

# Mothering in the Time of COVID

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## We knew it was coming but it still blindsided

us. On Sunday night, after days of denial and stalling, the mayor finally announced that NYC schools and daycares would be closed starting the next day. This left my husband and me in a bind. With two

active toddlers, what were we going to do with them all day? How will my husband get his work done? How will I rest in between shifts? I was working the overnight shift the next day.

At that time, we were starting to see COVID-19 patients. They started as a few every shift but it was rapidly increasing to the majority. There was so much uncertainty surrounding this disease. What if I bring something home? What if I already had?

Luckily my parents live 30 minutes away and have always been our go-to backup. For their safety, I wanted the kids away from me. As a mom, how could I just send them away? I made the excuse that it was too late in the evening to pack them up and drop them off. In reality, I didn't want to edit the mental packing list for all the activities they would do without me. It was going to have to wait until the early morning.

"No school tomorrow! You get to see Nani and Nana tomorrow! Now go to sleep; don't make me tell you again," we tucked them in. Our two toddlers had no idea what was going on in the world but my husband and I were scared.

The next morning, we packed them up with enough clothes, toys, and books for the week. "Just in case," I told my husband who would join them. I reasoned that they should have one parent there. "But I'll see you on Wednesday when I get the day off." I knew then that I was lying. I just didn't realize how far off I was.

I've spent a night or two away from the kids before, but this felt different. Almost immediately, the apartment felt too quiet and too lonely. It was usually me traveling away from them. Here I was all alone in our apartment. Meanwhile, their house had my parents, my sister, my husband, my two kids running around, plus our dog. I would have laughed, if it wasn't so sad, but the kids were loved and spoiled, and hopefully they were eating and sleeping.

Honestly, that first week without my children went by quickly. I was working a string of shifts, and I was still coming to terms with all that was happening at our hospital and others. I closed the door to their room; I didn't go in for weeks. Seeing their empty beds and toys made the silence louder. The TV noise felt comforting so it stayed on even when I wasn't watching.

We 'Facetimed' daily. My daughter kept repeating, "Hello mommy," as she would put the phone to her ear; all I could see was her hair on the screen. My son quizzed me on math and spelling; three questions every day. Neither my son or daughter seemed bothered that they only saw me on the phone. *That's a good thing, right?*

I didn't know what to do with myself on my off days. I wanted to be a mom again. Everyone on Facebook was posting about all their free time. They were baking, cooking, painting, bike riding with their kids. I tried to do a science experiment over the phone. I had my sister gather food coloring, oil, water, and alka-seltzer. I had researched 'easy toddler science experiments' on YouTube. My son's attention span barely lasted the five minutes. I read books over the phone; anything to try to connect with them.

The apartment was so quiet and empty except during Zoom calls with friends & family. I ended up hogging the conversation trying to answer everyone's questions. I just wanted some human contact.

A reporter from *The New Yorker* wanted to talk about separating from my kids; a phone call turned into a video interview. A friend wanted me to do a Q&A with viewers on his live streaming platform. "Sure," anything to avoid isolation.

## We all do what we have to do for our jobs and our kids. We sacrifice one for the other.



By the third weekend in separation, there was no food in the fridge. My husband came to clean our apartment while I was at work, decked out in a garbage bag, painter's mask and gloves. It felt like my life was on hold. Every spring I took the kids out of daycare to go to the Botanical Gardens for the day. We'd take family photos when the cherry blossoms bloom and they usually make it onto our holiday cards. This year the card would be a screenshot of a Zoom call.

On rare days, I walked outside for a few minutes. I took every chance I got to speak to someone. I hadn't touched someone without gloves in over three weeks. I asked my parents if I could see the kids through the patio glass doors at their house; I felt so desperate. They wisely declined. A friend asked me why I didn't quit my job and go to my kids; it's not worth it. *What?* I never considered it.

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Every night, at 7:00pm, my husband and kids would call. The clapping was bittersweet. My son loved it, proudly shouting, "I'm clapping for you mommy!" My daughter loves clapping for anything. But within moments of hanging up, it became unbearably quiet again. It was even more lonely. They were one big happy family sitting and playing in the living room after dinner. And I was left with my worries: about my family, my colleagues; worried about my patients, for the world; worried about me, my health, my sanity. I missed my children. I missed being a mom.

Then came the break. Sheltering in place worked and the spread was slowing. The hospital was full but the emergency department volume came to a trickle. I used my vacation time and got an unexpected week off. I didn't count on how much I needed work to keep me sane. I hadn't touched – or been touched – by anyone without PPE in over a month.

## I didn't know what to do with myself on my off days. I wanted to be a mom again.

Every day I thought about when I would see my kids again. I kept moving up the date of return: Initially the end of May, then Mother's Day. I talked about it daily with my husband. He wanted to come back to his home. But I was the one scared. What would we do with the kids? NYC had set up a daycare for essential workers but the idea of sending them to school filled me with dread. Facebook's Moms groups were full of women who would *absolutely not do that*. I didn't know if my loneliness and need to be with them would be putting them in danger.

With full trepidation, I went and visited an essential daycare center. They talked to me about their safety protocols, temperature checks twice a day for staff and kids, cleaning schedule, etc. It eased my guilt. But still

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so much doubt. In the end, without a definitive end in sight, we decided to bring kids home. But Pediatric Inflammatory Multisystem Syndrome (PIMS) was just starting to get into the news. I just held my breath.

NY PAUSE flattened the curve but it wouldn't end for weeks. For the first time in six weeks, I went to see my kids. I went to my parent's backyard and stayed six feet away from the house. My mom brought them out. I was expecting my daughter to be hesitant and my son to be jumping up and down. It was the exact opposite. My daughter clung to me; she rested her head on my shoulder and would not be put down. My son seemed distracted playing. I started to cry; my parents were crying, my sister was tearing. My husband just wanted to pack the car and go home.

I remember that my father left for the U.S. without his family when his green card arrived. It should have been for a few months until he could find a job and get an apartment. But he didn't know that his wife was pregnant and wouldn't join him for over a year. He didn't meet his daughter until she was seven months old. How does my six weeks even compare? We all do what we have to do for our jobs and our kids. We sacrifice one for the other. This is nothing new. It also won't be the last time.

On their first day of their new daycare they were minimally exposed to a sick staff member. *Shit, what have I done?* It was too late to change my mind and send them back to their grandparents. My husband and I are trying to prepare for the next step. If daycare closes, does my husband stop working? We are not naive to think that this is the end. What about a second wave? Do we separate again? I didn't want to; I don't want to. I reasoned it was for their safety and so, I would do it again. I may have to do it again. COVID-19 isn't over. ●

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