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# How to Manage Your Work and Childcare When Schools are Closing

As a society we are all dealing with new challenges to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. One added challenge you may be facing if you are a parent is the closure of your child's school.

Schools are closing around the world. As children or their family members are showing symptoms of COVID-19 they are self-isolating for everyone's mutual benefit.

Meanwhile, the government may go from encouraging workers to work from home, to slow down or stop the spread of COVID-19, to a stricter control tactic of locking down all movement in certain areas giving some people no choice but to work from home. This means that the typical family situation will be grownups and children sent home to spend the day together, trying to get along, and trying to be productive.

## Working from home

You may be in a position where you have to negotiate working from home with your employer. If working from home is impossible due to the nature of your work, or if your employer refuses to allow you to work from home, remember to maintain the recommended disciplines and hygiene routines recommended by the experts to avoid infection from COVID-19 when out and about.

If you usually work from home then the prospect of your children being around you throughout your day will recall the days of the long holidays for you, with the added concern that your children will need to consider studying to make up for lost time at school term time.

If you are a full time stay-home-parent then you will have the chance to shift your focus to maintaining, as best you can, the continuity of your child's education.

If the working from home arrangement has been recently offered to you, as a measure to defeat COVID-19, consider some of the following suggestions about how to best juggle your parenting role with the new experience of carrying out your professional work away from its usual setting.

## Managing children at home during work hours

Psychologists generally agree that children benefit from rules. They go so far to say that they like rules. This may be hard to believe as a parent preparing to present their child with how things are going to be under the new regime, but laying down rules will make life better for the family in the long run despite any resistance during at the beginning.

With lockdowns and isolation as precautions against COVID-19, some of the usual options for stimulating and entertaining children are not available. You can't take them to museums or cineplex as they've been closed. Play dates with friends and other visits are not possible either.

**Setting out rules.** The more structure you can give children in a way that integrates with your life the better off you will all be. A sense of continuity will be a reassurance to your children.
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**Independence.** Consider this an opportunity for a teachable moment. Perhaps now is the time they can learn to do more jobs around the house. Take a moment to explain to them the benefits of keeping your living space tidy. How it will make life easier and more pleasant for all those who share the space? Maybe now is the time for them to learn to put together snacks, or even cook meals. Do they know how the washing machine works? Showing them you trust them to do these things and letting them find out how capable they can be will contribute to their sense of self-worth and maturity.

**Routine.** Start off the day making it very clear to your kids that weekdays will stay different from weekends. If they were at school at 10 a.m., they would be dressed, working and using their brains, not slouching around watching TV in their pyjamas. The routine can be simple or detailed depending on how much energy you feel you have to invest in it. Begin by scheduling when you expect them to do schoolwork, and when you want to have meals and breaks. Play your hand carefully when offering times for things they know they enjoy. Encouraging them to cultivate meaningful interests and hobbies may tax your resolve but it will open them up to more rewarding stimulation in the future.

**Screen time and sugar.** The bargaining will involve you controlling what constitutes a treat in your household. As a parent it's difficult to ignore that the two most popular treats have a compulsive attraction to your children and should be offered sparingly.

Sweets and cakes offer us immediate gratification and fulfil our instinct to fuel our bodies. Add to this the attractive marketing and pricing for these products and it becomes easy to always have a stash of them around us to snack on. Streaming services and apps that our children access on TV or devices use algorithms to keep our attention indefinitely as they encourage us to constantly watch the next thing.

Without the boundaries you set, children are not likely to exercise the discipline required to consume these treats in a healthy way. Your mission will be to get them to take part in as much healthy activity as possible while conserving enough patience and energy to tackle everything else in life.

It would be extremely difficult to completely banish screens and sugar, so you can compromise by incorporating their attraction to motivate your children positively, keeping them as a treat. Set up a schedule for your children's snacktime, TV viewing, and use of their devices. Use a timer for screentime if helpful.

**Play.** Harness your children's energy by making clean-up time a game. Consider mothballing the toys that have never captured your child's interest. Your children will probably have forgotten about the toys at the back of the cupboard or under their bed. Consider organizing them into a series of boxes—when they have had all the fun possible from one set, get your child to pack them up and then bring out fresh reserves.

Noisy, flashy electronic toys often engage children for just a short time. Give a place of prominence to the toys that allow your child to use their imagination and play with indefinitely. If you have the energy to organize materials and deal with the clean-up, consider encouraging them to get messy and creative making objects from packaging, cardboard boxes, glue and paint. Or just let them play at the sink with water and bubbles. Remember you don't always have to join in. Playing alone helps them develop imagination and independence. It's enough if they are safe and you are nearby. You can carry on working and tell them that playing is their job.

**Maintaining schoolwork.** This will be a paramount concern for parents looking to the future impact of the special measures society is taking to mitigate the effect of COVID-19. Again, it's vital to impress on your child that this is not vacation time and that learning needs to continue. It is possible for you to keep continuity of their lessons at home and focus on their curriculum.

Education professionals find that children's brains start to lose their capacity for learning during long holidays, especially if they are starved of stimulation. It can take time for them to recapture their mental elasticity. Whether they are in early or middle childhood or adolescence, it will benefit them greatly if you can look for an appropriate learning routine that will allow them to do something productive. Ideally this will be something that allows them to work independently while you continue to work.

Consult the website for your child's school or your education authority for guidance on the curriculum. Your child's school may provide learning materials such as a learning pack.

## How you can stay productive and focus on your work

If you are working from home and schools have closed, a significant concern will be how to focus on work and care for your children. Maintain a schedule as close to your office hours as possible. Make sure you wake up and are washed and dressed by your normal start at the time. Then, as best you can, think about how you work in blocks of time.

**Boundaries.** Be clear with your family when you are expected to work and why they need to respect the fact that your attention will be focused elsewhere.

**Share care.** If you live with a partner and share care for your children, set out a clear plan for who will answer requests for help from the children at different times during the day.

**Synchronicity.** As much as is realistically possible match schedules with everybody at home. If you have a conference call in your diary you can be sure of getting the silence you'll need because you planned for your kids to go outside or the little one is napping. Your trusty fall-back will of course be headphones when you need to avoid distractions and focus. Instrumental music is recommended for this as singing and lyrics can pull your attention.

**Communicating with manager and team.** Make sure your manager and team members are informed about your home situation so that they are prepared if you have to be flexible with the hours you are able to respond to requests or extend deadlines.

As it seems likely we will be spending seven days a week at home for the foreseeable future, remember to make a significant effort to mark the beginning and end of your working day. Shut down your computer and try as hard as possible to enjoy your weekends, evenings and personal time, finding entertainment, keeping busy or if you want—just doing nothing.

## Protecting well-being for you and your family

We may take for granted the time we spend together with friends and older loved ones. With many of us self-isolating or social distancing we need to make a special effort to stay in touch with people outside our household to avoid isolation and maintain our own and others' well-being. You may also be having to provide support for older relatives who may usually be independent but are now being advised to self-isolate and need help shopping for essential supplies.

## Keeping children happy and safe

We are now in sole charge of the most precious people in our world. In the midst of this unusual time we need to reflect on our priorities and marshal our time and energy to what matters most to us.

Our children's physical health will be our first concern. Are they eating properly? Are they washing their hands? Can they get enough exercise? Going outside will benefit them in many ways as long as they are social distancing. Certain places like play parks may pose a risk as the equipment may not be hygienic, but a run outside in the fresh air will help them burn off energy and make them tired out and ready to sleep at night. Studies show that **vitamin D** from sunlight helps our bodies to fight upper respiratory tract infections.

The sudden interruption to their school schedule may upset your children in ways they will find hard to appreciate. They may miss play dates and socializing. Check in with them regularly. You are the best person to recognize what's going on with them.

Limit news reports but keep your children informed about the basic changes to their routines and what to expect. This will help them come to terms with changes gently and it will have less shock value coming from the person they know and trust. News media is another overwhelmingly abundant product in our society. Protect your children from a constant background noise about what's going on with COVID-19. They will be very sensitive to your reaction to news, especially children with predisposition to anxiety.

While safeguarding your family's well-being, offering reassurance, keeping peace among siblings, may all seem daunting, these may be the most important things you ever do. Dig deep and you will find creative resources you might not think you had. And don't underestimate the benefits of a simple solution like getting a book and lying down with your child and enjoying a story together.

Remember to bear in mind the importance of self-care while you are juggling your responsibilities. Your health and well-being is vital if others depend on you to function.

## Keeping Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic cannot be compared to any other situation we have faced in recent years, so we are all learning how to adapt as the situation unfolds. It's the ultimate test in improvising strategy. It's important throughout this experience to remember that coming through successfully depends on us taking care of ourselves and our families. The effort required to maintain this care is a discipline but we must not forget the importance of being flexible, keeping perspective, and forgiving small things that ultimately may not be important.