

Covid-19 and the Academic Parent



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By Trisalyn Nelson and Jessica Early

If there is one thing that has surprised us about social distancing and remote work in the Covid-19 era, it is how exhausted we feel at the end of *every single day*.

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It's definitely not just you. The shift to remote work has been hard on every faculty member, and having kids at home adds an extra layer of stress. That's true for all engaged parents, but the juggling is especially difficult for academic mothers who tend to bear the burden of home and kids much as they do in nonacademic families. Already we are seeing reports of female professors "submitting fewer papers during coronavirus."

Like most parents, we are trying to home school our kids and keep them healthy and comforted. And, like most academics, we have been moving our own teaching and mentoring online, running our research remotely, and attending all kinds of campus meetings via Zoom.

So how is that working out for us?

Some days are better than others, as old routines fall away and new ones pop up. By no means do we have anything figured out, and we can't resolve societal inequities. But we have a few realistic ideas about how faculty members can cope with working from home and parenting 24/7 in a pandemic. (Note: Our experience is based on working from home with young, school-age children. Academics with babies, rambunctious toddlers, or children with disabilities may be able to modify some of our suggestions to suit very different needs and attention spans.)

If nothing else, we hope the following invites an honest conversation and a reassurance that you are not alone.

To-do lists are your friend. Few things are more disorienting than having all sense of normalcy pulled out from under you overnight. For an academic, the sudden lack of a quiet campus office to retreat to means no time to concentrate on just one thing, no getting lost in solitary writing or reading time.

Without separation of work and personal time, managing your day can feel overwhelming. It is not possible to make every spare moment productive, and exhausting to try. Even when you *are* productive under quarantine with your writing, research, teaching, or advising, you may feel guilty about all the other things you're letting slide while you focus on your work. Shouldn't you be fixing the next meal? Teaching your own kids? Doing the laundry?

Two things have most helped us during this work-from-home-when-you'd-rather-not era: being organized and breaking tasks into bite-size chunks. We're used to breaking down our academic

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media and websites for ideas on what to make with what we have in the house. It helps to have kids who like to bake. It has been a great gift of time at home together to watch them make homemade noodles, calzones, and giant chocolate-chip cookies.

- **Category No. 2: kids.** Besides school work and extracurriculars, we have each tried to schedule one "social" event a day so our children have contact with friends, family, or a teacher. That might be via Zoom or FaceTime, or it might involve riding bikes to meet a friend and wave or chat from a safe distance or leave a chalk message on the driveway. We also check our kids' Google Classroom or teacher emails to find out what they have to do for the week and see which tasks they may need help with. We've learned to pick our battles. If there are some tasks our kids resist, we think about which ones really matter and will most benefit them, and let the rest go.
- **Category No. 3: self-care.** We are trying to get ourselves and our family members moving and resting in some way each day. Sometimes we kick soccer balls in the yard or ride bikes around the neighborhood; sometimes we hold PE in the living room via virtual exercise classes. We hold family movie/TV nights every evening at the same time to create routine and rest. And we try things we never thought we would do (e.g., make a family TikTok dance video and take a virtual kids' bread-baking class).
- **Category No. 4: meetings.** List all the day's Zoom and phone meetings in one spot where you can keep track of them all, and make sure they don't overlap and you don't forget about any of them.
- **Category No. 5: small work-related tasks.** These are things — such as email, grading, letters of recommendation, paperwork, and recording lectures — that we can do when the kids are occupied. The big work tasks — such as manuscript revision or curriculum redesign — are off the list because getting to them is unrealistic right now — and that's OK. It's also OK to ask for more time on the most pressing, big work tasks.

Four ways to manage your Zoom meetings. We aren't sure why Zoom is so utterly exhausting; it just is. And a lot of faculty members [feel that way](#). The technology is working well and we are impressed that we can have successful meetings with so many people from across the university, country, and globe.

But it's all too easy to spend your entire workday on Zoom, which is unproductive and tiring, not to mention unrealistic with kids around you 24/7. For us, the solution was aggressively [managing our Zoom meetings and our time online with the following strategies](#).

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are going to drop off while we pick up new and urgent tasks. We ask ourselves: "Is this meeting necessary to move forward with what most needs to get done now, or can it wait?" If it can wait, we cancel or reschedule.

- **Put it in an email.** Some meetings don't need to happen — ever. If the meeting is informational, just put the details in an email. If someone else is running the meeting, ask them to email you with the particulars. Even when we aren't locked down in a pandemic, that's good practice. It will save everyone time (which, along with toilet paper, is a precious resource nowadays).
- **Get up and move.** In our usual work routines, we walk between meetings on the campus or wander around the halls of our building. Right now, days come and go and we've only walked as far as the fridge. Meetings can be a great time to move. If we don't need to take notes or see visuals, we try to walk during online meetings, sometimes just on a treadmill and sometimes outside. Shut off your video feed and stretch. It helps us to keep going.
- **Record now, watch later.** If you can't make a meeting, if you're double-booked, or if you were planning to attend but your child is suddenly melting down about a complicated math problem, consider signing in and recording the session. Or ask a colleague to tape it for you. A big benefit of everything being online is flexible access.

Train your family and yourself. Very few of us have worked at home this much, and there has been a period of mental as well as physical adjustment for the whole household. It's been a month or so now, and our families are getting more accustomed to what it means when we say we need to work, including what it means for *them*. We've found a few home-management strategies that help us delineate between work and life in this crisis, and keep everyone in the house on the same page.

- **Be clear when you need uninterrupted time to work.** Develop ways to communicate that directly to your kids (assuming they are old enough to understand). For example, we tell our kids, "I'm Zooming in FIVE!" as a way to let them know they need to shut their doors and keep their voices down. Or we ask them if they need anything (snacks, homework help, hugs) before a period when we can't be interrupted. Our kids have learned to ask, "Are you muted?" or to peek in and look for headphones before coming in the room to chat or play.
- **Work around your family schedule.** We try not to schedule Zoom meetings at times we know our kids need us to be present and available. **Pro tip: Hungry kids and a Zoom-**

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"offices" out of the main living area of the house, and behind a closed door. Otherwise our kids were running through our Zoom meetings (sometimes not fully dressed), and we couldn't concentrate.

- **Get comfortable.** If you are spending a lot of time at a computer, and most of us are, consider the ergonomics of your set up because it may be a while before you get to a massage therapist. If you need specific advice on your set-up, ask your university's HR office for help.

We are all vulnerable at this moment, some of us more so than others. Even with the challenges we are facing as we juggle work, parenting, and home schooling, we are also grateful to *have* work that provides us with income, purpose, focus, structure, and connection.

But we can't actually do it all. No one can take care of kids full time and work full time. The kids need to come first. So now is a good time to lower your expectations, hold your kids close, and take care of yourself. Do the work that matters most to you, and that will make the most difference to your students, your colleagues, and your fields. It's not about quantity. Getting one main work task done each day is plenty (and some days even that may seem impossible).

No one knows how long this is going to last, and, in many ways, that lack of certainty goes against the training, goal setting, and planning that have helped us get where we are in our academic careers. As academics we are used to applying for grants and planning research and conference trips months and months in advance. But it's helped to let go of that need for long-term planning and thinking, and instead to focus on what is immediately in front of us and what needs to be done to move forward to tomorrow.

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