**The homeschooling survival guide**

While everyone is feeling the effects of Covid-19, it’s women who are facing the biggest challenges to their careers and emotional wellbeing - especially when school is out



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**JEN STEVENS**

Joe Wicks' PE class is back, and so too is the juggle. What we all hoped would never happen again has, of course, happened again, and we are back, in our homes with children who need to be minded, educated and entertained all while their parents still work.

A University College London survey was undertaken during the first lockdown of 2020 and its findings make grim reading, particularly for women, for as we’ve heard time and time again over the last 10 months, it is women who are by and large coming out of the pandemic worse off.

The study found that women spend more than double the time than men on their children’s home schooling. They also found that women with primary school-aged children “were considerably more likely” to have left their jobs to look after their family than fathers with children of the same age.

“As the coronavirus pandemic closed schools and nurseries across the UK, it was mothers, especially those of young children, who were most likely to have stopped work, and to have stepped in to provide educational support for their children,” the researchers at UCL’s Centre for Longitudinal Studies said.

The research was conducted as part of the University College London’s longitudinal studies of people that have been surveyed since their childhood to analyse the impact on work, finances and parenting among the four generations born in 1958, 1970, 1989-90 and 2000-02. This research contacted more than 18,000 from that programme.

Within the group of parents of primary school-aged children it was found that mums spent an average of five hours each day on home schooling while fathers spent about two hours. There was also a big difference in the time spent on educational and developmental activities like puzzles, reading and playing, with mums spending more than three hours a day at it and dads just under two hours.

*In homes where parents continued to work through the lockdown children’s education suffered more, with 1.2 hours less each day spent on home schooling when compared to those who were not working.*

The broadcaster and parenting blogger Anna Whitehouse, who you may know as Mother Pukka, has been lobbying for flexible working for many years with her #flexappeal campaign. As the news of the UK school closures broke last week she pointed out the impossible maths of it all. An average workday is eight hours, an average home school day is three hours (the UK government recommendation) and the average parenting day is 12 hours, that is, she said, 23 hours of work in a 24 hour day.

But what then, about teachers who are expected to work from home educating our children while also looking after their own families and supervising their online work? Women are at the coal face of this too. In fact when it comes to what is deemed the essential caring professions during the pandemic in Ireland it is women who are front and centre.

The Health Service Executive (HSE), together with Section 38 (Voluntary) Hospitals and agencies, employ 45,066 nurses, in both full and part time capacities. Of these there are 38,518 female nurses and midwives in Ireland, making it the single biggest occupation for women in the country.

According to the Central Statistics Office, women make up 72.3% of the education workforce too and 79.3% of those employed in the category that falls under caring and leisure (which includes care escorts, educational support assistants, nursery nurses and assistants and playworkers, including playgroup leaders).

Overall, that means that just over one in three (33.9%) of working Irish women were employed in either the education or health sectors. While some working women may be given flexibility during school closures, these are women who will be expected to work as normal and without additional supports.

And it’s one thing if you are part of a partnership that can help each other out but more than five out of six of the 166,900 lone parents in Ireland recorded by the CSO in 2018 were women.

When it comes to representation Ireland comes a measly 20th in the European table with just 22.5% of TDs in the Dail being female. Only Lithuania, Romania, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Croatia, Greece, Cyprus, Malta and Hungary were below us.

Despite an almost 50/50 population split we have just 36 women TDs out of a total of 160 and only a quarter of those are at cabinet or junior ministry levels.

*When decisions are being made that affect women and mothers, there aren’t enough women in the room, because there aren’t enough women full stop.*

As if that wasn’t enough, though many people have found themselves struggling financially over the last year, in terms of pay equality things have actually gotten worse for women in Ireland since 2013 when the percentage difference between male and female gross hourly earnings was 12.9%, in 2017 (the latest figures published by Eurostat), it was 14.4%. During the first lockdown the CSO ran a survey on the Social Impact of Covid-19.

When the results were published in May there was a clear difference in how things were going for men and women.

Of those surveyed who were new to working from home almost half (48.6%) of female respondents reported that they would like to return to their place of work after restrictions were lifted, compared to less than one in three (31.7%) of male respondents.

The men surveyed were keen to have a mixture of office based and home-based work, in fact 60.9% of them compared to just 43.9% of women.

But a look at the follow up survey from the CSO, "The Employment and Life Effects of COVID-19", published on 13 May 2020, showed how the pandemic has affected men and women and it might explain some women’s eagerness to get back to the office. It found that more women (21%) than men (15%) are caring for a dependent family member or friend because of the COVID-19 crisis.

It also found that women are more likely to report childcare issues related to the pandemic (9% women compared with 6% men) and women are finding it more difficult to work from home because of family being around (11% women compared with 9% men).

These findings were echoed by research performed by the National Women’s Council of Ireland which found that 71.5% of women surveyed were looking after children, adults or both in their own home and 85% of them said that their caring responsibilities had increased during lockdown. Many women living with another adult reported caring was not shared equally in their household, with the ‘lion’s share’ falling to them.

So if you feel like you’re already shouldering the majority of the caring responsibility in your house and are dreading a month of home schooling on top of all you’re currently trying to achieve you may not be dreaming it. Women in this global crisis are at a disadvantage while being relied on more than ever.

**How to support children through another school shutdown:**

Dr Colman Noctor

Dr Colman Noctor is a child and adolescent psychoanalytical psychotherapist.

He has worked across a range of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services both in Ireland and abroad, and also hosts the ‘Asking For A Parent’ podcast which provides ‘real world’ solutions for carers so they can understand the meaning behind a child's behaviour.

A lot of children saw a glimpse or normality over Christmas and are now upset and disappointed that they are locked down again. Colman says that children have been negatively impacted by the cycle of disappointment.

“The fear, as well as the emotional impact of isolation is the worry that children will become accustomed to disappointment. I see a lot of children becoming fatalistic and losing hope. It is important that we share the vaccine story as well as the lockdown stories and protect them from the current “schools are lethal” narrative which I think is causing considerable anxiety and uncertainty.

"I’m not saying what is right or wrong in terms of schools returning, but when the adults in the room don’t want to go back to the classroom then creating an atmosphere of safety becomes impossible.”

Sometimes in our busyness we can think that children that aren’t actively freaking out or complaining are fine, but Colman says that we need to look more closely at what’s going on at home and make sure we’re asking questions and listening to what they have to say.

*“Quiet children are not always okay children. Explore things with them. Give them a licence to talk. Provide permission and containment and hope but not false promises that cannot be delivered on.”*

With at least three weeks of home-schooling ahead of us, it can be difficult to see how to get everything done. Many parents fear not doing any of it well enough but Colman says that we need to cut ourselves some slack and minimising stress on all counts is more important.

“The concept of blended learning for many primary school children is a myth in my view. Parents who have their children at home need to lay off the pressure on themselves and their children. This is not working from home, it is parenting from work and it is simply impossible for most parents to home school and perform full time employment and the expectation that we can creates far more anxiety. I think the practical learning benefits of home schooling in a pandemic when weighed against the stress that it causes is a no brainer in terms of a cost/ benefit analysis.”

Many parents will find themselves allowing extra screen time over the next few weeks as they try to be present on Zoom calls and get work done. As the TV and game consoles become de-facto babysitters, Colman says it’s not inevitable that it’s something that’s bad for your child.

“Screen time is another area that will inevitably slip in these times. With more screen use try to move away from time spent and understand the importance of time well spent. Technology is not good or bad, it’s good or bad usage. Focus on what they do on screens as opposed to how much time they’re spending.”

Online learning tips from someone who knows:

*Samantha Whelan is a final year student in Primary School teaching in DCU*

Your child’s teachers will send out work via a programme like SeeSaw, Aladdin or Google Classroom but you can also give them projects to supplement their typical school work.

**Focus on what they are interested in.**

If you think they have no big interests, and just love their Playstation, use that! What's the history of game consoles? Do a project on them with a timeline and facts. Let them use Kiddle.co rather than regular Google for research.

**Use technology for learning on their terms.**

Duolingo is great for languages. Irish is one of the fastest growing languages on the app at the moment and it’s a fun way to learn French, German, Spanish and more.

Storyjumper.com is a brilliant way for imaginative children to create their own digital books and Canva.com is great for infographic type projects. For kids that love building websites, Scratch and Scratch Junior (scratchjr.org) are great for teaching coding. If Minecraft is their passion you could ask your child to research what their local area was like 100 years ago and build it.

**To burn off energy...**

...there’s the Joe Wicks PE class or, if you’d like something a tiny bit more zen, the Cosmic Yoga Channel on YouTube which is class!

**Children don’t always have to be on the go.**

Let them sit and read. They can write alternative endings or explore what the story might be like if the main character was a different gender or write themselves into the story. This can be done with pen and paper, trough collage or on the computer. Whatever way they find most fun.

**It’s important to give them time to chill too.**

Two or three hours of school work a day is plenty. Don't stress over it. If they're not in the mood give them a break and come back to it later. Make it fun and they will want to keep going. Have a schedule or don't. Do what works for the family. Take it day by day and reassess what is working well and not so well. Their wellbeing in paramount. Let them play. They learn through play!

**Learn together.**

Don’t try to be their teacher, they know you’re not. Learn with them, ask ‘what are we learning about today?’. If you have an older child and they’d prefer to work alone, let them, but ask them to come back and teach it to you later on. You’re giving them the chance to teach you something while being able to see what they’ve done.

**Online resources and supports:**

There are many online resources available to support parents both for home schooling and in their emotional wellbeing: here are some of our favourites.

[**www.twinkl.ie**](https://www.twinkl.ie/)

Over 525,000 teacher created resources to help over the next few weeks www.gillexplore.ie On the Gill Education website you’ll find the Over the Moon English resources for classes from junior infants up to second class.

[**www.rte.ie/learn**](https://www.rte.ie/)

This is where you’ll find the brilliant Home School Hub which was a saviour to lots of parents last year. There are hundreds of ideas for lesson plans and more in Irish and English suitable for children in first to sixth class.

**@the.wellness.psychologist**

The Instagram account of Dr Clodagh Campbell has lots of practical tips for looking after yourself.

She is running a free, 28-day, psychology-focused wellness programme for the month of January.

**@transformcbt**

#CBT practitioner Niamh Connolly has lots of resources to deal with the ups and downs of the pandemic on her Instagram page.

**Instagram accounts to follow for tips and ideas**

**@playful\_classroom** is run by Dee, a primary school teacher in Meath.

**@the\_playful\_den** is run by Emma who is a kid culture expert.

**@thejoyjournal** is a creative play resource run by Laura Brand.

**@littlemissteacherblog** is run by Clara, a lecturer in literacy

**@asdcreationstation** has resources and support for parents of ASD children.

**@beckys\_treasure\_baskets** has lots of ideas for creative play.