

On being parents and front-line health workers during COVID-19

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Two parents both in Emergency Medicine

My partner and I are both trainees in Emergency Medicine. We are also parents to two wonderful little girls, who from this year are both in school. We made the decision at the start of the pandemic to send them to live with their grandparents.

We have always taken turns working full time while the other person is the primary carer. My partner worked part-time for six years on weekends so that I could go back to university to study medicine. After completing my internship and residency, I worked part-time while he has been full-time. We have delayed our training at various points in order to maximise time with the girls. We are also fortunate to have supportive extended family who live in the same city and can fill in any gaps in childcare when needed.

Being parents and doctors during COVID-19

COVID-19 has presented us with challenges as parents and doctors that we have never had to consider. When the number of cases started increasing in Australia, we made the difficult decision to send the girls to stay with their grandparents. This was in late March. There was a lot of uncertainty during that time and news from China and Italy drove us to prepare for the worst. The term 'tsunami' was [being used in the ED](#), as we were expecting a wave of presentations similar to what we were seeing in Italy [1]. Also, while we knew at this point that the transmission rates were lower in children, we knew 80% of clustered infections were within families [2]. With two ED doctor parents we were increasing their risk of infection. We were also expecting to have to work additional shifts as workload increased and colleagues had to [self-isolate](#).

It was at this point that we decided to send the girls away. It was an extremely difficult decision as we felt we had to do it earlier rather than later in order to protect their grandparents from possible exposure from us. It was heartbreaking because we did not know how long it would be before we would see them again.

Making sacrifices as parents

Living in a politically stable and affluent country like Australia, we were not expecting to ever have to make this decision. It is humbling to recognise that this scenario is a reality for many around the world. My parents defected from Poland when I was six, fleeing to Germany and then ultimately to Australia. However, the financial groundwork for this defection was laid by my mother who came to work in an Australian factory line when I was 18 months old. She had just completed her Masters in Economics.

During this time, my father left university to be my primary carer. The Polish government did not allow me to accompany my mother to Australia, the rationale being that my mother was more likely to return if I stayed with my father. It was due to her work that year that we had the resources to defect and ultimately settle in Australia.

Other women I know today make similar sacrifices. A colleague left her husband and two children in Ethiopia to travel to Sydney to take up a PhD scholarship. They followed her a year later to Australia and are now living together. She made the sacrifice to leave them so that she could start a new life for them in Sydney.

Keeping things in perspective

During the time that my girls were away, I missed them terribly. I tried to keep things in perspective. I am a mother, but I am also a doctor and I wanted to work during the pandemic. The girls were being looked after by grandparents who loved them and lived only a 40 min drive away. I had to remind myself of this constantly. It was a dark time for us. The house felt empty; we were so incredibly sad. It felt strange coming home to an empty house. I missed coming home to their happy screams of "mama". I missed their cuddles and little arms around my neck. I even missed the bath and bed routine which was usually a period of screams, fights and protracted entreaties to go to bed (especially difficult after a 10-hour shift in the ED).

We reviewed our decision every couple of days. We decided that if the girls weren't managing and were missing home too much, then I could potentially stop working. I would do that not because I am a woman or a mother but because I am more junior, and therefore less useful to the department than my partner, who is at the very end of his training. Their grandparents were incredible. A teacher and an engineer, they made the most of their time with their grandchildren. The fact that our girls were in such a supportive and loving environment was the only reason we were able to keep our resolve for so long.

Adapting to change

Luckily, COVID-19 was well contained and managed in Australia. The initial peak did not eventuate, and hospitals were not straining at full capacity. After not seeing the girls for three weeks, we swapped our shifts so that we were working on alternate days and could care for them without grandparents helping and told the girls that we could pick them up any day. What happened next was a surprise to us: they wanted to stay with their grandparents! We warned the girls that they would not have

dessert every night, regular bushwalks or campfires and they decided that they wanted to stay with them longer. We negotiated an extra half a week. It turns out that yes, children are extremely adaptable. They were doing better than us.

This experience has taught me that we are all more adaptable than we think. Change can be daunting, but it also provides an opportunity for growth. Our children adapted far more easily than we anticipated. This period proved to have some positive outcomes too. It was an incredible bonding experience for the girls and their grandparents. For me, this period has made me so grateful for what we have and appreciate all the cuddles and bedtime reading even more. I think that we are all better than we anticipate at adjusting to changes in circumstances, and that this can happen at any age.

Back together again

We are now at home together again. The number of COVID-19 cases is decreasing every day but [social distancing](#) is still enforced. Modelling suggests a second peak in infections and hospital presentations in several months. Children are slowly being sent to school, but there is still a lot of uncertainty about the future.

Yet there is still hope. Our community has been wonderful. We have had friends leaving bread on our doorstep, offering to walk our dog, delivering wine, school mums have sewed scrub hats for the department, and we've had multiple other offers of help from the school community, including help with groceries. If only they knew this is the quietest it's ever been at work! [3]

It has also brought a very tight-knit ED workforce even closer together, sharing resources - like flour and tissues (when these were scarce resources) - and supporting each other through such uncertain times. I've found conversations with other [mums at work](#) a particular source of strength. One of the most difficult things about COVID-19 is all the uncertainty, there is no end date. But what this experience has taught me thus far is that whatever happens, we will adapt one way or another and it will be ok.

References

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