



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Working from Home During COVID, With and Without Children

The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious illness that currently poses significant risk to public health and is rapidly changing the work landscape in Canada. The current recommendations from the **Public Health Agency of Canada** (PHAC; <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>) about social distancing have an obvious impact on our work lives.

Many employers in Canada are recommending that non-essential employees work from home. This step ensures not only that potential person-to-person transmission of COVID-19 is reduced in the workplace, but also reduces the need for people to take public transit to get to work. Schools – including colleges and universities – are also closed or being closed to curb the spread of COVID-19, which will likely lead to parents and children sharing “workspaces” for an extended period of time. The information that follows is intended to help people understand the basics of working from home, as well as some ideas for managing home environments, especially ones with children!

Your work environment

In order to effectively work from home, it is important to establish an environment that is conducive to doing so. The needs of your individual work environment will likely vary, but some basics to consider include:

- **Dedicated workspace:** When at all possible, try to set up a dedicated workspace where you can store your documents, have conference calls or virtual meetings, and generally separate your work responsibilities from your home and/or caregiving responsibilities.
- **Appropriate technology:** Being effective when working remotely requires that you have the technology necessary to perform your tasks. Consider your work needs with respect to communication (e.g., access to your office voicemail, headset and webcam for virtual calls), appropriate software on your laptop or other devices, access to any files that you may need at work, as well as sufficient internet connectivity to manage your day-to-day business. Confirm with your employer, that you have the support and resources to meet all privacy and security requirements of your work when working from home.
- **Comfort and quiet:** it is important for your workspace to be comfortable and quiet to minimize distractions and encourage you to visit your workspace when required – a challenge in a shared space!





Setting a schedule for work and life

As noted above, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely require parents, their partners, and their children, to share “workspaces” for a longer period of time than is typical for them. Although most people can imagine working around each other’s schedules for a day or two, managing a balance between multiple people’s schedules in the same space may be challenging for some.

People are driven by routines, and disruptions to those routines can be stressful. This is true for adults, and doubly-true for children. When working from home, having a set schedule that approximates your (and your children’s) typical schedule can be helpful to ensure that you maintain your productivity and a sense of normalcy for your children.

The separation of your home and work schedules (or home and school schedules) is typically easier when those locations are physically separate. Here are some suggestions for sharing space:

- **Maintain a consistent routine when possible:** this includes sleep-wake times, exercise, and work/school schedules. Establishing and maintaining these routines will help everyone maintain a sense of normalcy. It is also helpful to establish a coordinated schedule for everyone (you and your children) to ensure that you are able to maximize the time that you can dedicate to your work without impacting your children’s care.
- **Don’t use extra time for work:** given the sharing of spaces between work and home, it can be easy to feel the need to “check-in” to our workspace outside of our normal work hours to complete a small task. It is important to also have boundaries with ourselves regarding work and home life.
- **Take breaks:** although this may sound intuitive to many people, it is important to practice self-care and remember to take breaks. Breaks are likely more automatic in an office environment when others can suggest a walk or a coffee, but they are just as important when working from home. Breaks can help you rest your eyes from long hours in front of a computer screen, re-orient you to important tasks, or just give your brain a break and let you check on your family.
- **Be flexible:** Although this may sound counterintuitive when trying to maintain a consistent routine, be prepared to be a little bit flexible with respect to the hours you are “at work”. Your coordinated schedule may not fit into a typical 9-5 workday, and that is okay as long as a balance between your work needs and your family’s needs is being maintained.
- **Understand your employer’s expectations:** Have a clear understanding from your employer about whether work from home changes any of your usual responsibilities or their expectations.





Maintaining good communication and boundaries

Sharing space with your children and other family members during these times will require increased attention to boundaries and the maintenance of open communication. Everyone in your family wants to get their needs met and ensuring that you have established clear boundaries with everyone will support the sustainability of your work-from-home environment over the long term.

- **Good communication:** This means good communication with your colleagues and your family. With colleagues, you may need to “over-communicate”; let them know that you may be interrupted during meetings, but that you will try to manage the situation as best as you can (having a strategy for quickly managing this, such as reaching out to a partner for help (if possible), or having a snack/bottle/activity ready for children will help).
- **Good boundaries:** This also means setting good boundaries between yourself and your family, and yourself and your colleagues. For family members, with the help of a schedule (see above), it will be important to ensure that your work time is protected as best as it can be. This can be as simple as trading off childcare duties with your partner (if possible), or establishing a “do not disturb” signal for your children. With colleagues, it is important to emphasize that you will “log-off” outside work hours, meaning that you can set and enforce the expectation that you will not be checking work emails/messages outside the hours you have set as your “work” hours.

Keeping children entertained or engaged during work hours

Although establishing a good work environment, good communication, and an effective schedule are helpful, it is also important that your children are entertained and/or engaged while you are working. How to do this will depend greatly on how old your children are; what works to entertain a toddler will generally not work for a teenager. What follows are some points to consider for some of the major age groups:

- **Babies and toddlers:** Young children generally require the most attention and flexibility from their parents. It might be helpful to plan for meetings or tasks that require your full attention during your children’s naps, attend virtual meetings with your camera disabled so you can feed or hold your child while on a call or in a meeting, or if possible, plan to trade off responsibilities with your partner around important work engagements. Again, any of these steps will require good communication with your family and colleagues regarding your current work-from-home situation.
- **Early and elementary school-age children:** Working from home for an extended period of time with school-age children will likely mean balancing their schoolwork and other activities with your work schedule. It may be helpful to set a schedule with your children around expectations for schoolwork vs. free time. It will also be helpful for your children to know when and how they can





communicate with you (e.g., make up a fun way to communicate, along with reasonable expectations for response time). Other strategies, such as relaxing limits on screen time during an important meeting, having a “boredom box” filled with fun activities and toys that your children can access during your workday, or even sending your children outside to play (if it is safe to do so) will allow for increased productivity for you. Finally, allowing children access to online educational tools or setting up supervised video-chatting between them and their friends might help alleviate some of their boredom and leave you with more time for work and yourself.

- **Middle-schooler and teenagers:** As children mature, it is often appropriate (and helpful) to get them to participate more actively in setting their schedules and managing their daily tasks and expectations. Creating a schedule that they can independently follow, setting daily goals regarding school and housework, and setting boundaries around your work time will be helpful. Finally, discuss appropriate screen time limits, bedtimes, and ways for your child to stay physically active and connected with friends and peer groups, even if virtually.

Where do I go for more information?

To obtain important and up to date information about COVID-19, visit the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) website at <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>

If you are having difficulties with managing a prolonged self-isolation, you can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>

This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Dr. Stewart Madon, Accreditation Registrar and Ethics Officer, Canadian Psychological Association.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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