

Two parents. Two kids. Two jobs. No child care^[1]

And no end in sight.

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EXCERPTS

Things are starting to break down. I don't just mean psyche and soul and social bonds and sense of self. I mean ordinary, overworked things around the house: the dishwasher, the garage-door opener, the fridge door, the faucet in the kids' bathroom, the towel hanger in the kids' bathroom, the toilet in the kids' bathroom. (Don't ask.)

Bodies, too. So far we've had a sprain (our 9-year-old apparently attempting the land speed record on a scooter meant for a toddler), a possible fracture (him again, attempting same on a bicycle, after dark) and enough stress-induced gastrointestinal distress to burn out the poor plunger. For a school diary entry, our 7-year-old recounted how, during an overly raucous, parentally imposed game of Chicken Charades, she bit brutally into her lip, resulting in The World's Biggest Canker Sore.

"This is the worst day of my life," she reported.

There is much ambient love in my household under lockdown, but I'm sorry to say that at any particular moment there is likely to be a state of war, and the alliances shift more capriciously than those in the Trump administration. Over the weekend, the kids, often fiercely battling each other over increasingly diminished parental attention, unexpectedly banded together and presented us with a written list of demands. We refused to sign; my wife was taken prisoner of war, and the children do not appear to think highly of the laws of conflict. (They let her nap, but only with the lights on.)

Does this sound fun?

Maybe one day we'll get a kick out of it. For now, we do not.

Yes, I am blessed beyond all measure. My family and I are so far healthy and financially secure. We live in the San Francisco Bay Area, where government has been surprisingly effective and the death toll from the coronavirus minimal. My wife and I both have jobs that can be done mostly from home, and I've worked primarily from home for much of my career, so I didn't even have to adjust. Also, as my parents keep telling everyone they know, my kids happen to be the world's most perfect children.

And yet, in this fifth week of sheltering in place, I am really starting to wonder how anyone could think this is sustainable.

Attempting to work full time while rooming with, feeding and educating one or more children during the pandemic is not going well -- not for me, and not for most people I know. Though we are embarrassingly indulgent of self-care, neither of us feels as if we are doing anything other than failing at everything, every day.

There is a largely meaningless debate going on right now about when to "reopen" the economy, as if you could just roll up the clanky gate on society and take us back to the way we were on New Year's Day.

The whole argument is moot, because across vast parts of the country, school has closed for good for the academic year, and many of the already meager, expensive and inconvenient options for child care during the summer may still be deemed unsafe. The economy will not really "open up," and life will not really return to normal, as long as parents don't have any place to send our children during the day.

Something will have to give. This is not just about my personal annoyance and incapacity. Much of the future depends on parents coping. In about half of American households, both parents work full time. Even in ordinary times, American parents report feeling deep stress about raising children while working (the stress is, of course, borne largely by women).

But across demographics and income levels, the pandemic has undone many of the supports parents usually rely on to manage raising children while working. If even fancy me is faring so poorly, I can't imagine how others -- the single parents, the front-line-worker parents, the newly unemployed parents -- are coping.

Actually, I don't have to imagine it. Parental burnout under lockdown has been a hot topic these last few weeks. "The parents are not all right," writes Chloe I. Cooney in the online magazine Gen. The New York Times's parenting section abounds with warnings of and solutions to burnout. And when I asked my Twitter followers how they're faring as working parents, I was bombarded with dozens of tales

of woe.

"I feel like I'm doing everything poorly and have no energy to focus on anything," said Nilesh Shah, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh who is raising a 2-year-old with his wife, who also works full time for the university.

"I know I am not working to the best of my capabilities," said Llyra De La Mere, a market-research analyst who lives with her husband and their 12-year-old autistic son near Seattle. "I'm forgetting things constantly. I've lost every semblance of organization. It's embarrassing and troubling and I'm not proud of the work I'm doing," she said.

Another mom, Erika Brown Ekiel, who lives near me in the Bay Area, told me she feels on the brink of burnout. She described "such a level of emotional and mental stress that it's hard to see how much longer this can go on without creating really dangerous consequences all throughout society."

She tried to continue, beginning to explain how her kids' interruptions were limiting her capacity to get in any state of workplace "flow." But just then she was interrupted by her nearly naked son. "Put your pants and shirt back on," she scolded.

Here is where, ordinarily, I would conclude with a grand thought about America: I might venture that cross-society parental stress under pandemic could forge a new parental voting bloc. That perhaps now universal child care will be regarded as a necessity, not some kind of indulgence. But the kids are asking for lunch, and I have to break it to them that all the hot dogs are gone. Pray for me. I don't want to be taken prisoner of war.

We want to hear from you. Please share your experiences below.

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