



Perspective

Where Do the Children Play?

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We are both physician trainees — a cardiology fellow and a general surgery resident — in New York City. We are one of the nearly 10,000 dual-physician couples nationwide

who, over the past 30 years, have embarked on the arduous journey of medical training together.¹ Like many of our colleagues around the world, we've witnessed firsthand the devastation and lonely suffering wrought by coronavirus. Our clinical and research work has also been upended by the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of learning the ins and outs of coronary angiography and laparoscopy as planned, we've memorized the ARDSNet ladder for ratios of positive end-expiratory pressure and fraction of inspired oxygen, and we've developed our own tricks for placing dialysis catheters and arterial lines in crowded and overheated rooms. We've become connoisseurs of the N95, appreciating the subtle characteristics of each mask that lend to less irritation of the nasal bridge.

We're mashing on though. There is a sense of camaraderie with our brothers and sisters in health care that is uplifting. Our hospitals' leaders have provided us with plentiful supplies to protect ourselves. Colleagues in our institutions are so mission-driven that teamwork is the new norm.

One person close to us, however, is bearing an unacknowledged burden of this ugly pandemic. Our son. He is 3½ years old. One month ago, we made the gut-wrenching decision to send him hundreds of miles away to be with his godparents. His school was closed, his other caretakers were sick, and our parents, who are in their 60s, are vulnerable to infection. Before making this choice, we consulted the village of family members and friends who help us raise him, and we did

what any technologically savvy couple would do: we convened a Zoom session with them to figure out the best plan. After running through the various options, we enacted our own version of Operation Pied Piper, the famed British mission to evacuate children from London before the Nazi blitz during World War II.² Feeling wounded and cornered by the coronavirus, we decided our son would be picked up promptly at noon the next day and would remain out of the city for the foreseeable future.

In the days and weeks leading up to our decision, we lived in a cloud of denial — thinking, hoping, and even believing that our son's departure could be avoided. Immediately after we concluded that he had to leave, the thin veil of disbelief lifted and reality sank in. Sobbing ensued. It eventually gave way to a profound sense of gratitude to our family — all of whom offered to shelter our son in these difficult times — and a new purpose of preparing him as

best we could for the long hiatus from home.

We sold the trip to him as a “vacation” with his aunties and uncles. While we felt powerless as parents, he reveled in the control and decision making of picking out clothes and toys for his big trip. We packed his things, shedding tears while cramming his toys and favorite stuffed animals into his luggage. Most parents aspire, but usually fail, to “travel light,” but we didn’t even bother trying this time. He needed every last train track, coloring book, and dinosaur he’s ever loved — anything to make him feel more comfortable.

We hugged each other a lot amid the packing, trying to reassure each other. We played out rituals we knew would make him happy — he got to watch a lot of nature documentaries and Disney movies in our bed. As we desperately sought any source of strength, we turned to our Jewish heritage for inspiration and landed on the Blessing for Children, the same verse that our parents read to us on our wedding day. Moments before leaving our apartment, we recited the prayer with our hands on our son’s head: “*May God bless you and keep you. May God shine his face toward you and be gracious to you. May God lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*”

When the car arrived to pick

him up, our son jovially climbed in and embraced his new, temporary guardians. Our gratitude was delivered from afar — we didn’t want to risk transmitting the virus — and muffled by our surgical masks. It was the most inhuman of good-byes, and it was wholly inadequate to the debt we owe them. As they drove away, the last glimpse we had of our son’s face told the real truth. Full of nervous smiles and anxious laughs, he was scared, too.

Our home instantly became dark, quiet, and eerily well organized. We no longer tripped over toys, and things were magically always in their place. It felt terrible. We have since resorted to frequent FaceTime sessions to ease the pain of separation, and we send our son videos of what we’re doing in the hospital throughout the day so that he understands that Mom and Dad are helping people who are sick with the “bug.” When we read him a story over the phone, we hope not to be interrupted by an overhead page for a cardiac arrest. Like every parent, we do the best we can, but it never seems to be enough.

Our story is echoed around the world as Covid-19 disrupts the homes that many trainees and young professionals so cherished coming back to after a long day’s work. We hope that we will all remember this vulnerability when

we reform health care and medical education in the post-Covid world and that we will ensure that trainees are appropriately recognized for bearing this tremendous burden.

Writing during similarly uncertain times, singer-songwriter Cat Stevens wondered where the children ought to play in the rapidly changing world of the 1960s. A half-century later, unexpected empty-nesters like us wonder the same thing, as our pandemic-era world keeps “changing day to day.” With hope in our hearts, though, we wait for the change that makes us whole again, the moment when we all emerge from the scourge of Covid-19, and our dear, sweet boy can come back to play at home.

Disclosure forms provided by the authors are available at NEJM.org.

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1. Results and data: 2019 Main Residency Match. Washington, DC: National Resident Matching Program, April 2019 (https://mk0nrmp3oyqui6wqfm.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NRMP-Results-and-Data-2019_04112019_final.pdf).
2. Farley L. “Operation Pied Piper”: a psychoanalytic narrative of authority in a time of war. *Psychoanal Hist* 2012;14:29-52.

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