

## (Un)Balancing Mathematical Research and Remote Schooling in Times of COVID



Cover Article

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When I was invited to write this piece in early December, my first thought was to discuss the positive academic aspects of this pandemic from the point of view of mathematical research. Indeed, we have learned to collaborate remotely in a very efficient way. This represents a big advantage for collaborating with interesting people in the four (or infinite?) corners of the world. It is also a great benefit for those who have difficulty travelling, either for personal reasons or for lack of resources. Indeed, our newly gained expertise in remote collaboration has also opened the door for events to be more inclusive of virtual participation in the future, and we can dream of having less of an impact on planet Earth with lower levels of academic travel.

*"Syntactic manipulation!"*

Fast forward a few weeks to when I find myself, once again, in crisis control mode. In early January, the frantic pace of Omicron accompanied by remote schooling for my children, replaces the almost-romantic vision of early December. In spite of this, I still try to achieve the research goals of a sabbatical year at home. This being done with virtually no travel (or should I say most of the travel is virtual?). I am so lucky that I do not have to worry about the uncertainty of teaching in variable (or variant?) nonstandard formats this year, and of course, I am beyond lucky that I have tenure, a good job, a roof, a supportive family, and access to many resources. I keep repeating this to myself, in between the many interruptions.

*"How do you spell, 'whatever'?"*

What does remote schooling mean? By now, most parents of school-aged children are certainly familiar with this term, in Canada and in many other parts of the globe. Allow me to try to explain it to those who have been spared of this exquisite experience. First of all, this is a trick question with no single answer! Back in March 2020, most teachers, like the rest of us mortals, had no background in remote schooling. When schools closed in the early days, my children spent several weeks without much formal instruction. Then, some teachers started emailing parents with activities for students. Of course, homework for the kids often means homework for the parents. This is particularly true if the kids are young, or if the assignment is difficult, or anytime! Eventually, our teachers organized meetings with their classes through various online platforms. Make no mistake; this did not make things easier! First, young kids still needed considerable help and supervision while participating in these meetings. Second, some of these online platforms were quite difficult to manage for those that have never used them. In some unfortunate (but nonetheless hilarious) online classes, confused kids and parents created multiple simultaneous isomorphic meetings, and we had to connect with various devices to find the correct meeting (by definition, the one where the teacher was connected). Finally, those meetings were short and ended with a list of activities for students to work on. Naturally, the ever-growing list of assignments led to endless parental frustration.

*"The ethics teacher is holding his baby while he lectures! Come see!"*

Things have improved drastically since the ancient days of 2020. By now, teachers and kids have become veritable experts with online platforms. Classes last longer, and in some cases even for the whole time that the kids would normally be at school! Children are more engaged and need less parental assistance. Still, this is a far cry from having school in person. We need to monitor the kids so that they do not chat during class. Plus, we have to be available for some occasional help (i.e. when they can't find the right book, pencil, geometry set, coins, vinegar, they don't know how to spell a word, they need to go to the washroom, they need a snack, they have a crisis in art class, etc.).

*"Mommmy, come! Latin class!"*

How does one accomplish the reflection necessary for writing an opinion piece, let alone the deep thinking that entails research when one suffers interruptions every fifteen minutes or so? Please tell me, I'm all ears! In terms of seemingly "research-ish" activities, I find myself doing less

challenging tasks: easier projects with students, editorial duty, taking care of referee reports, event organization, trying to answer to collaborator's questions, rather than generating questions for them myself.

*"OK, now I have to represent 2 times 5 with coins."*

With that in mind (or out of mind?), I am now focusing on the positives, and making a list (and checking it twice) of what works. The most important step is to lower your expectations in terms of both parenting and mathematical work. Live day-to-day, show love to your family. Try to accomplish quick, easy tasks first and leave the hardest projects for the middle of the night when everybody else is sleeping (What? You want to sleep? No such luck!). Find fun collaborators who truly understand the situation and are patient (bonus points for communal commiseration). Be honest with what you can and cannot do. Learn to say no. In fact, say no generously and often (except to people who are having a worse time, which, you know, may be everybody else). Be appreciative of the teachers' work and be patient, and try to add some humor to the kids activities ("tonight we're eating your science project, yay!"). Try to keep a routine/structure at home. Plan so that each kid has easy access to their material, so that they do not have to call for help too often. Be appreciative of the good things you do have in your life. Talk to your friends. Eat chocolate.

*"Ayyy, I need to go to the washroom!"*

In conclusion... While work-life balance was always on the challenging side, the pandemic took it to a whole new level. Of course, what we discussed here is just the surface of some particularly challenging aspects that COVID has brought to us mathematicians. I am sure there are many different difficult scenarios that you, dear readers, have to deal with. But, if you belong to the club of parenting small children and being a mathematician in these times, here is my message to you: If you feel like a bad parent while working and a bad mathematician during remote schooling, try to be more gentle with yourself and your loved ones and keep in mind that you are in good company!

*"Si, yo ask for help, moi aussi."*

Notes:

1. The phrases between paragraphs are actual quotes from the author's children during remote schooling periods. The original sentences were pronounced in a mixture of Spanish, French, and English. Only the last one was left in the original language.
2. While most of this article was written during the remote-schooling days in Montreal, it was finished in early February, when the author's children went back to school and the author had time to take long baths.
3. No children were harmed in the making of this article.