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The Penumbra Parenting in the time of COVID-19

For more on **The Penumbra** see
[Comment Lancet 2019;](#)
[394: 453](#) and [Perspectives](#)
[Lancet 2020; 396: 1718](#)

Before COVID-19, you could put any two physician parents together and we'd have a shared narrative of all our "fails" as we juggled hospital work with child rearing: missed teacher conferences, late sign-ups for activities, being the only one who didn't attend the field trip. These were all crises in the Before Times. Our lives changed abruptly with COVID-19. The ways we educated, enriched, and entertained our kids were obliterated overnight. For many parents, child care evaporated, as did the endless march of activities that helped to keep our kids happy. And we worried, constantly, if we were exposing our own families and friends to increased risk by doing our jobs.

In the Before Times, aspirations for our kids were more rigid, often gleaned from side conversations with other parents or social media and, viewed now through the lens of the pandemic, reflecting our privilege. Initially, in the early phase of COVID-19 lockdowns, many parents' attempts to recreate the previous structured chaos of life bordered on quixotic: intricate daily schedules of at-home learning, virtual morning circles, and "educational" YouTube videos. But as the months passed, these routines slowly gave way to free-wheeling screen time, less clothing or personal hygiene, and a motto of "just survive". Chores, exercise, and sleep/wake cycles became more and more lax. Long walks around the neighbourhood, waving at masked strangers from a distance, and marvelling at the slow growth of tomato plants in the front lawn of a neighbour's house became highlights of the day, with their own beauty.

For physician parents, the impact of this fundamental shift in how our society and home lives intertwined had equal parts poignancy, urgency, and despair. We were witnesses to the toll this virus takes on patients' bodies and mental health, and to the burden on a health-care system already

taxed to breaking point before this crisis. We understood our privilege in new or deeper ways: we were employed; we could find ways to make the child care work, somehow; we could engage in the fight against COVID-19.

Simultaneously, we witnessed our children struggle to find meaning and focus as their worlds contracted. We watched the smaller ones internalise that physical closeness was dangerous, and the older ones lose connections to peers and structure around which their lives were built. We ached for their wellbeing and agonised over how to adapt to help them best. Yet we have had clarity about the necessity of isolation in proportional response to the pandemic's destruction.

And there was still, always, our work to be done. We were needed more than ever, not only providing care at the bedside, but also in our public presence and voices. We have needed to be steadfast, strong, and consistent in our public messaging while remaining flexible as the science evolved. For some of us, saying "no" at work became nearly impossible, because the yesses offered a chance to help shift the pandemic's course, improve processes for our patients, and keep our colleagues safe. And, at times, work was also a way to escape—often with a touch of guilt—the monotony of life spent locked at home with our kids.

With a vaccine on the horizon, we are beginning to look ahead to recovery. What lessons will we hang on to from this strange time? The background noise of the Before Times is quieter now and seems less vital. The empty space of all that busy-ness has been filled with a sense of the value of our family connections, our immediate community, and our colleagues at work. Parenting during COVID-19 has forced us to be vulnerable with our kids, to work through tough problems without becoming overwhelmed by fear, and to regain our wonder and mindfulness of the moment at hand.

There is also hope that along with the boredom, frustration, and strangeness of this time, our children are watching and absorbing lessons about serving the needs of others in times of crisis. Perhaps their witness to our work will allow them to understand that blind devotion to absolute individualism can exact a heavy toll that others must pay. And perhaps they will seek to be helpers in some way, whether in direct healing roles or pulling together community for a common cause. How they act, and who they are in the After Times, could be a redemptive outcome of this pandemic.

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