

Tips for Preparing for Childcare and Work Disruption due to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt business as usual across the U.S. Many schools and daycare centers are doing virtual coursework or hybrid environments, and parents around the country are needing to find alternative care for their children.

Below is a set of guidelines, adapted from the authors of *Parents Who Lead*, to help you prepare for potential disruptions of school and work as a new academic year begins. The most effective leaders face reality head on, especially in times of crisis. And that's exactly what you need to do. The COVID-19 pandemic is a leadership challenge for working parents.

Talk to your boss.

Your manager may believe that they are prepared to oversee work-from-home arrangements, but they may not fully understand the complexities associated with doing so for working parents. Now is the time to speak to them, one-on-one. And it will benefit you, your boss, and your children if you take time to consider how you might approach this conversation, understanding that you and your boss are both facing difficult, unexpected, and uncharted choices.

Think through the different scenarios that may play out in the upcoming weeks (e.g., if your child's school is virtual learning only but your workplace is not). Let your boss know the purpose of your conversation — to clarify your mutual expectations for different Covid-19 scenarios. Relentlessly seek to comprehend your boss's expectations with follow-up questions about specifics.

Remember that the goal is to find ways to make things work for everyone, not just you. These conversations should not launch with how your work must accommodate your family life. Such zero-sum thinking (good for me, bad for my boss) isn't likely to get you the support you need in the short term or build a strong foundation for your on-going relationship.

Get on the same page as your parenting partner.

Even under the best circumstances, figuring out how to share childcare and housework responsibilities with a parenting partner can be fraught with frustration and resentment. (Note that "parenting partner" refers to anyone with whom you share responsibility for raising children, even if they aren't your spouse. And this may include a paid child-care provider). With the looming prospect that one, or both, of you may need to adjust your schedules to accommodate virtual or hybrid schooling in the fall, you should begin, proactively, to talk about possible solutions.

Just as you did with your manager or colleagues or both, talk through different scenarios and come up with a game plan. Whether it's working in shifts or creating different zones in your

home, seek out creative solutions now. And, in case those don't work the way you expected, come up with back-up ideas. You may well need to continue to be willing to adjust on the fly, but if you do your calm and rational talking now, when you aren't in crisis mode, you will likely be better able to create a plan that will work for everyone.

Leverage technology wisely.

With the potential for several people (adults and children) to be home for an extended period, consider how you will use technology to make things work for all of you.

For younger children, recognize that you may have to relax normal screen-time restrictions to free you up to get more work done. For older children, keep in mind that they may be expected to use technology to complete schoolwork from home. If you do not have enough computers and tablets for everyone to use at the same time, consider how you can work with what you have so that everyone can do what they need. Familiarize yourself now with their school technology system so you're not scrambling to figure it out later.

Understand the limitations of your technological capabilities, and think, in advance, about how you can work together to make sure everyone gets what they need. For example, your internet speed might not support your video conference calls while your kids stream Netflix.

Mobilize your village.

We've heard that it takes a village to raise a child. Now's the time to get yours in place in a more deliberate way. While it may not be feasible to trade-off childcare responsibilities (depending on quarantine restrictions), consider other ways in which you can make things easier for one another — whether it's sharing creative activities to keep the kids entertained or taking turns grocery shopping. Like how one of us is now teaching classes via webinar — with each student on their own laptop, having conversations in virtual breakout rooms — kids can get together for virtual play dates, in groups of various sizes. Be open to new ways of doing things.

Remember the bigger picture.

As working parents, we can lead our children through this potentially scary time. We can use it as an opportunity to talk about what matters most and how we work together as a team. This crisis highlights the interconnectedness of our world and our responsibilities to others.

Children seem to be more resistant to the virus — and resilient, when infected — but they are carriers to those in our community who are more vulnerable, including beloved grandparents or elderly neighbors, or friends who are sick or recovering.

There are countless opportunities to talk with our children about what we value as parents, and this community health crisis demonstrates the importance of helping others, looking out for people in need, the efficacy of small actions (like handwashing or not going to large gathering

places) in order to protect others. Hard as it might be to do so, try to place the day-to-day frustrations and compromises within the scope of the larger reason our schools and workplaces may do things differently this fall to help safeguard the most vulnerable members of our society.

As parents who lead, we can teach important lessons about what really matters to our children in this trying time.

Workplace Solutions, your employee assistance program, is available 24/7 at 800-327-5071 to provide confidential support and guidance. The EAP web portal, www.wseap.com (access code: *Publicis*), contains additional resources on COVID-19 and will continue to be updated as this situation develops.

Stewart D. Friedman is an organizational psychologist at the Wharton School. He is the co-author of *Parents Who Lead*. For more, visit www.totalleadership.org, find him on Twitter [@StewFriedman](https://twitter.com/StewFriedman).

Alyssa F. Westring is the Vincent de Paul Associate Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship at DePaul University's Driehaus College of Business. She is the co-author of *Parents Who Lead*. Follow her on Twitter at [@AlyssaWestring](https://twitter.com/AlyssaWestring).