

The coronavirus has caused a child care crisis. Here's how some parents are managing. ^[1]

"I feel incredibly exhausted all the time": 6 families on juggling child care during the pandemic

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EXCERPTS

A single mom homeschooling her preteen while caring for her toddler. Another mom managing both her child's school schedule and her own. Two parents splitting their workdays in half to take care of their son.

With tens of thousands of schools, as well as numerous day care centers, closed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, millions of families around the country have stories like these: stories of how they make their lives work when their kids are suddenly home all day, every day. For some, it's been a time to connect in a new way as a family. "It's nice to be with our kids all day," one mom told Vox.

But for many parents, it's still really, really hard. Moms and dads have become teachers, expected to supervise a totally new form of school for most kids — online learning — often with no training. If they're working from home, parents are trying to juggle child care with Zoom meetings and projects, sometimes working hours every night to make up for lost time during the day. "I feel incredibly exhausted all the time," one mom said.

If they're working outside the home in health care or other essential jobs, parents are finding care for their kids with family members, at emergency centers, or with groups that have sprung up in recent weeks to support frontline workers.

But even with help, these workers are facing a lot of anxiety. One dad, a nurse, told Vox he's worried about bringing Covid-19 home and infecting his mother-in-law, who is caring for his kids. Meanwhile, for the millions of American parents who are unemployed right now, the days are often spent taking care of children while trying to get a new job or file for unemployment.

With most Americans still under shelter-in-place orders, the experience of parenting during the pandemic can be isolating, and it's easy to wonder whether everyone else is somehow managing better than you are. To break through the isolation a bit, Vox spoke to six parents about how they structure their days, what their challenges are, what makes things a little easier, and what they need right now. Their stories — of stress, sleeplessness, and sometimes moments of joy — are below.

Hayley Gorbet and Philip Scott Gorbet: "How am I going to pull this off?"

Reno, Nevada

Three children, ages 5, 8, and 11

Their day-to-day: Hayley Gorbet had a full schedule of work and school before the pandemic hit. She was pursuing an associate's degree in clinical psychology at the local community college while also working at Applebee's at night and occasionally shopping for Instacart. She used to leave for her night shift after her husband, who installs heating and air conditioning systems for a living, got home from his day job.

But now that she has been furloughed from Applebee's and her kids are home from school during the pandemic, her focus is looking after them and helping them with remote schoolwork. Hayley's stepdad has been chipping in with child care occasionally, and her husband's work has been slowing down amid the pandemic so he has been able to relieve her from child care duties earlier.

How it's going: Life at home is chaotic. Gorbet had to ask her professor for an extension on an essay, and while she's still attending lectures via Zoom, there are always disruptions from her kids that make it hard to focus.

The biggest challenge: "It's been hard for me to structure my learning at home, as well as theirs," she said. "I've been working on my stuff late at night, which has been hard getting up in the morning to get them ready. I hope life goes back to normal because I don't know if I can do all that learning from home."

What's more, her kids' schoolwork has been demanding: One of their teachers recommended spending no more than an hour or two on an assignment, but four and a half hours later, they still hadn't finished it. And each of their teachers is approaching distance learning slightly differently, with some communicating with parents over email and others over the education app ClassDojo — it's a lot to keep track of, she says.

"I woke up this morning and was like, 'Oh, my gosh, how am I going to pull this off?'" she said.

What lifts their spirits: "We do have a really strong family support system. My stepdad is looking after my little boys while I'm in math class. And my sister is a teacher in Boise, Idaho, and she teaches fourth grade, so she has been giving me tips. We should be reaching out to each other and getting words of encouragement and love. I think those things help everybody navigate through the situation."

Alison Wathen and John Herfkens: "The hill you're willing to die on"

Kalamazoo, Michigan

4-month-old twins

Their day-to-day: When their kids' day care closed, Wathen and her husband were in a bind: There was no way they could continue doing their jobs and care full-time for two infants. Her parents offered to come and help, but they both have chronic health issues, and Wathen and her husband live in the Chicago area, where cases were rising. "We all felt it was safer for us to just go to them," Wathen said.

So the couple packed up their belongings and moved in with Wathen's parents in Michigan. They've been there about six weeks now — four adults and two babies "in a small house meant for two," Wathen says.

Wathen's mother still works part time, so her father does most of the child care. Wathen, who's working remotely as a case coordinator for children with disabilities, is able to take a little time every day to give her parents a break. But her husband, an accounting manager at a medical association, isn't available at all during the day. Overall, "it's basically my father doing about 75 percent of the work," Wathen said.

How it's going: "In the words of my father, no one wants to move back in with their parents," Wathen said. And moving in with babies is especially difficult — now every parenting decision is a conversation among four people, rather than just two. "When you're parenting with your own parents watching, it's a lot harder because you question everything and they question everything," Wathen said.

It's hard on her parents, too, both emotionally and physically. "They're in their 60s," Wathen said. "It's not easy to bounce a baby for eight hours."

The biggest challenge: The hardest thing for Wathen and her husband is when they disagree with her parents on a question of baby care. Then she and her husband have to decide if it's worth it to raise the issue, given that her parents are already doing so much. It's especially hard because they don't know how much longer they'll be in this situation.

"If it's just for a week or two, okay, but if this is something that sets up a pattern for the next three months, that could make a huge difference once we go home, if we ever get to go home," Wathen said. "It just makes it hard to decide what is the hill you're willing to die on."

What would help: Working less. Wathen says her brother's employer has given workers the option to work half time so they can take care of kids. "If that were something that was available to my husband and I, then we could have taken care of the kids ourselves and not put my parents at risk by going to them," Wathen said.

Lyzbeth Rivera: "It's just us three"

San Francisco, California

Two kids, ages 3 and 12

Their day-to-day: In March, Rivera was let go from her job as assistant general manager of a spa. So now she's at home, guiding her 12-year-old son through his online lessons while taking care of her toddler daughter.

Usually, she lets her son work on his lessons on his own, setting a time frame for him to finish them. Then she can take care of her daughter, doing arts and crafts, reading, and speaking in Spanish. "I'm bilingual, so I'm making sure that she also becomes bilingual," Rivera said.

Rivera has heard a lot of horror stories about applying for unemployment, and feels fortunate that she was able to get her benefits quickly, meaning she's able to pay the rent. Now she usually sets aside one day a week to apply for new jobs. But she needs to find one that will wait for her to start until her son is back in school and her daughter is back in day care. "I don't want to leave them alone," she says.

How it's going: Rivera has homeschooled her son in the past, which she says has made the transition easier. "I just remind him every day, it's like how you were doing it before," she says.

Still, it can be a challenge supervising his school while taking care of her daughter. Sometimes the 3-year-old "wakes up in a really moody situation, and she just wants me to hold her," Rivera said. At those times, "I just tell my son, you're on our own, you're solo."

He's fallen behind on his schoolwork at times, but she does her best to keep him on track. "I just have to remind him to just keep doing it, finish it up, keep communicating with me," she said. "Because it's just us three."

The biggest challenge: Online education now isn't like it was when she first homeschooled her son, Rivera says. That was planned, and this happened suddenly. And Rivera wants more from her son's teachers. "The communication has been lacking a lot," she said. "I just worry because I don't know if my son's getting the adequate amount of education right now."

She tries to fill in the gaps and teach him things he doesn't learn in school, like how to save and manage money, something she wishes she had learned at an earlier age. "Teaching him financial things about life right now, especially because of what's going on, is something that I've had to reinforce a lot," Rivera said.

What lifts their spirits: The whole family does a lot of baking and cooking together. "A week ago my daughter was all into birthdays, so I

made her a birthday cake with a candle,” Rivera said. Her daughter even helped a little, and they experimented with different ways of decorating the cake.

Then “we wished her happy birthday, even though it’s not her birthday,” Rivera said. “Just keeping them entertained with different things like that helps the time pass by faster.”

Elizabeth and Lauren Henkel-Lorenz: “I feel incredibly exhausted all the time”

Maplewood, New Jersey

Two daughters, ages 2 and 5

Their day-to-day: Elizabeth Henkel-Lorenz’s workdays at home with her wife, Lauren, and their kids involve a lot of switching off. Elizabeth, a curriculum developer, wakes up early and does child care from 6 to 9 am while Lauren, a special education administrator, works. Then Lauren takes care of the kids from 9 until noon. Then the two-year-old naps while the 5-year-old watches TV. “That’s probably the most productive time in the house,” Elizabeth Henkel-Lorenz says.

In the afternoon, the two adults split time based on who has a meeting, and they “work at night as needed to fill in the blanks,” Henkel-Lorenz says. For her, that can be anywhere between one and three hours a night.

How it’s going: “It’s really hard,” Henkel-Lorenz says.

On the one hand, “it’s nice to be with our kids all day,” she says. Ordinarily, they’re in full-time day care and preschool, and other adults are caring for them many hours a day. But now, “it feels like we’re their people,” Henkel-Lorenz says. But caring for them while working full time is very challenging: “I feel incredibly exhausted all the time,” Henkel-Lorenz says.

Still, she’s grateful that she and her wife have been able to find an arrangement that works for them. “I have so many friends where the gender divide just was at work” in the division of pandemic-era domestic labor, she says, with the husband getting to work uninterrupted while the wife handles all the child care on top of her own job. “It’s been great that we don’t have a situation like that,” she said.

The biggest challenge: “I think wanting to give them the attention that they deserve and not being able to is so hard,” Henkel-Lorenz says. “Everybody’s saying to give yourself grace with screen time and TV, but it doesn’t feel great to know that for a lot of the day, our daughter’s watching much more TV than she normally would.”

What lifts their spirits: The family got a puppy at the beginning of the pandemic, which has turned out to be more work than the adults bargained for. But she’s “very cute and the kids really like her,” Henkel-Lorenz said.

They also have “Disney princess dinners” as a family, where everyone dresses up as a Disney princess. “We’re a big Halloween family, so we have a lot of costumes,” Henkel-Lorenz says. “We do very silly stuff to try and make things feel special.”

James and Kristel Minnock: “We just basically split-shift everything”

Oxnard, California

One child, age 12

Their day-to-day: When schools closed, it had an especially big impact on the Minnock family. Their son has autism and needs a one-on-one aide for education, and his parents aren’t trained to provide that kind of support for him. His school sent some materials to try to help, James Minnock said, but “they know and we know that it’s just not going to happen.”

With school on hold, Minnock’s wife, an adjunct professor, takes care of their son in the mornings. In the afternoons, she works remotely and Minnock, who works for the Department of Defense, comes home to do child care.

The family does still get visits from state-provided caregivers to give Minnock and his wife a break, he said. But other than that, “we just basically split-shift everything, and one or the other of us has to be actively taking care of him at any time.”

How it’s going: Minnock says “it’s a blessing” that he’s still working outside the home. He’s not worried about Covid-19 because his workplace is doing a good job of monitoring the risks. Moreover, “because I am ‘super-fun dad,’ if I am home, I don’t get to work,” he says. “If I had to telework, I would just have to quit.”

He is worried about how his son will react when he finally goes back to school. Right now, Minnock says, “I think he thinks that he’s done.”

The biggest challenge: A lot of the activities that helped Minnock’s son aren’t possible right now due to the lockdown. “He would go to the pool, he would go to splash pads,” Minnock said. “All that’s been stripped away.”

Minnock was very worried when he heard that California might close all beaches. “That was our last thing,” he said. “That’s where I take him every day.”

Change is hard for Minnock’s son, and it’s been especially difficult to deal with the many incremental changes to restrictions during the pandemic. “I’d rather do all the changes at once so that we can figure out how to get him through the day,” Minnock said. “Continually reacting to new things being shut down is just drawing out the agony.”

What would help: Minnock said he wishes state officials had given families a clearer idea of what would be shut down and for how long. If they had known how severe restrictions were going to be beforehand, the Minnocks might have moved to a state where they have family and more options for helping their son. As things stand, “we don’t know when it’s going to shut down or when it’s going to start back up, so we’re not getting the information we need.”

Joshua Martin and Stacy McCall-Martin: “She’s giving up her life to be here”

Stanton, California

Three kids, ages 4, 9, and 11

Their day-to-day: When the pandemic hit, “it was really tough to take in that our children are not going to be in school,” Martin said. A nurse, he ordinarily works at an outpatient clinic but was reassigned to a hospital as cases of Covid-19 began to spike in Southern California. His wife, a therapist who treats teenagers, can work remotely but can’t care for their kids at the same time.

Now that cases where he lives have stabilized somewhat, Martin is no longer in the hospital — he spends most of his time performing wellness checks on older people in the community, making sure they are taking their medications and are up to date on their lab tests. That work takes place by phone, but he still has to go to the clinic to do it, meaning he’s out the door by 7:30 most mornings. He also takes an online chemistry class three nights a week.

But luckily, Martin’s mother-in-law was able to move in with the couple to care for the children while they work. She supervises all the kids’ online schooling and even has some experience in preschool education, which is especially helpful for the 4-year-old. “We’ve been blessed and lucky to have her,” Martin said.

How it’s going: At first, Martin worried about bringing the virus home and infecting his mother-in-law, who is over 60. But he’s been taking a lot of precautions: For example, when he gets home, he always showers and changes clothes before spending time with his family. “Knock on wood, no one has gotten sick here,” he said.

Emotionally, Martin says, “everyone is doing pretty well.” It took some adjustment at first because his mother-in-law likes to have the kids on a strict schedule, while he tends to be more free-form. But they adapted to his mother-in-law’s preference, he said: “Because she’s there, we want her to be comfortable.”

The biggest challenge: One of the hardest things about their new situation was that Martin and his wife wanted to pay his mother-in-law for her help but weren’t able to afford very much. Luckily, a child care stipend program for essential workers gives the family a little money for payment. “She’s giving up her life to be here and help us, and at least she’s somewhat compensated,” Martin said. But she’s probably still making less than minimum wage, he said.

What lifts their spirits: Martin and his wife are both taking time for self-care when they can. For him, that means video games, since golf courses are closed. For her, it’s crafts — she even decorated a face mask to commemorate her birthday this year, “just so she can always remember this time,” Martin said.

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