

# Work, Family, and Caring for Children: Tips for Working Remotely from Home During COVID-19

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Almost everyone is feeling the pressure of present-day challenges. Never did we imagine that we would be parenting, working remotely, and homeschooling all at the same time, let alone during a pandemic. Our schedules, routines, and daily rhythms have changed and identifying how to quickly restructure life can be difficult. While you may feel privileged working from home, the situation presents many challenges, like children and cats popping in during Zoom meetings. Along with the day to day stressors of practicing social distancing, we are also embarking on a journey where our interpersonal interactions, parenting, and education systems have significantly changed. Many of us are worried, concerned, scared, angry, or sad about current events and these thoughts and feelings can be exhausting. Many of us are trying to grapple with the difficulties that come with working and parenting in this uncertain context. Now more than ever we need to find ways to practice compassion for ourselves and for others.

While this list is in no way exhaustive, we share it to provide some strategies to support navigating our new day to day realities of working and parenting during social distancing.

## Acknowledge Our Emotions

Recognizing and labeling our emotions can be a helpful way to manage our reactivity. Dr. Dan Siegel says that it is helpful to “name it to tame it” or rather notice it, name it, and try not to judge yourself for having those emotions. When we start to feel ourselves becoming overwhelmed we often notice it in our bodies first. Our chests become tight, our neck and shoulders ache, we may even feel dizzy. When this happens it can be helpful to stop what we are doing, notice what you feel in your body and where you feel it, take a deep breath, and name the emotion your

body may be feeling, “My body feels...and the emotion I am experiencing is...” After labeling the emotion try not to judge it. Emotions are normal and healthy and give us clues to what we may need to feel better; judging ourselves for having emotions only makes us feel worse. For example, maybe you feel frustration while trying to support your children’s learning...frustration in this situation would be normal! Maybe you feel guilt that your child is playing on their tablet while you finish a phone call...some extra screen time won’t harm your child, so let the guilt go! Maybe you feel anger because your partner did not communicate their schedule and now you have to balance scheduling conflicts...guess what, I’d be angry too! All emotions are informative, it is what we do with those emotions that matters. Stopping to recognize how our body experiences emotions and then labeling the emotion can be a helpful strategy in managing strong emotions and may reduce family conflicts. It can also be helpful for adults and young children to notice and label our pleasant emotions to help us recognize when we are experiencing joy or calm. No emotion lasts forever, so name it, tame it, and keep going.

## Manage Expectations

Have you ever tried to hold a beach ball under water? It is a challenge. Now imagine trying to hold five beach balls underwater simultaneously. Chances are you could successfully hold one, maybe two underwater at a time, but holding all five would be next to impossible. Expectations during a pandemic are like beach balls in a pool, they can be extremely hard, if not impossible, to manage all at the same time. So do not expect to be able to do everything at your normal capacity.

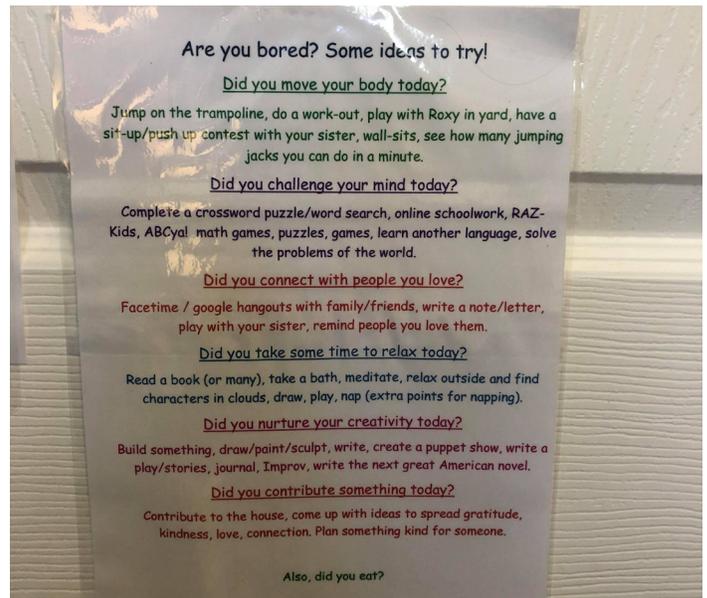
It is important to remember that colleagues and co-workers are experiencing working remotely during this pandemic in different ways. For some, working remotely while practicing social distancing is welcomed and leading to moments of innovation and creativity. Working in this new way may provide the affordance of time to be able to write, publish, pursue grant funding, and create new and exciting programming. For others, this may be a time of survival where we are managing feeling overwhelmed, adjusting to working remotely, caring for and educating our children, and grappling with numerous uncertainties. It can be difficult to manage the pressure to achieve and produce more. Ideas for releasing the pressure include talking to your supervisor and colleagues about setting appropriate and realistic work goals, setting boundaries around work time, and practice not comparing yourself to others. Try and let go of any guilt or shame for feeling like you cannot “keep up”.

### *Parenting Expectations*

When it comes to parenting, it can be helpful to manage our expectations too. While it can be helpful for everyone to have routine, these daily routines will be different for each family. It can be helpful to remember that young children need to see us model healthy ways of dealing with the difficult emotions and situation created by recent events. Stressing over trying to educate or create learning activities for your children will not be helpful for anyone. What young children need more than ever right now is time to connect, cuddle, have a routine with some flexibility, and feeling safe. Find moments to make every day activities fun and playful. Maybe it's having lunch as a picnic on the living room floor or outside in the backyard. Play restaurant during dinner time and create a menu where children can practice choosing items and pretending to be in a restaurant. When spending time with children, we can benefit from being fully present during these moments so that we limit our need to divide our attention. Try and be intentional about when you need to work and when to play or be with your children. When children receive moments of our undivided attention, then they are more likely to feel okay when parents need to work.

### *Screen time Expectations*

This may also be time when we relax our expectations for screen time. A recent article written by Erika Cheng and Tracey Wilkinson in the New York Times encourages parents to consider the “child, the content and the context.” For younger children, choose content that is reputable and slower paced, like Daniel Tiger. Sometimes screen time will occur in different contexts. Your child may passively watch a show while you have a Zoom meeting or it can



Create a list of activities to keep children busy while you are working.

be more interactive. Your child can watch a show that encourages them to move their bodies, such as doing yoga with Cosmic Kids. Screen time can also be used to connect with friends and family. With younger children make it more engaging by having the child and their grandparent play a game or read a story together. While it is helpful to communicate and follow through with boundaries around screen time, like avoiding screen time at least one hour before bedtime, don't feel bad or guilty if you find your family using screens more often right now. As Glennon Doyle says, “Bringing yourself some peace, will give them some peace”.

### **Create a Schedule**

Most conflicts and frustrations in the family will result when schedules are not clearly communicated. So sit down with those in your house (including children) and create a schedule that allows for flexibility. This will not only help establish structure and routines; it will help children feel like they have some control over their lives as well. While some last-minute meetings or phone calls may happen, sticking to a work schedule may be helpful for the entire family. If there are two partners working remotely, it can be helpful to develop shifts to split the work time. It may be helpful to work in chunks of time. So instead of working three full hours, it may be more helpful and realistic to work 1-2 hours and then stopping to check in with the family. Each morning you can review the schedule with your family, reminding children of the times during the day when you will spend time with them. It can also be helpful to have physical work and learning spaces. You can create a sign that indicates, “in a meeting” or “you can interrupt”. But remember, there may still be interruptions. It can be helpful to accept this and even communicate to work that



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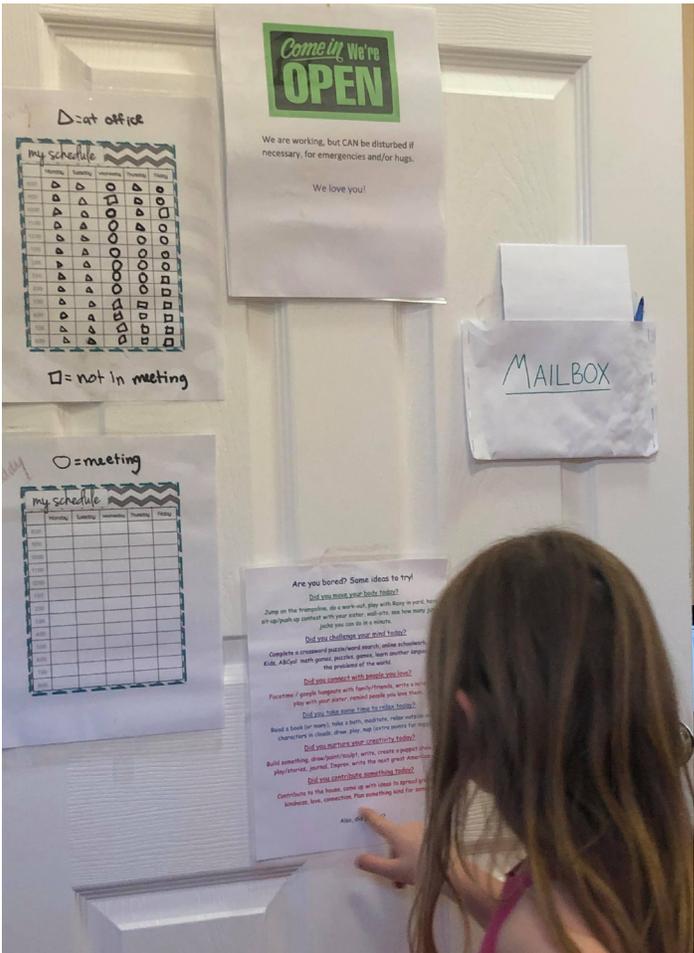
children may appear. Another strategy is to indicate your planned working hours in the signature of your email. If possible, plan work that requires a lot of concentration to occur alongside the times that children are more likely to engage in activities they can do on their own. Right now, schedules may be challenging to follow. If this happens, following a predictable routine at bedtime, such as reading to children before bed and having them go to bed at the same time each night can be something to celebrate.

**Repair and Reconnect**

Considering the circumstances, we may feel more stressed and less present in our interactions with our partners and children. This can lead to more conflict and reactivity. This means there may be more moments where we misstep and want a do-over. What is most important during these times is how we repair the interaction in the moment. This repair happens by reconnecting. So the next time we feel frustrated and yell for our child to get into the bath for the fifth time, it can be helpful to reconnect by saying, “I don’t like it when I yell at you when I’m feeling frustrated. I’m sorry. I know that taking a bath is not always fun for you. Do you want to help me pick out some toys to play with?” We may also need to apologize to co-workers or colleagues after quickly responding to an email or regrettably saying something during a meeting. Apologize for the reaction and next time remember to stop, pause, take a deep breath and respond instead of react.

**Practice Self-Care**

More than ever, we need to make sure we are taking care of ourselves. During times of stress, we often let go of self-care practices. Our minds get into “doing mode” and keep thinking we need to get more and more done. Stop, and make time for the “being mode”. This can be challenging when we cannot go to the gym or meet our



If you can create a separate workspace. Consider posting your schedule, possible activities, and mailbox to the door.

co-workers for a mid-day walk. Be intentional each day to practice positive self-care strategies. Identify strategies that are realistic and achievable during this time, such as listening to music, taking the time to virtually connect with friends and family, spend time in nature, exercise, practicing deep breathing or meditation, eating healthy, reading or drawing, getting adequate sleep and waking up at the same time each day, practicing positive thinking, and/or practice gratitude. It may be helpful to create a Facebook closed group of friends or with your colleagues where you share what you did to be physically active during the day. There are also many virtual exercise classes and free offerings for live and recorded guided meditations.

**Be Gentle with Yourself**

We are collectively experiencing a worldwide crisis, and crises trigger our brains into fight, flight or freeze mode. That means our brains are focused on surviving, not thriving. So it is normal to feel like you aren’t functioning at your peak level. You may forget things, feel overwhelmed more easily, lose track of time, feel disconnected from yourself and from others, and find it difficult to do basic things like getting dressed and preparing meals. All of these things are functions of your

brain doing exactly what it was created to do, keep you alive and safe. You may find yourself hypervigilant and anxious, or hypoactive and depressed. Both are natural responses to unnatural circumstances. The day will come when we will be able to look back on this time and process what has happened, but in-depth processing happens only after one feels emotionally and physically safe. So in this time of crisis, be gentle with yourself (and with others). Self-compassion creates space where mistakes are viewed as valuable learning opportunities, tiny victories call for huge celebrations, and we can acknowledge our suffering without criticizing ourselves for being human.

As hard as it can be to remember, we are capable, we are enough and we have what it takes to walk this new journey – even if the route is curvy and not always clear.

### **Acknowledgment**

Thank you to Sara Gavin for providing the pictures and ideas to support children and families working from home.

### **Resources:**

Zero to Three – many resources of activities to do with children and tips for managing stress and being with the family during COVID-19.

Child Mind Institute - <https://childmind.org/coping-during-covid-19-resources-for-parents/> (they have live Facebook video chats with clinicians)

<https://www.nebraskachildren.org/covid-19-information-and-resources.html>

UNL A Beautiful Day website – ideas for engaging children (0-8 years) in learning and play activities <https://cehs.unl.edu/abeautifulday/>

Sesame Street have excellent resources for engaging children in learning at home activities during COVID-19, [www.sesamestreet.org/caring](http://www.sesamestreet.org/caring)

Tips for Managing Screen Time: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/parenting/manage-screen-time-coronavirus.html>

Be Kind to Yourself <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/between-cultures/201802/be-kind-yourself>

Self-Care Tips During the Covid-19 Pandemic <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/self-care-tips-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

Staying Active at Home <https://food.unl.edu/article/family-food-fun-home#stayingactiveathome>

## Are you bored? Some ideas to try!

Did you move your body today?

Jump on the trampoline, do a work-out, play with Roxy in yard, have a sit-up/push up contest with your sister, wall-sits, see how many jumping jacks you can do in a minute.

Did you challenge your mind today?

Complete a crossword puzzle/ wordsearch, online schoolwork, RAZ Kids, ABCyal, math games, puzzles, games. learn another language, solve the problems of the world.

Did you connect with the people you love?

Facetime/google hangout with family/friends, write a note/letter, play with your sister, remind people you love them.

Did you take some time to relax today?

Read a book (or many), take a bath, meditate, relax outside and find characters in the clouds, draw, play, nap (extra points for napping).

Did you nurture your creativity today?

Build something, draw/paint/sulpt, write, create a puppet show, write a play/story, journal, write the next great American novel.

Did you contribute something today?

Contribute to the house, come up with ideas to spread gratitude, kindness, love, connection, plan something kind for someone.

Did you eat?