



From Textbooks of Brains to Teams Calls with Whiteboards: Parenting Through School, Work, and COVID-19

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Even before the pandemic hit, I was no stranger to working from home with kids. You could argue that I wasn't doing things by the book: I started my bachelor's degree as a parent of one, and by the time I finished grad school, we had four children. An added challenge, I had moved thousands of miles away from my hometown, so my journey in working parenthood started without extended family and friends around to help. Six people under one roof – and four of them under 10 years old. It was a challenge, but it was also an exercise in creativity. In fact, it was my ideas on how to spend time with my kids – while also advancing my studies and my career – that sparked their love in science, and why they beg me to put [Daniel and Jorge Explain the Universe](#) on during every drive.

Picture this: I'm studying my neuropsychology book, learning about how protons align and flip in an MRI to create the image of the human brain (or of a [dead fish](#) – really), and my toddlers really want to spend time with me. In fact, they're pretty sure they might die if we don't hang out. This has become a routine: they take turns crawling into my lap while I read out loud – "This uniform alignment creates a magnetic vector oriented along the axis of the MRI scanner..." (see [here](#) for more information) – pointing at the pictures and asking what the superior temporal sulcus (STS) is and how it helps us perceive human motion. It didn't take long for them to get bored and go back to watching Dragon Hunters or playing with Legos, but it was these little things that helped us bond despite long weeks that could be 80 hours of work, studying, writing, and data collection.

As they grew up, it didn't matter that they were confused about whether I was a designer or a scientist (one who, mind you, lacks potions and beakers.) The routine stuck. Other graduate students and colleagues got used to me running "mini-studies" on my children. They helped me fill out cognitive task analyses and ran through Wizard of Oz studies speaking to me as if I were a virtual assistant, "pulling levers" of text-to-speech prompts and acting out in-car games. Even before COVID-19 locked us all in a house for months together, they knew what I did for my job because they were active participants in my professional growth. In fact, they can almost define what human factors and user experience mean in an age-appropriate way, and they finally believe me when I say that engineering and psychology can go hand-in-hand.

Even though I didn't see the pandemic coming (who could have?), I figured making my education and my career a part of my children's lives would pay off. So, when we had five of us on Zoom and Teams calls in a four-bedroom house, we could hear what the others were up to. This meant that between classes or over the summer once school was out, the kids would run up and ask me about what I was working on or volunteer (okay, the teenager was voluntold) to be in hackathon videos. They'd brainstorm ideas with me or ask me to go on mute so they could give me feedback on an idea they saw on a whiteboard during a Teams meeting.

Through it all, it's been comforting being part of an organization that has welcomed flexibility and encouraged its employees to acknowledge that we're all humans with families in a world that's turned upside down. My kids get time with me no matter how busy things get – even when the angsty teen isn't quite so sure he wants it anymore and is too tall to sit in my lap. Even if we're still figuring out what this "new normal" thing we keep hearing about is, the blend of career and family has long been our normal, and I wouldn't have it any other way.