



Parenting during a pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has posed some major challenges for caregivers and parents. Parents who have lost income since the pandemic hit are facing new struggles to cover household expenses and stay afloat. And when schools shut down in the spring, parents needed to be resourceful and adapt quickly, making childcare arrangements and helping kids with online school.

While many daycare centres remained open across BC when schools were shutting down – due in part to government incentives for the sector – many parents have been struggling to juggle work and caregiving responsibilities. When schools reopened in September, parents again had to adjust quickly to new schedules and safety protocols and procedures for the family.

They quickly had to decide if they were going to be sending their kids back to school, or making arrangements for home school, distance learning, or a transition program.

We spoke to HSA members and parents Fahrin Schmidt, a child behaviour worker and Assistant Chief Steward at Foundry North Shore in North Vancouver, and Arsalan Butt, a steward and health information management administrator at Children and Women’s Hospital in Vancouver, to learn more about parenting in the age of COVID-19.

Fahrin Schmidt has seen some of her co-workers struggle with their parenting responsibilities since COVID-19 hit. She is aware of at least one member – a single parent – who was unable to find childcare when schools closed, but was required to be at the office. She said that for parents who wanted to work but couldn’t find childcare, it was a very stressful time.

“A lot of the parents were asking, ‘Where do I go?’ and ‘How do I ensure the bills get paid?’”

The BC government quickly repurposed schools provide childcare for children of essential workers aged five to 12, with new safety protocols in place. The province also provided temporary emergency funding to help childcare centres remain open in the face of reduced enrollment.

In her conversations with management, Schmidt encouraged the employer to adopt a flexible approach to scheduling and virtual work.

While Schmidt has been working from home full-time due to a medical accommodation, the majority of her colleagues were required to be in the office throughout the summer two days a week, and otherwise work remotely.

As a child behaviour worker, she understands the value of the supports that Foundry North Shore provides the community. She said that the majority of staff have been able to maintain client hours.

By delivering services virtually, “people’s caseloads have remained quite active,” she said.

Their clients, who are aged 24 and under, have responded positively to the delivery of virtual supports.

“Whether it be by phone, video, or sometimes by text, they’ve felt really safe and content with the way things have been,” she said.

As the mother of a nine-year-old boy who just entered Grade four, Schmidt understands first-hand the difficulties facing parents during the public health crisis.

“Trying to keep him active and busy while being at home has been a challenge,” she said.

Schmidt’s son is a very active child who played many different sports before the pandemic started.

“We are just juggling, trying to figure out ways to give him a little bit of structure so that we can get work done,” she explained.

For her husband, who works from home part-time, this has meant occasionally going into the office on weekends to get work done. He helps with childcare during the week.

HSA member Arsalan Butt, a father of three daughters in Grades one, four, and nine, started working remotely early on in the pandemic.

“As soon as I finished my work, I would kick into helping the kids with their homework. It was slightly overwhelming at first but then we got into the routine of doing that every day and on weekends,” he said.

Butt said that at first, the fear of contracting COVID-19 kept his family from leaving the confines of their home and backyard. “The fear of the pandemic – the fear of getting infected – was and still is very high. We literally didn’t go outside. I became the dedicated grocery shopper.”

Now, Butt tries to take his children outside whenever it is safe. He and his wife Ayesha have been focused on teaching their children new safety protocols.

“They need to get used to this new normal of wearing masks, putting on gloves now and then, and being able to maintain a safe social distance while around other people,” said Butt. “The middle one, when I took her to buy candy for a trip, was literally scared of walking by other people in the aisle.”

For both Schmidt and Butt, seeing their kids return to school this fall, and fearing that the virus could be brought home, has carried added stress.

Butt, who lives in a multigenerational household, has been advocating within his children’s schools and in the province more broadly for a pandemic response that considers the diverse cultural needs of communities.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all problem, the pandemic," he said. "In the Lower Mainland we can have just two parents and children living at home, or we can have up to 10 family members in a single household. That is where my advocacy is based."

"I have two senior parents at home, one of them being extremely vulnerable."

He suspects that there are many South Asian families in his children's school district - the Surrey School District - who also live in multigenerational households and are concerned about how to keep the whole family safe as schools reopen.

"The same concerns apply to teachers, school staff, and their families," he said.

Butt reached out to his children's teachers throughout the pandemic. "I'm making sure they are ok, and letting them know that we are here and thinking of them and their families as well," he said.

While Butt has had some concerns as schools reopen, he believes that Provincial Medical Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry has been a strong leader. "I have relatives throughout the world, and I have seen how messed up some of the policies have been around the world when it comes to dealing with the pandemic," he said.

"I have been singing praises about how Dr. Bonnie Henry has led from the front, and dealt with this pandemic from day one."

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