

Vox



Natalie Nelson for Vox

Working from home with kids feels unsustainable. Here's how to ease the burden.

This situation is unprecedented, so go easy on yourself.

By Cheryl Wischhover | @CherylAnneNY | Mar 25, 2020, 11:50am EDT

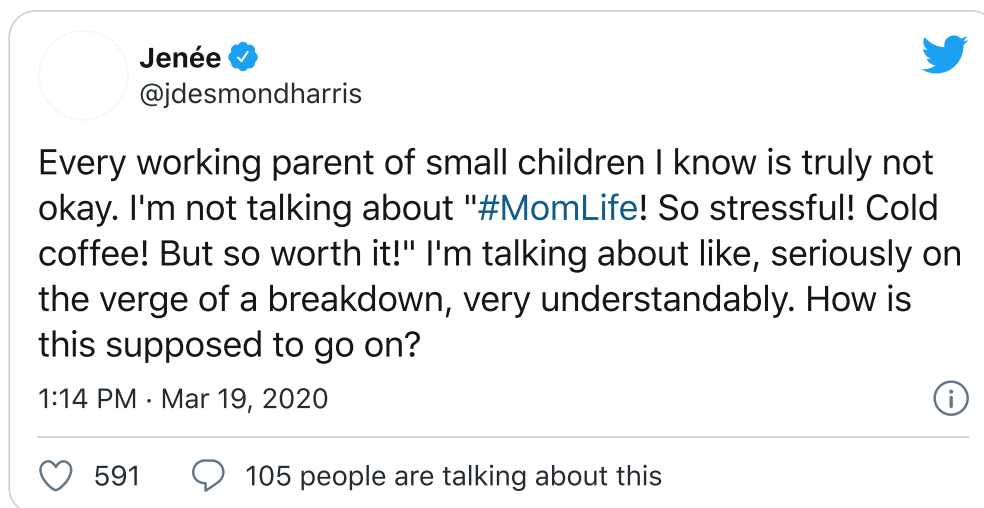
Part of

The Vox guide to navigating the coronavirus crisis

“Today I took 1/2 Xanax to lift the brick on my chest — does that tell you something?” wrote a mother in a parenting Facebook group on a thread about how working parents are coping with the increased demands of trying to entertain and **educate their children** while also holding down jobs.

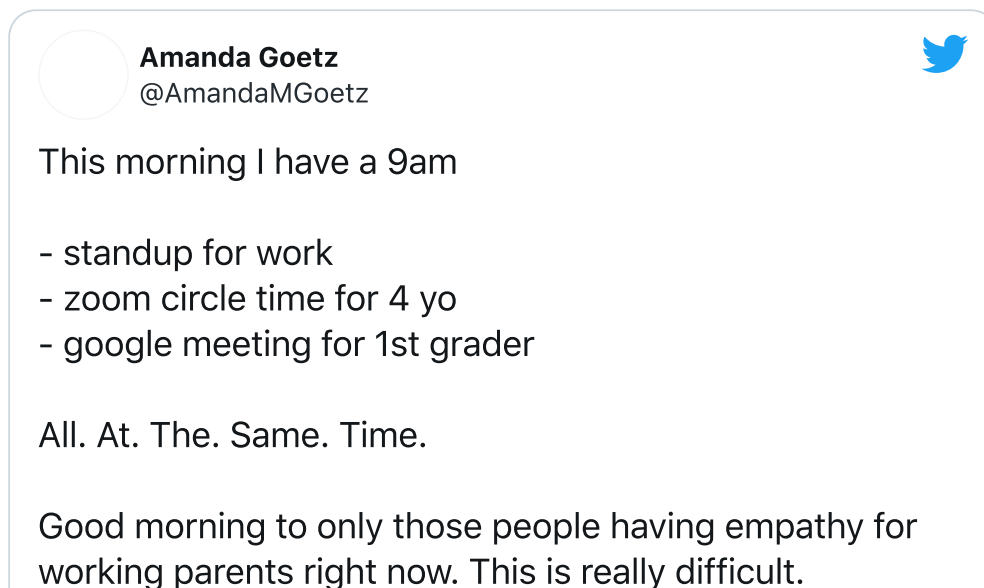
For almost two weeks now, families across the country have been forced into this situation as offices and schools have shut down and increasingly strict shelter-in-place orders have gone into effect to try to prevent the spread of the **coronavirus**. The situation feels

impossible for two-parent homes where both partners can work from home — and gets exponentially harder for single parents, kids with special needs, families experiencing homelessness, and parents who have to work outside of the home. Add financial worries, lack of proper technology for online distance learning, and logistical challenges like grocery shopping and managing outside time while social distancing, and it can feel downright paralyzing.



Chavie Lieber, a former Vox reporter now at Business of Fashion, has a 2-year-old son. She says her working hours have been completely disrupted. Her husband is an occupational therapist and is still leaving the house to work, though his hours have been cut. During a recent morning Zoom call with her co-workers, her son dumped an entire bag of flour all over the floor and himself.

“Between 9 and 2:30, I’m not getting anything done,” she says.



8:54 AM · Mar 23, 2020



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On the other side of the age spectrum are the teens, many of whom were getting their first taste of independence and are now housebound with the people they least want to be around at this stage of life: their parents. My two teen boys are resentful that they have to stay inside, and they miss their friends and activities. My 11th-grader's SAT, which he'd been studying for for months, was canceled. They've been spending more hours online than ever.

To make this situation as tenable as possible, communicating with partners and employers, setting realistic expectations, and accepting that more screen time is inevitable will help ease the burden a bit. "For most parents, it's completely resetting their reality. We're unable to do the same things with work or caring for our children that we've been able to do in the past," says Dave Anderson, a clinical psychologist and the senior director of national programs and outreach at the **Child Mind Institute**. "The first thing we're talking to parents about is undermining their own sense of perfectionism and being exceedingly and radically realistic with themselves."

In other words, go easy on yourself. You're essentially being asked to perform two full-time jobs.

Your kids are going to be spending much, much more time online, and that's totally okay. Here are some suggestions on places to pass the time, entertain, and educate:

Monterey Bay Aquarium, all ages: Offers an array of live cams to watch animals like sharks and sea otters in their aquarium habitats.

Cosmic Kids, 3- to 6-year-olds: A YouTube yoga series that tells a story while also promoting movement.

Cincinnati Zoo, 2- to 10-year-olds: Educators and keepers at the zoo do Facebook Live "Home Safaris" and then offer an activity to do at home.

Mo Willems, 3- to 10-year-olds: The beloved artist and writer does a "lunchtime doodle" once a day with the Kennedy Center.

Art for Kids Hub, 2- to 10-year-olds: Art lessons on everything from drawing to origami to sculpting, with videos organized by age range.

Amazon Prime, all ages: Amazon just announced it is making some of its kids' programming available without a Prime membership.

Story Time From Spaces, 6- to 10-year-olds: Astronauts read books aloud while the text and images from the book are displayed on the screen.

Khan Academy, 10- to 17-year-olds: A free service providing math and SAT practice.

Camp Broadway, 10- to 17-year-olds: An educational livestream featuring theater pros involved in all aspects of productions.

American Museum of Natural History, all ages: The New York museum is offering a variety of online content.

Child Mind Institute: Mental health resources and advice for parents.

Don't expect to work at your normal capacity

"Take the to-do list you had for today and cut it in half, then cut it in half again," says Anderson.

Everyone is going to be less productive during this time. Being proactive with employers and co-workers and setting realistic expectations about what you can accomplish is necessary to prevent misunderstandings down the line. First, figure out what your optimal working hours will be, when you'll be most available, and how much you think you can get done, says Jaime Klein, the CEO of **Inspire Human Resources**. Then request a scheduled video call with your boss. "The human brain still takes in so much information through nonverbals. The ability to not only hear the intonation but to see how a leader is receiving the information is incredibly important," says Klein.

Klein also says to come armed with choices for your boss and give them options, which "gives them something to respond to and edit," such as staggering shifts or moving meeting times. (Interestingly, offering choices is also a method that educators suggest for getting young children to comply with requests.)

Unfortunately, unconventional working hours are probably necessary. Lieber does most of her work after 2:30 until dinner, and then from 8 to 11 pm. Ann Vegdahl works in academia in New York City, and her husband is a software engineer. They have a 2-year-old son, and she is seven months pregnant. Her son is usually in day care for eight hours, but now all three are home together. Vegdahl primarily works when her son naps and then for several hours in the evening. She estimates she is only getting 40 to 50 percent of her usual workload accomplished, but her employer has thus far been understanding. "When [my son] goes down, I'm like, 'Can I take a nap too?' I laugh at the idea of schedules," she says.

Still, Anderson recommends for two-parent homes with both partners at home to plan to work in shifts if possible, especially if there are small children that require more attention. Breaking it up into two- or four-hour shifts apiece can ensure that each partner has dedicated time to focus. But even then, be prepared to help out if things get tricky, especially if there are multiple children.

Anderson recommends setting a maximum of five goals for the day: one or two things you really need to accomplish at work, one or two things you want your kids to accomplish, and one family or partner activity, even if it's crashing on the couch to watch TV for 30 minutes. Don't expect to or try to do more, because you'll get frustrated and even more stressed out.

"I'm used to getting a ton done and when this started, I didn't shift my mentality. Now, I give myself two days to accomplish what I'd like to do in one day — professionally, personally, and otherwise," Alexandra Mayzler, a mom of a 3- and 5-year-old and the founder of the **Thinking Caps Group**, says in an email.

Communicating ahead of time with partners can prevent fighting and stress during the day, too. "Though I'm doing most of the child care and homeschooling with our kids, every evening my husband and I go through our schedules and we block out an hour or two if there is something that I need to get done during regular business hours. Communicating ahead of time keeps things calm during the day," says Mayzler.

Distance learning is a challenge for all age groups

"You're not a teacher. Unless you already were planning to homeschool your kid, there's no way to truly adapt to this," says Anderson. "We are seeing compassion from schools where they are saying, 'We know you're not going to get it all done, we know they can't complete the same curriculum as if they were in their classrooms.'" He recommends that parents reach out to their schools to "triage" and ask, "What are the most high-priority items I've got to get done during the day?"



Jackie Goldschneider 
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Do I claim to have the patience and strength to be a perfect homeschooler for my children?

No.

But am I trying my hardest every day to be the best possible teacher I can be?

Also no.

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Infants and toddlers arguably require the most hands-on care and the most attention, but all age groups come with their own challenges for working parents.

Vegdahl says she went to a local dollar store and bought tons of cheap toys and objects. Colored tape has been popular at her home. She's used it to make "roads" through the apartment that her son drives his trucks on. Lieber says a \$4 kazoo and daily baking keep her toddler happy. And both of them have taken advantage of the lockdown to potty train. "We're not going out anywhere, and I now have time and patience. I go back and forth between wondering if I'm a masochist or if this is a good idea," says Lieber.

For older children, schools vary widely on how they're handling distance learning, from formal online classes to sending packets of work home. No matter what the workload is, at least a rudimentary schedule can be helpful for kids and parents alike — many kids are used to a structured school day.



Jackie Goldschneider @JGSchneid · Mar 19, 2020



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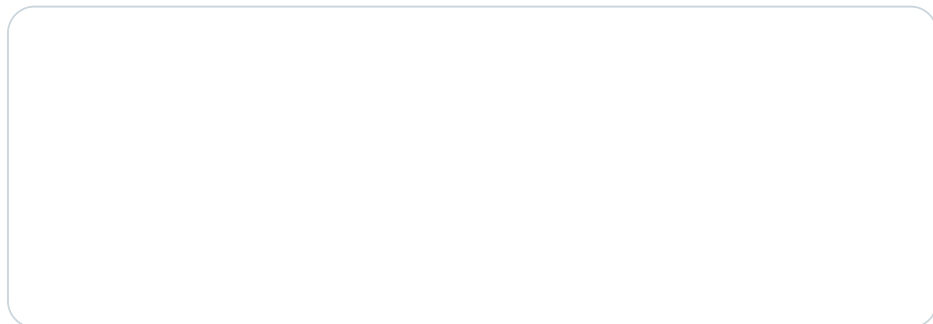
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“The most important thing is that kids need some sort of structure, whatever that routine and structure looks like for that family. That’s what’s been the most helpful,” says Jennifer Quinn, a school librarian and former elementary school teacher based in upstate New York. She has two children at home, ages 9 and 10; her son is blind. At one point she was sharing a laptop with her daughter, who was doing Zoom classes.

Quinn says that for kids older than 7, a checklist of tasks they can complete can be a good tool. She incorporates concepts like “choice time,” which they recognize from school. At home, this means they get to go to the basement and play with whatever (non-screen activity) they want to do down there. Once the checklist is complete, she lets her kids do a reward activity, like playing a video game.

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Quinn recommends that families look for online resources that jibe with their kids’ interests, otherwise the sheer number of them out there can be overwhelming. She also recommends reaching out to a librarian, who can steer families to specific resources in their communities that are relevant to their interests. For families looking for books, there is a program called **Epic**, which Quinn calls a “Netflix for books.” If a teacher or librarian invites you, you’ll get free access to e-books and audiobooks. (She doesn’t really recommend Audible’s free offerings, noting that the titles are “limited.”) **Scribd** has a similar program. She also recommends hunting down favorite authors’ Twitter feeds. Many are doing daily or weekly activities online.

Let’s be honest: Spare time is probably going to involve a lot more screens

Let’s all be honest that most of our kids, regardless of age, are probably going to be getting more screen time. Popping your toddler or kindergartner in front of a Netflix cartoon or an iPad game while you get 45 minutes of critical work done is not the end of the world, especially during this stressful time for all of us.

For teens, the biggest battle might not be their school work but their social lives. In pre-Covid-19 days, my biggest fights with my two teen boys involved how much time they were spending online. Now I’m thankful they have the technology. I hear them playing video

games and talking and hollering with friends on Discord and other platforms. My older son does FaceTime calls with his friends in the basement.

“So much of what is central to the teen experience is their social life,” says Anderson. He says some of the families he works with have allowed teens to go out in pairs and keep a safe social distance or meet in the hallways of apartment buildings while maintaining six feet.

This is a new normal for families now, and Anderson recommends checking in with other parent friends who can commiserate. Mostly, though, give yourself a break, he says. “Have some compassion for yourself and know that no one has experience juggling the range of things that many parents are currently juggling. Forgive yourself and tell yourself, ‘I’m going to get some sleep and wake up tomorrow morning and do it basically good enough. It doesn’t have to be perfect — just good enough.’” ■

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