

The World Health Organization says the pandemic emergency is over. Everything is fine. Right, parents? ^[1]

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Excerpts

A few weeks ago, while scrolling through old family photos, I came across two images that document a parenting moment my husband captured a month into the pandemic, one that now feels both sweet and foreboding.

It's early April 2020. We are at home in our East York semi, in the basement, a tiny space that had become both my husband's office and the kids' play area during the early weeks of what we didn't yet know would only be the first wave of COVID-19. My husband took the photos surreptitiously from his desk in the corner.

In the first one I am lying on my back on the carpet, holding my six-month-old daughter aloft and zooming her around like she's an airplane. Beside us, my three-year-old is a blur of movement, full of pent-up energy from being stuck at home for weeks, her preschool closed indefinitely. She was, I remember, demanding to be airplaned like her sister.

In the second photo, taken minutes later, I am still on the floor, but I am clutching a pillow and have fallen into a deep sleep. My mouth is agape. I look like I've been knocked out. The baby sits beside me with a zebra toy, looking confused. The three-year-old has seized the unsupervised moment to perform a banned activity, jumping on the sofa, and her unbrushed hair is bouncing around her head.

I thought about that photo this week as the World Health Organization declared the emergency phase of the COVID-19 pandemic over. It feels like we are emerging, finally, from a dark place. Though there is certainly a lot to feel grateful for, I can't help but reflect not only on how far parents have come, but how much we've paid for it.

The global health emergency may be over, but many of the parents I know, maybe most of the parents I know, are suffering from what feels like chronic and incurable burnout, emotionally and physically depleted after years of trying to do the impossible: perform two full-time jobs at once, often while feeling pressure to stay positive. This struggle has led to relentless feelings of guilt and failure in our personal and professional lives, and consequences including depression and anxiety, substance abuse, marriage breakdowns and family violence.

I remember feeling, in those early weeks, hopeful, like we just had to push through a little longer and things would be OK. It's probably for the best that parents didn't know then what lay ahead: how long we would be forced to endure virtual school and forgo child care; to see our children deprived of friendship and community; to live without extended family and social supports.

My family is fortunate. My husband was able to work from home during the pandemic. I have either been on maternity leave or working from home for the past three years. I think often about parents who had to work at factories, hospitals and stores. Or parents who lost their jobs. Or the single parents. The single parents! How did they do it?

A recent U.S. study found that the pandemic increased overall levels of parental burnout and, as the authors put it, "(reduced) use of positive parenting strategies," which is a generous way of saying we've become crappier parents. And how could we not? We worked around the clock, performing parenting and work duties by day, and then staying at our desks into the night to play catch-up.

In the first year of the pandemic, the average annual employment rate for women in Ontario fell to levels last seen in 1994. U.S. researchers last year found that the pandemic parenting burden was heavier on women, who performed, on average, two hours more of supervisory parenting tasks each day than men.

Moms are definitely not OK. We watched our kids' lives be curtailed and often wore that as a personal failure, as though we could somehow make up for the world imploding.

Parents feel older, and not just three years older. "I look in the mirror and feel like I've aged a decade," one mom I know said recently.

Child-care centres and schools remain sensitive to symptoms of illness, a trend that is understandable in theory, but extremely challenging in practice for parents. We are all one runny nose or soft stool away from having an entire work week derailed. For families with two or more children, future cold and flu seasons may be an unending cycle of children getting sent home with illnesses that exclude them from daycare even as they remain full of energy.

Many employers are back to business as usual, expecting workers to return to the office three or more days a week — a challenge for parents still getting regular pick-up calls from daycare.

For some parents, the idea of working from home with children again, even for a day, is unbearable. It triggers symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. We can barely function as parents or employees when put in this impossible position.

We all have a reel of worst moments from this time. With three kids under seven, two of whom were born just before or during the pandemic, I have many.

One day I was on a work call — a sensitive interview with a woman whose husband had died in a nursing home — when my four-year-old started having a meltdown. Not wanting to interrupt the woman, I ran into my bedroom, locked the door and continued the interview from a closet as my daughter wailed in the hallway until her father emerged from a work call of his own. Afterward, I sat in the dark and cried for a while.

There were, of course, moments of joy. I started a tradition with my oldest — we call it “cranberry-juice tea and notebook time” — in which we drink pink juice out of teacups and write stories in our notebooks, mine journalistic, hers fantastical. While I hope my kids remember more of the good moments than the bad, I have to accept that I have little control over that.

This morning, I started my workday from the dining room table as my three-year-old — the baby I held aloft in the airplane position in those early weeks of the pandemic — sat beside me with a piece of lined paper and a yellow pencil, practising her letters. She is home “sick” from daycare, but full of energy, as is her nature.

As I tried to read a report, she asked me to help her write the letter zed, and then asked me to get her some stickers, and then asked me to get different stickers (not the rainbows, the mermaids!), and then scissors, and then water, and then snacks. So many snacks. Inevitably, I turned on a movie. What could I do? I had to work.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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