

'Mom guilt,' work hours rise in pandemic parenting, but so does quality family time

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It has now been nearly nine months since many parents transitioned from on-site jobs to working from home—and have been not only parenting, but homeschooling as well. It seems safe to say most parents never dreamed their homes would become schools, home offices and the only

place to entertain their children without feeling anxious about contracting COVID-19.

Previous studies have established that parents in the U.S. already face greater stress trying to achieve work-family balance than parents in any other Western country, but COVID-19 levies an unprecedented strain on working parents. Yet the pandemic also offers opportunities for change, as couples have to renegotiate competing career and parenting demands together and reevaluate their priorities. Abigail Ocobock, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, wanted to investigate how working parents were managing the dueling work-family demands of COVID-19. She is preparing the study for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

Between April and June of this year, Ocobock and her graduate research assistant, Lindsay Heldreth, a doctoral student in Notre Dame's Department of Sociology, interviewed 80 parents with at least one child in elementary or middle school. All of the parents work full time and are expected to facilitate e-learning for their children. In this study, all the parents are heterosexual and coupled and they hail from different parts of the U.S. Among the researchers' key findings are a marked increase in "mom guilt," enriched family time and a rise in work expectations and demands.

Popular media and academic studies have highlighted how working moms experience significant guilt. Ocobock found that the effects of COVID-19 increased the level of guilt.

"Put simply, moms felt guilty whatever they were doing; dads did not. In the rare cases when dads took on most of the parenting and schooling labor (typically because they had more flexible or lighter work demands), moms felt very guilty and indebted to them. More often, though, moms felt guilty even though they were already doing most of

the parenting and schooling labor; it was never enough," said Ocobock. "They felt guilty for any number of things: if they tried to fit in any of their own work during the day, if they were tired or not energetic or engaged enough with their kids, if they lost their patience and yelled at their kids, and so on. By contrast, not a single dad mentioned feeling guilty about having to work, or not spending enough time with their kids during the pandemic. Dads seemed to have a much easier time hiding away somewhere in the house and focusing on their own work or needs."

In one interview, a mom of an only child used the phrase "steal time" when referring to taking time to concentrate on her job, but quickly realized that the statement was motivated by her own guilt. Other moms felt guilty using any free time to peruse social media or do other activities that didn't focus on their children. Some moms expressed guilt triggered by losing their tempers in this new, constant school-work-home scenario. Retroactive guilt popped up, too, when assisting their kids with homework.

"I think what's new with the schoolwork is that before—because they don't have homework at this age—a lot of school work issues didn't come home, but now it's on us, and so now I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, more mom guilt,'" said one 36-year-old mom. "Like, should I have been more engaged this whole time? Am I just resting on my laurels, and focusing too much on other things?"

Focusing on work is, of course, necessary, but one of the most common things Ocobock heard from parents was that workplaces had offered them no real accommodations to take into account that they were now also parenting full time. In fact, the opposite happened. Parents reported that their workloads had actually increased during the pandemic, despite their employers generally stating that they understood their parenting situation or at least professing to be supportive of it. While a number of things contributed to increased [work hours](#), like layoffs and changes in

processes due to the pandemic, the result was usually the same: parents working extra hours, sometimes late into the night. While some saw it as an opportunity to prove their value and worth as an employee, the majority of respondents felt it was an added burden.

Other parents are feeling pressure from their management, but also putting pressure on themselves. One mom who used to begin working at 8 a.m. says she now expects herself to start work earlier and end later.

"I see myself expecting myself to clock in at 7:15 or 7:30 as opposed to 8:00, and then usually working till 5:30 p.m. or 6 p.m. just to make sure that any hours that I've been away from my desk helping the kids, I've more than made up for. Just because I want to make sure I'm getting all of my work done in a good way, and we've started so many extra initiatives that it's required me to work longer hours," said a 35-year-old mom of two kids who works in marketing. "I always make sure I'm available to people so even if we go for a walk, I take my phone, so the notifications come in if there's something very important. And then just the extra mental health work...to lead other employees that are maybe doing less well trying to help them through in that way."

A bright spot illuminated in the study was the organic creation of more family time as a result of being at home almost exclusively. One of the most common things Ocobock heard from parents was that they appreciated the slower pace of pandemic life and having more time to enjoy their spouse and kids. Their pre-pandemic lives, many parents said, were "over-scheduled," "rushed" and "always busy." However, without commutes, carpools and after-school activities, families have been able to spend more quality time together.

"Now we generally do have breakfast together, which again is kind of nice I think 'cause I used to rush off in the mornings. Mornings were definitely much more rushed. I was like, 'Oh, you have to get out for the

bus; you have to get out for work.' Or, if on days that my wife was traveling, it's like, 'Oh, she has to catch a train.' There was definitely a lot more morning stress," said one 47-year-old dad of two kids. "And, in fact, our daughter used to have acid reflux in the morning sometimes and she hasn't had that at all since [COVID-19] started."

Ocobock is careful to point out that these experiences are not indicative of every family and it is very likely that single parents or [parents](#) who are considered essential workers are subjected to more stress brought on by school closures and lack of childcare. However, the change of pace for families that are spending a lot more time together has had an overall positive effect.

"It has taken a global pandemic to interrupt the fast pace and stress of contemporary family life and give some families a much-needed slowdown and break," Ocobock said. "Whether or not they will be able to sustain a less busy, less rushed life post-pandemic is unclear, but many spoke about wanting to try to keep doing less and being together more. One positive of crises is that they can make people rethink what's important—and we see clear evidence of families re-evaluating how they spend their time and relate to one another."

More information: COVID-19 Parenting and Work Study:
covidparentingwork.github.io/#/

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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