

My challenge to other fathers during Covid isolation

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Working from home has given men a rare opportunity to give their kids an important life lesson, writes author Rob Sturrock.

It still amazes me how quickly my 18-month-old son picks things up from the rest of my family. Seemingly nothing misses his gaze. If his sister twirls around dancing to 'Into the Unknown' from *Frozen 2*, he does as well. If I casually throw a ball against a wall, he will too. If I sigh in annoyance or shake my head in frustration at the latest toddler misadventure, so does he.

He is also fascinated at the daily roles his dad, mum and sister perform in the family. As are most children. Even when we think our kids aren't watching us because they're doing their schoolwork, watching TV or playing games, they somehow absorb all the activities going on around them. More importantly, it informs their views of the world and their own identity.

So, what are our kids learning from their parents during the current isolation experience due to Covid?

Much has already been written about the gendered impacts of the crisis on our community. We know women are shouldering an enormous double burden. Our healthcare system, as well as early childcare centres and schools, are overwhelmingly staffed by women. And women are overwhelmingly in charge of childrearing and household duties, even if some men have a hard time admitting it. The women in our community are on the frontline of the pandemic in more ways than one. Add to that the gender inequality already embedded in our society, where even when women are the main breadwinner in a household they still do more domestic work than their male partners.

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Our kids are noticing all these trends in real time and it's going to shape their views of gender roles as they grow up. They see it acted out all day for them at home, as Dad does paid work from home while Mum arranges breakfast, gets the kids ready for another day of homeschooling, while managing a few chores in amongst doing her own paid work. Our kids won't just notice the uneven distribution of responsibilities, they'll notice the different emotional affect it will have on their parents. Research from a couple years ago showed that working mothers with two children tended to be 40 per cent more stressed than other people. What's that percentage going by end of this year? How does that look inside homes across the country right now?

Covid offers us a major opportunity to reset our attitudes to gender roles, whether we're ready for the moment or not. I'm interested in toppling one big cultural myth in particular, that the best way for men to be fathers is to go to work.

Many men are currently experiencing something they haven't since before the industrial revolution, the merging of home and professional life. Before the industrial revolution, men typically worked alongside their family and were actively involved in caring for and raising children. Then they started going off to cities and factories to work, and the connection with home became more increasingly more tenuous. Our stereotypes of gender roles came out of that period, and we're still living with them more than 300 years on.

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COVID is the chance for working dads to immerse themselves in childcaring and carrying the mental load. Research shows men frequently miss out on special family time because of work. The fact a lot of dads are working from home is only the start of the change. What comes next is making flexible work for men a permanent part of their professional lives, so they can be at home to help run the home more often.

The only way I ever got any competency as a dad is by spending time out of the workforce at home. I had zero experience or skills at childcaring before being a dad. I just used becoming a father as on-the-job training. I tried, I failed and succeeded, and I learned for next time.

If we want our kids to truly believe there is equality between genders, then it's up to men to use this crisis to push for more flexible work arrangements, to take parental leave, to be responsible for homeschooling, to do the groceries and track how the family budget changes week to week, and crucially to provide their kids the emotional nourishment and support to weather the isolation. Without saying a single word, men will have taught their kids volumes on what being an equal partner really means.

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Once Covid passes, and the world finds a new equilibrium, if gender equality is so normal to our children as to be totally boring and uninteresting to them, we'll have done an incredible job.

That's why right now, I'm thrilled when my sweet boy picks up his little broom to join me, as I sweep the floor while his mum works away on her laptop in the next room.

Rob Sturrock is a working father of two, advocate and author of [Man Raises Boy: A revolutionary approach for fathers who want to raise kind, confident and happy sons](#) out now with Allen & Unwin.

People in Australia must stay at least 1.5 metres away from others. Check your state's restrictions on gathering limits.

Testing for coronavirus is now widely available across Australia. If you are experiencing cold or flu symptoms, arrange a test by calling your doctor or contact the Coronavirus Health Information Hotline on 1800 020 080. The federal government's coronavirus tracing app COVIDSafe is available for download from your phone's app store.

SBS is committed to informing Australia's diverse communities about the latest COVID-19 developments. News and information is available in 63 languages at [sbs.com.au/coronavirus](https://www.sbs.com.au/coronavirus)

Juggling work with homeschooling has nearly broken me

It turns out that the juggle in a time of pandemic is magnified by about 8000 per cent.

We need more role models of successful part-time working parents

"In the end, we decided that my husband would take three months off to be the primary carer and that he would return to part time work after his period of parental leave."

Things you find out about your partner when you work from home

I've realised our working styles are very different. I've got quite "big open office plan energy". My partner? Not so much.

Still serving guests while your male relatives relax?

Not all instances of sexism are easy to explain, but they can have a similar impact on women's mental health as overt sexism, writes research fellow Beatrice Alba.

The key to a great partnership? Sharing the mental load

What would change – in our relationships, our domestic life and society in general if men and women shared emotional labour equally?

