kids). You may need to start with 10 or 15 minutes of work, then play with the kids, then work again but you can hopefully build up to longer chunks, depending on the age of your child. The key is *not* to try and multitask. When you try to work and be half present with the kids, they know it and don't feel like their needs are met and you don't get much work done - it becomes a lose-lose situation.
- Have your child "work" with you. If your child is young, set them up with their own version of work (colouring, painting, etc.) but if your child is older, you can set this time up as school time while you do some of your work.
- Work standing up in the kitchen. Young kids are often attracted to us sitting down - it's like the sign we're ready to play with them because clearly we're doing nothing. Setting up your laptop on a high table not only keeps it away from young hands, but you are standing up and look busy with something and they can be less likely to bother you during that time. You still won't get much more than 30 min at a time, but it can be a bit more peaceful than having to remind them endlessly that this is your work time.

Be gentle on yourself. Overall, know that working as we do from home with no space alone or help is not how our work lives are structured. Hopefully businesses that have employees working from home can also learn to be more flexible in what they expect and that can alleviate some of the burden from parents who are struggling.

Activity: One-Week Work Challenge

In order to get back on track (somewhat) with work, I recommend taking a one-week work “challenge” where you set up your work slightly differently to see how it blends with providing child care as well. To do this I recommend the following:

1. Break your work down into small chunks. Start by first creating two lists: short projects/activities and longer ones. For example, emails are short because even though getting through all may take a while, each email shouldn't take an hour. Writing reports is a longer activity. Then break down your longer projects into smaller components. Whenever possible, break your bigger projects into chunks of 15-20 minutes (thereabout, as best as you can guess). The reason for this is you will find that you often don't have more than 15-20 minutes and if we don't have small things that we can do at that time, we tend to do nothing, but if we do have small chunks to be done, they can build up over the course of a day. It's not an 8-hour work day, but it's not nothing either.
2. Identify one larger project for the week to complete. Yes, this may not be what your work wants, but if you're struggling to meet demand, at least start with what's most important. If you get through one then have a second, but the sense of completion is crucial.
3. Take note of times when you think you can get 15-20 minutes of work done. I often think about times in terms of child neediness, so I know I'm better off getting something done right after engaging with them or when they're eating or taking their screen time. Try to identify 4 or 5 of these chunks in your day and write out when they are so you are ready to take advantage of them each day. Importantly, don't spend all your time on email, but reserve one chunk for the most important emails and let the rest go until your big project is done.

This is not going to get you a full week's worth of work, but it's the starting point for if you're struggling.

Section 4: What Do Our Kids Really Need?

As parents, many of our struggles during this time are related to the little people we are caring for. Depending on the age of said little people, our struggles will vary from how to keep small ones occupied, to alleviating anxieties, to ensuring our kids continue to get their education. However, there are 5 main concerns that I have encountered thus far with families in this crisis:

1. Health and safety concerns
2. The lack of social time
3. The amount of attention they require from us at home (i.e., being the only people to fill the well, so to speak)
4. Educating our kids during the crisis
5. Handling their anxiety about what's going on and the changes around them

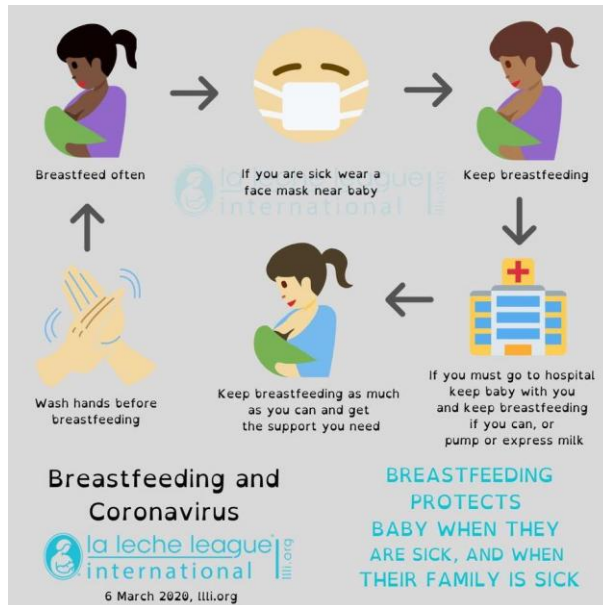
These are all very valid concerns when you have children at home and so I would like to examine each one individually.

Health and Safety Concerns

Many of us worry about our children during times of crisis because children - especially young children - are often vulnerable to disease. One silver lining with coronavirus has been that generally speaking, our young children are safe; however, infants under 1 year of age *may* be at somewhat higher risk than other young children of developing complications due to covid 19¹⁰. What can we do to keep our kids - and others - safe?

- As with all people, make sure you keep them inside and avoid going out as much as possible. Order groceries if you can and keep any trips out into the public to a minimum.
- Continue to breastfeed if you are. Even if you become infected with coronavirus, general consensus is to continue breastfeeding as by the time you show symptoms you will have already shed the virus and your baby is likely infected too. By breastfeeding, you are providing valuable immune support to your baby. The graph below is from La Leche League and highlights the best practices for breastfeeding mothers.

¹⁰ <https://www.vox.com/2020/3/18/21181009/coronavirus-in-kids-symptoms-covid-19-risk>



- During this time if you have appointments with medical professionals, find out how many you can do online as you should not forfeit any medical help if it is necessary for you or your children. Many countries have online medical services if you need them and many lactation consultants are offering assistance online for those who need it. Some of them can call in prescriptions or order tests without having to go to the hospital or visiting your family doctor (as many are closed). Please check to see if this is an option for you and have that information at-hand in case you need it. If you do need to go to the hospital or doctor, find out what protocols they have in place to keep you and others safe before going and then adhere to them.
- If someone in the family gets sick, please self-isolate as much as possible and assume that everyone else in the family is already infected. Some people have suggested family members limit contact and some teens may be happy with this news, but generally speaking, families live in close quarters and germs spread rapidly. Young children in particular will not be willing to keep at a distance and all kids may require more proximity at this time to handle their stress, so try to remember that their mental health matters as well.
- As with all viruses and diseases, our general health is important to how we stave it off or face it head-on. For our kids, we want to make sure they continue to eat healthy meals, take a multivitamin if necessary, take extra zinc and vitamin D if needed (as these are crucial to immune function), get as much fresh air as possible, sleep as well as is normal (no your baby and toddler will likely not be sleeping through the night), and make sure they get regular exercise too. In fact, making these family priorities can make it easier to implement when everyone is doing it.
- Remember the real issue is that your children are more likely to be carriers and infect other people, so please make sure that they are not in contact with others, especially

those who are at higher risk of disease. Children do not show many symptoms yet can be carriers, putting others in a dangerous position around our young ones.

The Lack of Social Time

Depending on the age of your child, the lack of social time can be a minor inconvenience or a cause of concern. Our younger children tend to be less affected by this social time as they generally don't have what we might call "true" friendships. They enjoy the company of other people (sometimes), but by and large, their family is their universe and so the added time with those they love most is enough to keep them happy.

As our kids get older, it becomes harder as they rely on that social interaction to fill their well of well-being. Sometimes it's friends but it can also be regular time with grandparents or family friends that keep them feeling filled with love and so we want to do all we can to help keep this going for them. The following are some ideas that can help keep your child's social life going, especially if they are one of the many now having to do things like birthdays in isolation.

- Facetime, facebook messenger, zoom, and the other virtual meeting platforms are wonderful for kids to just chat and see each other. Younger kids (around ages 7 to 12) seem to have really taken to facebook messenger for kids because it has incorporated games and emojis and stickers that they find hilarious and fun. These young kids are also at the age where they enjoy the type of silly interactions that come with a bear puking hearts (it really is a thing).

Using these platforms for birthdays can be nice for kids to see their friends for moments like opening gifts or singing happy birthday with a cake. They won't last an hour together, but even the 15 minutes or so for those special moments can make a big difference. You can also use these platforms to play certain board games together, like battleship, chess, connect four, and so on (though in some cases the other person will need to make the moves too so you each have a complete board).

For younger children who are not used to having conversations like this and who may be more interactive with those they engage with, you can set up activities over these mediums to help with their social engagement. For example, you can have kids build lego together and show each other as they go. Kids and grandparents can colour together and talk about what they're doing and show it to each other to help keep relationships present in our kids' lives even when we're physically isolated.

- Penpals. Yep, you can bring back the old paper and pen for your child and this is an excellent way to keep in touch with those further away in a more creative way. Older children and younger ones who like to write may find this a good way to take up time, practice writing skills, and allow their thoughts to come out in a more effortful way.

- Phone. Remember talking on the phone for hours when you were younger? Your kids may not be used to that because of texting and the like, but it absolutely has value in an isolated world. Many older individuals do not have the type of social platforms that can allow kids to interact that way with them so calling up our older family members and friends is a good way to keep those relationships going.
- Video messaging. Video messages are great for kids to send back and forth as they can also watch them over and over when they're feeling down or in need of a little social pick-me-up. They're also awesome for birthdays when our kids are isolated and won't be seeing their friends during this time.

The crucial element here is to ensure there's enough social time *each day* for your child's needs. Sometimes we can get caught up in the schooling and exercise and all that, but the ability to freely socialize is equally - if not more - important. How much time you set aside for socializing will vary from child to child, but I imagine it's at least 30 min a day and may be up to 2 hours for older kids and teenagers.

I also think it's a good time to consider *adding* a new friend or reconnecting with old ones. So many kids around the world are experiencing this pandemic during formative years and using this time to widen their circle of friends can be an excellent way to make a negative situation more positive. Whether it's taking on a foster child through an organization and then connecting via their platforms of writing and sharing or finding adults in other like-minded parenting groups and having their kids start to connect or just looking to older friends and reconnecting, it is a time when we can actually create more space for others in our lives that can have positive long-term impacts.

The Attention. So Much Attention.

I don't care if you're a working parent, a stay-at-home parent, or a parent who works from home. I don't care if your kids go to school or you homeschool. Prior to this isolation, chances are you had some time to yourself. Your kids had activities and playdates or time in school. You had get togethers or time at work or just going to the gym or walks alone for a bit.

That has all changed, no matter what your circumstances were before. There are definitely people for whom this is not *too* different, especially if you have a very young baby, but chances are things are different. And harder. One of the struggles for so many families is the amount of attention that their kids need being at home and this is more common for younger kids. The toddler and preschool age is filled with joy and wonder as they explore their world, but my goodness do they have a ton of energy and a well that needs to be filled regularly with love and attention and engagement. It doesn't help that their attention span is also generally as long as their thumb. To facilitate their activity levels and keep your sanity (regardless of your work status):

- Set up break times for you to just relax. These are best scheduled after some intense one-on-one time with the kids. Carve out your break time and know that you will be present with your kids outside of these times.
- Set up free play time for the kids. I find it best when this is done loosely and by that I mean you have your time when you will let them play around and you have various chores you're getting done (if it involves a computer, use the standing up trick mentioned above) as you all putter around for 1-2 hours. When they need your help, you join them for 5-10 minutes then return to your chores. Sometimes they'll need you more, and that's okay, but the goal is to have this time be their time to *learn* to engage by themselves and this won't happen immediately.
- Do meals together as an activity. Too often we feed our kids separately, especially during the day, but making meals an activity can help build up time with them while also getting them to possibly eat more or a greater variety of foods. Set up meals as picnics or in a fort and just make it a fun event together. I also recommend bringing books or cards or small games that can be played at the same time so our kids can enjoy the entire process. Yes, lunch may take an hour, but it'll be an hour that fills their well as well as their tummies.
- Don't feel you need tons of activities. Being the ones to always entertain your kids actually makes it harder for them to learn to entertain themselves. Pick 2-3 activities a day that you're willing to do with them and leave it at that. Set the times (approximate) for these activities and then let them figure out how to have fun themselves outside of those hours. Yes, there may be some complaints of boredom along the way, but empathize and leave it at that. (Of course if you're *enjoying* all the time, rock it. This is really for those who are struggling with the amount of focused time their kids are asking for.)
- In terms of activities, I recommend having a craft, a game (like a board game or card game), and an active game (like hide and seek or tag or jumping on the bed) each day. And you can use the same games and crafts over and over as long as your kids enjoy them. Sometimes we put pressure on ourselves to have things be "new", but our kids love the same old thing. Until they don't, then you need to come up with some new ones, but it's a lot easier to do that every few days than every day.
- Rotate toys. It's amazing how old toys become fun when they haven't been seen in a while. Take this time to go through and scale down to just a few things out at a time and then set a rotation schedule for every week or two with toys. Sunday night put away the few toys and craft supplies that were out that week and replace them with a new set. This can help with that whole boredom thing.
- Move activities around. Put the building blocks in a new location and see how the kids react. Novelty stimulates their minds here so old toys in new places can make them more exciting.

- Screens. Again, use them as you need to in order to give yourself a break. Is it ideal? No, but there are tons of high-quality programs out there that you don't have to feel too guilty about them watching during this time.

Education

In most parts of the world, school has come to a standstill. Some places have set up online learning, but not all. If you are in a place without online learning or one where resources sent to parents have been scarce, you may be worried about what you should be doing with your child during this time.

First and foremost, let me reassure you that the most important thing you can do is to connect with your child given the stress that surrounds everyone. If you make schooling too big a deal, you risk creating a hostile or negative environment which serves *no one* during this crisis. Make sure you focus on spending some quality time together doing things your child enjoys even if you can't see the academic benefit.

The second consideration is child age. If your child is in high school, chances are the schools have a lot more going on in terms of online education so kids can earn the credits they will need to graduate. If they don't, then you need to contact the school board to determine when that will start and in the meantime you will probably want to look at some online courses from other sources (like [Outschool](#)). If, however, your child is in elementary school, I would strongly suggest letting it go. Of course you can always add in learning through play or engagement in other areas or maybe even take a course or so online, but your child will survive without ongoing academic work.

If you still feel like you need to ensure some level of academic continuation, I would recommend the following:

- Project-based learning. In this type of learning you pick one larger project that your child is interested in to work on during this time. It may be building a model car, creating a costume, writing a book, planting a garden, and so on. The key with projects is that they aren't one-off crafts or activities, but they encompass a lot of different areas, explored in-depth. For example, depending on your child's age, if the choice is to plant a garden, they need to research what will grow, when they need to be planted, what kind of soil is needed, what other environmental concerns there are, how deep to plant seeds, how far apart, and then how to care for them (just to scratch the surface). This covers a lot of different areas academically, but may not feel academic to your child. As the parent you just need to ensure it's your child doing the learning, not you.
- Curriculum books. As many homeschoolers can tell you, there are *many many* options when it comes to workbooks that cover a wide variety of curricula. Find a homeschooling family or group and see what they use and then you may have a good guide for completing some developmentally-appropriate schoolwork for your child.

- Online courses. There are many forms of online learning for families. Most are self-directed which can be great for some learners but not others. Some are live (like Outschool which is what I use as a homeschool family) offering you a bit of downtime (or work time) when your child is “in class”. The joy of online learning for us is in the huge variety of topics covered. My own daughter has taken classes on growth mindsets, history through fashion, myths and legends, french, math, habitats, and more. If you imagine it your child can probably take it. Another benefit is that there are many types of classes; that is, some are one-off classes, some are short runs (like 4 classes), some are longer (like semester classes), and some are ongoing and you can go in and out of them.

Whatever you choose, remember that the key here is not to create a negative environment around learning, but rather to facilitate learning in a fun and engaging way.

Helping Them with Their Anxiety

Depending on your child’s age and temperament, this may or may not be an issue. Older kids that have an understanding of what is going on and those kids who generally are on the more anxious side are those who are likely to struggle with anxiety here. First and foremost, if you feel that your child’s anxiety is too great, please consider professional sources of help at this time. As mentioned in section 2, there are places offering free or low-cost distance help in coping with stress and some of these are focused on children as well.

For those whose kids are more anxious, it may be due to either fear of the virus or generalized anxiety over the change in their routine and lives or even just picking up on the anxiety from us adults. Luckily there are things we can do to help our kids during this time and below are some of these ideas:

- Manage your stress. I know, I know, easier said than done, but it is actually essential when we have anxious kids around us. In addition to the advice on coping with our own stress, just being aware of how you’re feeling in a given moment and taking time to relax yourself through deep breathing or a small meditation can help your children too.
- Create a new routine. Many anxious kids thrive on routine and their lives have been upended. However, that doesn’t mean you can’t start new routines that will last the duration of this pandemic. It can also help to help identify what old routines are still in place so there is a sense of continuity for these kids. Yes, they may not go to daycare or school or see grandma and grandpa, but they are having dinner with you each night, reading stories together, and so on. Often anxious kids will focus on the change and we can help them focus on what is the same in order to calm their stress.
- Prioritize one-on-one or special time. Many families with anxious kids have had these kids of special times in place as part of their old routine and for many families, these have fallen to the side. It may happen because the special time used to happen outside

the house or because we aren't aware of the need for that time when we're spending all day together. However, our kids - especially our anxious ones - need that connection time with us on a regular basis to feel grounded and safe. As you may have to shift what it is, I would talk to your child (if they are old enough) about what they would like to do for their new special time and then work that into your routine, be it daily or weekly (yes, some kids will actually need *more* special time during this period so be prepared to offer that as best as possible).

- Help them learn a new skill. When we are in a state of crisis, we feel lost and aimless and our kids can feel the same. We lose our sense of purpose and so one way to reclaim this is to focus on learning something new, especially for older kids who are more self-motivated during this time. Learning a new skill takes mental effort which takes our mind off the stressful situations and also takes time, something our kids have more of these days. It also provides purpose as they work towards something new.
- Visual schedules. This is a go-to for a lot of families already, but can be helpful in making these new routines easier for kids to follow and feel safe with. It also serves as a good reminder of the various things that need to happen each day as we all adapt to new routines. These don't need to be down to the hour, but even just the flow of each day is often enough for families to know what's happening and then things like special time don't get left behind.
- Talk about what's happening in age-appropriate ways. You are not going to do your kids any favours by talking doom and gloom, but they aren't stupid and will benefit from an honest discussion of what's going on and why. Focus on the positives of social distancing on the health of everyone and remind them that we have amazing doctors, nurses, hospital staff, grocery staff, and others working to keep us all going. When we talk about negative situations, we must remember the wise words of Fred Rogers' mother: Always look for the helpers.
- Find ways to help. We all do better in times of stress when we can help others. It may sound counterintuitive, but when we help others we are able to put our stress aside and it also provides us with a good endorphin rush which helps our overall mood and lowers stress. For kids, you can help them identify ways they can help other people in their lives on a regular basis. This may be just drawing pictures to send to loved ones in isolation (mail is still working as is email) or if your child has skills to help in a more practical way, doing something that helps health care workers. For example, we have a high school student in our community who is making face masks from home and is donating half to the hospital and selling the other half to community members to fund her making more and donating any profits to the health care fund. Young kids may not be able to do that, but they certainly can bring joy to other people in a variety of ways and if you help them realize this, that can help them gain a sense of control over the situation.
- Let things go. Most of our children's stress seems to come from adult-driven activities and situations and this is an ideal time to let this go a bit and in anxious times, driving home the need to do more school may backfire. More free play, more unstructured time

(even within a routine you can have lots of unstructured time), and more *fun* are key ingredients to combatting anxiety in children. This may be why some families are actually seeing *less* anxiety in their kids at this time and you may be able to see some of this in your own kids if you can give them the space they need.

As always, also remember to just be there to let them talk and empathize with what they are feeling. Don't get caught in the idea you need to "fix" their feelings or change what they think. The most important thing you can do for them when they feel anxious is simply be there to hold them through it. Reason, logic, and sense of purpose can come later.

Section 5: Resources for Families

In addition to this guide, I believe there are certain resources that may help families during this time and I have listed them here (when there is an external link, it is underlined and should link directly for you):

- Local crisis numbers. If you need them, many local areas have crisis numbers you can call to get information on things like psychologists or other mental health professionals who are offering services or free help during this time.
- Local food banks. If you are struggling to provide for your families, then I strongly suggest checking out your local food bank. They are being tapped, but there are also lots of donations coming in to help and they are always willing to do all they can for families in need.
- Facebook Covid-19 centre. Social media can be good and Facebook has a spot to put out requests for help or offers of help. If you don't know where in your local community you can get this assistance, online may be a good place to start.
- Covid-19 Circle of Care from Amy Glenn. From Amy: "Join a Circle of Care during these uncertain times. Receive access to weekly 45-minute reflections and interviews on holding space, compassion/mindfulness, grief work, self care, support for the vulnerable, caring for children, and caring for the dying during the age of Covid-19."
- ChildMind Institute resources for parents. This includes live chats with professionals, email tips, videos, etc.
- The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds. This is a quick guide that offers tips on how to talk to your kids about what's happening along with a lot of other mental health tips and strategies for families during this time.
- Understanding kids play at this time. An article from the Atlantic that is an excellent source of information on how kids use play to process and why we want to let them do just that.
- Pandemic Toolkit from Dr. Bruce Perry. Dr. Perry is an expert in trauma in childhood and has spent years working with families who have experienced trauma. He knows what he's saying.
- Urban Wire: Stabilizing Supports for Children and Families During the Pandemic. Urban wire is a policy group and they have really highlighted the primary areas that will allow for family stability. Some of their links go to finding practical solutions and others are a call for the government and others to help, but it's a good starting point for information.

Closing

This is a crazy time for all of us. I have probably said it enough, but I will repeat it again: be kind to yourself. So much is going on outside of our control and in ways that challenge the very core of who we are as humans that we are bound to struggle more than before. When we add in unemployment, school closures, and the stress of the unknown health toll, it can be downright overwhelming. You are not alone though. If you take anything from this, please take that message to heart. Reach out and find those who can help you because that will be crucial to our sense of normalcy and security.

I also want you all to know that you will get through this as will your kids. If you find it all becoming overwhelming, take a step back and focus on those little people who call you Mom or Dad. When we bring our focus down to what is most important in our lives, we do better, and there is nothing more important to most families than their kids. Allow them to centre us so we can be the best parents possible for them.

On a practical note, I want to thank Saskia for her help in editing this document and my husband Brian for his work on the design and getting it ready to go out.

Please stay safe and take care of each other!

Tracy