

# Washington FAMILY

washingtonFAMILY.com

SEPTEMBER 2020

**Meet Erica Scherzer**

*Mom, Volunteer, Baseball Wife*

Embracing  
a  
New Normal





Erica Scherzer on motherhood, philanthropy and this year's crazy baseball season.  
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## READERS' RESPONSES

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*Please note we reserve the right to edit or refrain from publishing comments we deem inappropriate.*

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**WE WANT  
YOUR  
FEEDBACK**



## OUR FUTURE LEADERS WILL COME FROM MONTESSORI

If the COVID-19 crisis has taught us anything, it is that we are part of an interdependent, fragile world. It has also taught us the vital importance of scientific thinking. Finally, it has taught us that problems of this magnitude and complexity require adaptive leaders who can work with others to create effective strategies around which all segments of society can coalesce.

Fostering an interdependent mindset, scientific thinking and adaptive leadership skills has been foundational to the Montessori approach to education since Maria Montessori launched her first school in 1907. These outcomes are natural by-products of the way Montessori classrooms function: teachers introduce concepts in a big-picture perspective, allowing students to move about freely and work in small groups, experimenting and engaging in self-directed projects. This structure provides many opportunities for students to practice leading teams and working together to accomplish a goal.



Sometimes parents ask, "How will my child be prepared for the real world?" Our answer is that Montessori principles are the very things our children need to learn to not only be successful in the world, but to improve the world. Montessori principles such as self-motivation, initiative, creative thinking, scientific theory, emotional intelligence, ethics, communication and leadership will be integral if we want to see a world that can better address the next global crisis.

At Oneness-Family Montessori High School, the only Montessori high school in the Washington area, we are building a 21st Century Leadership program founded upon Maria Montessori's vision. We've gathered a team of exceptional thought leaders to create a program that incorporates essential leadership skill sets and will have students joining together for a real-world capstone project in their community each year. The program will launch in September 2020.

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Special Series



Calendar of Events



Family Matters  
Family Fun



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**PJ Feinstein**  
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# A Digital Detox

*“Can I have electronics now?”*

That’s the question my two sons have asked every day, multiple times a day, since the pandemic started. (In our house, “electronics” is a catch-all word for anything with a screen.) More often than not, the answer has been “yes,” especially when my husband and I are busy working from home.

But for nearly 72 blissful hours in August, my kids didn’t ask for electronics. They didn’t whine about screen time. They didn’t beg to play Minecraft or Roblox with friends or to watch another cartoon on their tablets.

Instead, they read books, played card games and tied knots in lanyard (or “gimp”) during their downtime. Because that’s what you do at camp—and that’s where we were. Specifically, we were at Capital Camps, unplugging as a family and experiencing the healing qualities of nature for a few days. Even I was able to disconnect, leaving my phone in our cabin as we went boating, tie dyed T-shirts and impersonated Hawkeye at archery.

Perhaps the best thing about our time at camp, however, was that it proved to me that my kids aren’t addicted to their electronics (as I was beginning to fear). They can survive just fine without them—and so can I.

My kids—and yours too, most likely—are about to begin a new school year of distance learning. In this issue, we wanted to explore ways to make virtual school a success, from supporting children with specials needs to setting up a learning space in your home.

After my family’s experience at camp, I have one more tip to add: Whether it’s every evening or weekends only, find time for your family to disconnect from electronics and connect with each other. You can all use the break from screens.

Good luck this semester! And be in touch; I want to know how it’s going. ■

*PJ Feinstein*

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By PJ Feinstein



## MAGNA-TILES STRUCTURES BUS

Who says math and creativity don't go together? On the reverse side of these graphic school bus tiles are numbers and symbols to help your little one hone their math skills. Beep beep! Ages 3+. \$55; [createon.com](http://createon.com).

## STUDICO ACTIVE CHAIRS

By allowing the body to move naturally rather than forcing it to sit still, chairs that wobble can actually help kids with ADHD and shorter attention spans stay focused on their work. It may seem counterintuitive, but parents of wiggly kids say active seating works. \$35-\$80; [activechairs.com](http://activechairs.com)



## COSTA FARMS PLANTS

When setting up your child's at-home learning space for the fall, don't forget a houseplant! Studies have shown that plants can increase productivity by 15%, and tasking your kid with watering their plant will help them become more responsible, too. Not sure which plant to pick? Explore your options at [costafarms.com](http://costafarms.com).





## FOOD CUBBY

Some kids (and grownups, too!) just can't stand it when their peas roll into their noodles or their chicken nuggets touch their mac-n-cheese. These clever dividers suction to any flat plate and keep each food item in its own compartment. \$15; [foodcubby.com](http://foodcubby.com)



## LE TOY VAN ABC BLOCKS

Wooden alphabet blocks are a classic learning toy, but they usually feature only upper case letters. We love that this Scandinavian-inspired set, in pretty pastel colors, also includes lower case letters, numbers and illustrations for some good old-fashioned educational and imaginative play. \$50; [scandiborn.com](http://scandiborn.com)

## CIRCLE HOME PLUS

Our kids are going to be spending a lot of time in front of screens this fall, so it's important to know what sites they're visiting and how long they're staying online. This award-winning device lets you do just that, and you can also set time limits on specific websites or games, schedule offline time and "pause" the internet to get your family's undivided attention with a paid subscription. \$129 includes 1-year subscription; [meetcircle.com](http://meetcircle.com)



## PLUM PAPER DISTANCE LEARNING PLANNER FOR PARENTS

Adjusting to online learning will be challenging, but staying organized can help make the transition a little easier. Available in two sizes with a variety of covers and layouts, this customizable planner lets you keep track of your children's daily routines, assigned readings, projects and more. Starting at \$24 and \$34; [plumpaper.com](http://plumpaper.com)

# Let's Do Lunch!

## Easy recipes to feed learn-from-home kids

**N**eed some fresh ideas for your homeschooling crew? These recipes come to us courtesy of Nourish Culinary Co. in Washington, D.C. You can find out more about them on Instagram at @nourishculinary or on their website at nourishculinary.com.



### Grilled Cheese & J

Is it grilled cheese? Yes. Is it peanut butter and jelly? Sort of. We look to our Eastern European roots here and combine salty and sweet for a fancy take on a classic sandwich.

Serves 2

#### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons of unsalted butter
- 4 slices of bread (Whatever you have around.)
- 4 slices of your favorite cheese (We love havarti, but try cheddar, Muenster or even brie.)
- 2 tablespoons of apricot preserves

#### Directions

1. Heat a large skillet or griddle over medium-high heat and melt butter until it foams. Place four slices of bread into the butter.
2. Spread apricot preserves on two slices of bread, then top with cheese.
3. Turn remaining two slices of bread onto the slices with the jam and cheese to form closed sandwiches.
4. Remove from pan. Slice into triangles or rectangles or whatever shape your family likes.



### Brunch Burrito

Eggs are one of our favorite everyday proteins. So on the days when breakfast is oatmeal, cereal or a bagel, we like to get our fill of eggs at lunchtime.

Serves 2

#### Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons of unsalted butter
- 4 eggs
- 1 large handful of spinach
- $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 2 large or extra large whole grain tortillas
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup mild salsa
- $\frac{1}{2}$  ripe avocado
- Sour cream (optional)

#### Directions

1. Heat a medium skillet over medium heat and melt butter until it foams. While the butter is melting, beat the eggs in a separate bowl.
2. Add the spinach to the pan and stir until it begins to wilt.
3. Add the eggs and stir with a rubber spatula until they begin to set. Flip eggs over and turn off your heat. Sprinkle desired amount of cheese onto hot eggs and allow to melt.
4. Remove the eggs to a cutting board and divide into two portions.
5. Wipe out the pan and warm each of the tortillas until pliable.
6. Spread half of the salsa and half of the avocado in the center of each tortilla. Top with hot eggs.
7. Fold the bottom of the tortilla up over the eggs. Fold the sides over and then roll upward to seal the filling inside.
8. Wipe out the pan once more and warm the burrito, seam side down, over medium heat for one to two minutes to crisp the outside. Flip to the other side for an additional minute.
9. Slice in half on the diagonal and serve with sour cream.

### Refrigerator Stew Soup

This delicious soup only requires a couple of pantry staples and a whole bunch of whatever vegetables you have in your fridge. We like to make a double batch and freeze half.

Serves 4

#### Ingredients

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 stalk of celery, chopped
- 1 carrot, peeled and chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 2 cups mixed vegetables, chopped (These could be any random veggies from your fridge. Try half a red pepper,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a zucchini and a few green beans. Feel free to use frozen mixed vegetables as well.)
- 1 14-ounce can chopped tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- Leftover parmesan rind (optional)
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 cup cooked grain of choice (Brown rice, farro, barley, orzo and quinoa all work great. Got something else? Toss it in.)
- 1 quart low sodium chicken or vegetable broth

#### Directions

1. In a large pot, heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil over medium heat until it just begins to shimmer.
2. Sauté the onion, celery and carrot for three minutes over medium heat. Add the garlic and sauté an additional minute.
3. Add the remaining ingredients, except for the cooked grains.
4. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer. Cover and cook for 20 minutes. Uncover, cook for an additional two minutes, and remove parmesan rind if using.
5. Add cooked grains. Stir to incorporate and heat through.
6. Drizzle with remaining tablespoon of olive oil and serve. ■



# How to Make Vanilla Latte Soap

by Lindsay Ponta

Now that school's back in session at your kitchen table, are you finding that your morning cup of wake-me-up isn't cutting it anymore? Get a extra dose of java with this yummy-smelling vanilla latte soap.

A generous scoop of real coffee gives this self-care concoction its pretty café au lait color and the oomph to lightly exfoliate tired skin.

Since this recipe uses microwavable soap as its base, you don't need a bunch of specialized soap-making ingredients or tools. In fact, if you're not a fan of added fragrance, you can skip the oils and make the soap with two simple ingredients.

*Pro tip: Get a head start on holiday gifts or put together a teacher pick-me-up care package by making a few extra bars and packaging them up with a pretty coffee mug!*

## Supplies

You can find these supplies at your local craft store, on Amazon or on any other soap-making website, such as Bramble Berry or Bulk Apothecary.

- 1 pound melt and pour suspension shea butter soap base\*
- Coffee fragrance oil
- Vanilla fragrance oil
- 7 tablespoons ground coffee
- Silicone soap bar mold
- Small spray bottle of rubbing alcohol (optional)

\*I don't recommend a clear soap base for this recipe, but you can use any creamy melt and pour soap base. Keep in mind that if you don't use suspension formulation, the ground coffee will sink to the bottom of the soap instead of floating throughout it. However, that can yield a neat layered effect, so it's certainly worth a try if you already have some regular melt and pour base on hand.

## Instructions

**1.** Chop your soap base into small cubes using a sharp knife or soap-cutting blade. For even melting, make sure the pieces aren't larger than an inch. Most melt and pour soap bases will have sections already scored like a chocolate bar for easy cutting. Feel free to use those lines as guides for cutting.



**2.** Dump the soap cubes into a microwave-safe bowl. Microwave for 45 seconds on high. Stir and continue melting in 20-second intervals, stirring between, until soap cubes are completely melted. Then you'll need to work fairly quickly; the soap base thickens as it cools.



**3.** Add five drops of each fragrance oil and stir. Give the mixture a sniff test to see if you're happy with how it smells. If it's not strong enough, stir in more fragrance oil a few drops at a time. Keep in mind that the smell will be a little bit weaker when the soap has cooled and hardened.

**4.** If the mixture is getting thick and difficult to stir, microwave again in 20-second intervals.

**5.** Sprinkle the ground coffee over the surface of the soap, and quickly mix it in.



**6.** Carefully pour the mixture into your soap mold. If you're using a flexible silicone soap mold, it's helpful to place the mold onto a baking sheet or dish before pouring. Once filled, tap the mold or baking sheet firmly against your countertop a few times to bring any bubbles to the surface of the soap.

**7.** Pop bubbles by spritzing the surface of the soap lightly with rubbing alcohol. You can skip this step if you don't have a spray bottle or rubbing alcohol; it just yields a more polished finished product.

**8.** Set aside any melted but unused soap. You can melt it again in the microwave once your mold is empty again.

**9.** Let the soap set at room temperature for at least two hours. You can pop the whole mold into the refrigerator for faster cooling if you're in a hurry or want to free up your mold for the next batch.

**10.** Gently pull the mold away from the soap to pop the bars out.



**11.** Store your homemade soap in a cool, dry place—preferably in an airtight container. ■

*Lindsay Ponta created the DIY and lifestyle website [Shrimp Salad Circus](http://ShrimpSaladCircus.com) in 2009 to inspire busy women to live perfectly-imperfect creative lives. She lives in Silver Spring, MD. Find easy DIYs and recipes at [shrimpsaladcircus.com](http://shrimpsaladcircus.com).*



# EMBRACE THE Season

## Yes, There Are Things We Can Do this Fall

**Taylor and Brandon Huffman** have wanted to host a sunflower festival at their Thurmont-based Winterbrook Farms for several years. Yet they were nervous because you've got to time the blooms just right. "We decided to go for it this year," Taylor Huffman says. "I personally love sunflowers, and we thought it was another way to get the public out to the farm near our (annual) fall festival."

The Huffmans planted more than 100,000 seeds across 4 acres for their inaugural Sunflower Festival taking place Sept. 12-13 and 19-20. Their Fall Festival runs every weekend from Sept. 26-Nov. 1. Both feature access to more than 25 activities, including apple cannons, zip lines, a jump pillow and a corn maze stretching more than 15 acres. This year's maze theme is dedicated to Platoon 22, a nonprofit raising suicide awareness for military and first responders.

Winterbrook Farms will also be hosting a private ticketed event, Sippin in the Sunflowers, from 6-8 p.m. on

Sept. 12, in partnership with Catoctin Breeze Vineyards. Guests may take pictures in the

sunflower fields while listening to live music and enjoying red or white wine in a souvenir wine glass.

"I think the great thing about our farm is that there really is something for all ages," Taylor Huffman says. "Our corn maze is still the largest in Maryland, and it is still pretty challenging to go out there and try to find all the check points. I think (guests) are really just going to have a good time, and I think that is what everybody needs right now—a little happiness outside of their house."

The Huffmans considered cancelling the festivals due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic but they decided to proceed because their activities are outside and spaced out. They cut their hayrides because people could not social distance properly and are adding hand sanitizing stations. They'll also be spraying a solution that sanitizes each activity and regularly wiping down surfaces with heavy contact points.


Taylor Huffman hopes the festivals give families something to look forward to at a time when "it seems like everything else is cancelling," she says. ([winterbrookfarms.com](http://winterbrookfarms.com))

### Horses and foliage

Fall is usually one of the busiest seasons for events. Organizers and patrons enjoy the cooler temperatures, the fall foliage and getting in fun times before cold temperatures grasp hold of the region. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, most event calendars for 2020 have been erased save for a few.

As of mid-August, The Preakness at Pimlico Race Track will still be held on Oct. 3 though the InFieldFest has already been cancelled. Traditionally the second race in the Triple Crown, this year's event will be the final competition and could be run without fans in the audience. The Capital Challenge Horse Show is also still set to take place on Sept. 25-Oct. 4 at the Prince George's Equestrian Center, featuring competitions as well as exhibitors. ([preakness.com](http://preakness.com); [capitalchallenge.org](http://capitalchallenge.org))





For those looking to take a drive, the annual Autumn Glory Festival in Oakland will be running from Oct. 7-11. Usually featuring antique and craft shows, band competitions, concerts and parades, the event has not yet announced if some of these activities will be postponed or restructured. (oaklandmd.com)

## What about festivals?

Oakland is not the only place opening its doors. Fall has always been festival season—and DMV families who love these outdoor events can still ready their calendars despite these crazy times. Many events are happening, albeit with social distancing and mask requirements.

Leesburg's Pumpkin Village 2020 is one such event. Dig out the carving knives, but let the kids know there are no moon bounces or indoor play areas this year. Scavenger hunts replace the wagon rides, but there is still live music on the weekends. The event takes place Sept. 21-Nov. 1 at Leesburg Animal Park. (pumpkinfestleesburg.com)

And here's another one, but just for parents. Mount Vernon's Fall Wine and Sunset Tours takes place Oct. 9-11. This is one of the DMV's longest-running events for oenophiles, and it features offerings from more than 20 Virginia wineries. Sip something special and take in the views of the Potomac River with your someone special. (mountvernon.org)

Finally, Cox Farms has been keeping us motivated throughout the pandemic with its clever signs. If you don't follow the farm on social media, put that on today's to-do list and appreciate the timely messages. The farm remained closed through the summer and is not hosting its fall festival. But it offers a fall drive-thru market from Sept. 25-Nov. 2. that promises to be way cooler than any fast food line; it might be one of the few drive-thrus that offers cider doughnuts. Get the kids road trip ready, order some doughnuts and then hit the road in search of fall foliage. (coxfarms.com)

## Hike, bike ... and glamp

While events are less frequent, there are plenty of things to do this the fall beside watching every show on Netflix and ordering too many items off Amazon. "We've seen a huge spike in outdoor recreation," says Matthew Scales, public relations specialist for the Maryland Department of Commerce Office of Tourism.

Highlighting Maryland's outdoor collection, Scales notes many have made their way to the numerous hiking and biking trails in the state, including the Baltimore and Annapolis Trail, the Great Allegheny Passage, Patapsco Valley State Park and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park. Along the canal, people can even stay overnight at several lockhouses on the path. "It is cool during the fall because of the foliage," he says.

For those who still want to isolate but get away from their homes, glamping is a great option. There is no roughing it at Savage River Lodge. Surrounded by 700 acres of state forest lands in Frostburg, the getaway features two-story luxury cabins and large round tents known as yurts, which are popular in the west coast region.

"We have been set up for social distancing since we opened in 1999," says Elizabeth Williams, marketing manager. "The yurts only accommodate two people so it is great for romantic getaways or just get-out-of-town getaways, which is what we have been seeing a lot of this summer. It's just a blend between having your own space and privacy while not having to trek too far away."

But be prepared. There is cell service but no Wi-Fi or televisions. "It encourages people to unplug and disconnect from everything that is happening in the world on a normal time and especially now," Williams says.

With private accommodations including bathrooms with running water, guests don't have to share elevators, hallways and other common areas like a hotel. "It is definitely proving to be a really great best of both worlds location," she says. As of late July, their onsite dining and bar was only open to onsite guests for carry out only.

Reservations are quite popular in the fall with peak foliage ranging from late September to mid-October. And if adventure is calling, the property hosts 14 miles of trails for hiking—perfect for sunny days. "That is definitely a big plus," Williams says. "The weather is really conducive for outdoor recreation in the fall." ■



## IN AN EPIC PLAY

produced by a young stay-at-home actor, the protagonist finds himself trapped inside a hollow cavern, surrounded by ghastly witches and creepy creatures.

He begins to run towards a dimly lit escape, realizing he'll need a rope to help him scale the rock walls. A knotted jump rope that sits idly in a hidden corner of the garage quickly becomes his climbing rope; he swings it up and successfully pulls himself to safety. The witches and creatures remain trapped inside the abyss of darkness while our young hero walks away unscathed and into the light.

With local theater companies moving their educational programming online, young theater enthusiasts are now exploring their love for the performing arts at home while logged online. Kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms are makeshift theater stages, and household items and toys—jump ropes included—are being used as props.

But theater is also an art form that's both collaborative and interactive; it relies on physicality and closeness to meaningfully tell a story. Do online classes take away the authenticity of the art and allow kids to fully express themselves creatively? And how are kids staying engaged and enthusiastic for hours behind a screen?

"I think one of the things that's very exciting about the online platform is [that children are] in a home environment," says Margo Brenner Collins, education director at Adventure Theatre and ATMTC Academy in Rockville. "They're being encouraged to see things in a different way instead of being in a class and that translates to the way they engage with their environment," she adds.


Kindergarteners and first graders taking ATMTC Academy's Beyond the Page class this fall, for example, will listen to a story and then act it out as a group. This weekly class will also introduce the basics of musical theater, incorporating song and dance to help bring different scenes to life.

As kids continue to explore their performing arts passions, Collins advises parents to also join in on the fun and help fuel their children's creativity. Whether it's painting or compiling a fun playlist for a mini dance party, the options for creative exploration are endless. By engaging in small, daily family art activities, parents help establish a creative safe-space for their kids, according to Collins.

by Joy Saha

# THE SHOW MUST GO ON!





“Our goal right now is to help the kids really engage in the creative process and embrace the collaborative nature of building something together for shared joy,” Collins says. “Just helping them to feel comfortable and engaged without that stress of performance.”

At Baltimore Shakespeare Factory, interactive games paired with online learning programs encourage the company’s students to think analytically and expand upon their understanding of popular Shakespeare plays. In Shakespeare Interactive, participants use Dungeons and Dragon, a popular games that intertwines role-playing, decision making and improv, to tweak the plots of well-known Shakespeare plays and make them their own.

How would the story of “Romeo and Juliet” change if Romeo waited to take the poison? How would the story change if Romeo didn’t take the poison at all? These are just a few questions the theater students explore during their virtual theater exercises, says Bethany Mayo, the company’s director of education.

In another class, Radio Shakespeare, students come together on Google Meet to perform classic Shakespeare plays as if they were 1940s-style radio shows. They also write commercials for products or services the characters might have—or could have—used, such as an assassination service for “Macbeth” or a ghost catcher for “Hamlet,” Mayo explains.

Allowing kids to work on the script, the score, even the sound effects “empowers them to take ownership of programs,” she says. “We really do want the children to be as creative as possible.”

Building off of the success from their virtual summer classes, Bethesda’s Imagination Stage also hopes to inspire and empower children through their online fall offerings. The group brainstormed for creative ways to keep children active and engaged during a time when they need it more than ever, organizers say. The results are classes that include introduction to acting, improv, stage makeup, playwriting, hip-hop dancing and even learning about the history of film.

Moving to a virtual format has allowed Imagination Stage to venture into new content and embrace new ways to perform, says Nikki Kaplan, associate director of education.

One new class for grades 7-12 is the International Theatre Exchange, which connects students with another youth theater group from a different part of the world and has them work together to create an original short video. Another, LGBTQIA + Stories: Devising with Queer Youth, is designed specifically for queer-identifying students and their allies to learn how theater and art can be their own form of activism. Students are encouraged to share their experiences and develop an original performance showcasing their perspectives. ■

**Virtual theater programs encourage kids to continue performing arts**



# Star Teacher

## Parent-Approved Hacks for Online Learning

by Joy Saha

**Online learning returns this fall**, and many parents are worried. Jamie Maier understands: During last spring's online learning, her then-kindergartner faced long lectures and a lack of participation opportunities as well as peer-collaboration and hands-on activities.

"He learned beautifully in school, both in preschool and elementary school," Maier says. "He loved being interactive and listening to his teachers so he did not enjoy learning on Zoom."







## Consider learning styles

Her son, who attends Montgomery County Public Schools, is a kinesthetic learner, she says, adding that he thrives academically while in an interactive learning environment. After the quick transition from in-person to Zoom instruction, he struggled tremendously with his handwriting, spelling and writing.

To counter the shortcomings, Maier learned to incorporate more hands-on activities for her son to take part in and stay engaged. Baking, cooking and even making ice cream are now interactive math, science and reading comprehension lessons for her son. Through these daily hands-on learning activities, Maier is helping her son strengthen his kinesthetic learning style even when online classes can't do the same.

Fellow MCPS parent Hava Anderson says her 6-year-old daughter also struggled with Zoom classes as a kinesthetic learner. While Anderson's 9-year-old son—a visual learner—easily completed his daily online lessons, her daughter found it difficult to sit still for long hours.

The lack of incentives and fun activities offered over Zoom were another setback for Anderson's daughter. For example, playing with friends after completing classwork was a small incentive that she no longer could look forward to in the pandemic.

Now, to make her daughter's online learning both fun and engaging, Anderson encourages her to recap her lessons by teaching them to her family members.

"A lot of times after her math class, I'll have her be the teacher and she teaches me," Anderson says. "Or she'll call her grandpa or her grandma and she'll teach them what she learned, which she loves doing. That makes it fun for her."

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## Try these tips

There are a lot of teacher tricks that parents can use to facilitate this fall's learning process. For example, bringing in pop culture—and pop songs—is a good way to engage your student, says Sarah Brennan, a mother of two and a middle school teacher at Immaculate Conception School in Towson.

How does that work? Many middle schoolers read "The Giver" as part of a curriculum. Parents can reinforce the book's themes by encouraging kids to find songs about dystopian futures or even loneliness, or the opposite, connectedness. This works easily for other titles as well.

Students can create their own flash cards online through Quizlet, or parents can help them go old school and create paper versions. Parents also should familiarize themselves with something called Flipgrid, which is a common way that teachers create presentations for their classes.

And, Brennan says, moms and dads should take note of this hack: There are audio versions of many commonly assigned books on YouTube. For the kids who find silent reading to be tedious, this is a great alternative.

Evelyn Wright, the director and owner of the Towson-based tutoring service Wright Academics, recommends creating a large tic-tac-toe review board. The board can be set up on a spacious hard surface—like a white board or even on the wall. Each tic-tac-toe square contains different review terms and concepts. Children can throw a sticky ball at a specific term and then explain it in-depth and in their own words.

Even though online learning environments can take away the structural aspect of learning and the interactive relationships between students and their teachers, parents can still compensate for those losses by evaluating their student's strengths and developing activities that best fit their individual learning styles, says Wright. ■



## What's My Child's Learning Style?

The four most common learning styles amongst children are visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile, says Evelyn Wright, the director and owner of Wright Academics, a Towson-based tutoring service.

Visual learners learn best by seeing things and receiving spoken instruction with accompanying visuals. These learners struggle with information that's purely provided in a spoken fashion, which is a main characteristic in online learning.

"If you have a visual learner, you don't just want to say the directions out to them," Wright says. "You also want to have some sort of visual that's going to remind them to do something, because they're not going to take in information efficiently when they're hearing it."

In contrast, auditory learners rely on their listening comprehension skills while learning. These learners struggle when classroom instructions are entirely visual and rely on visual aids.

Tactile learners rely on touch and sensation to aid their learning, while kinesthetic learners heavily rely on movement. Despite the rigid distinctions in learning styles, Wright adds that most students learn best with instruction that caters to a mix of all four styles.

"But when you talk about the type of learner a person is, it's usually about what their predominant learning style is," she says.

To help parents determine what their child's specific learning style is, Wright recommends they look at what the child is naturally good at doing.

According to Wright, children who are creative and artistic lean more towards a visual learning style. Children who are athletic and enjoy moving around are better kinesthetic learners.

On the other hand, children who enjoy being social need constant conversations while learning and associate more as auditory learners. For children who are more introverted and quiet, Wright says they could be a mix of auditory and tactile learners. ■





# A Classroom in the Living Room

## Creating the best at-home learning space for your child

by Jason Fontelieu

As many school districts across the country prepare to start the year virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the question arises: How do we get our kids learning when the living room is the classroom?

Chris Jones has a few tips for parents. Jones specializes in creating “functional, creative spaces,” which most of the time finds him designing children’s spaces. He’s the co-founder of Thinkterior, a company that designs interior spaces, and Adaptiv Design Concepts, where he does commercial design work and sells his myWall pegboard products. Both companies are based in Ashburn, Virginia, where Jones lives.

### Remember these five principles

Theme, focus, storage, growth and safety are common design principles, and they’re applicable to making effective learning spaces, too.

Theme is key, but it doesn’t have to be over-the-top. The theme can be your child’s favorite cartoon character to something “as general as ‘contemporary,’” Jones says

The focus? In this case, a space for learning.

Storage is necessary in keeping a space organized (more on that below).

Growth means buying furniture and decor

that will be useful for your children as they continue to grow.

And for safety, the basics: no sharp corners, no materials that could hurt your child and nothing they can jump off.

### Keep learning separate

It’s important for children to mentally be able to separate school time from play time, Jones says. Since that distinction is lost with virtual learning, keeping their desk or workspace away from their toys and their bed is helpful.

Remember, some kids may benefit from changing locations throughout the day. Others prefer the routine of always working in the same spot, he says. Also, younger kids may need to work near their parents or caregivers to remain on-task, so be sure there’s room for an extra chair.

And for people in smaller living spaces, Jones suggests taking the doors off a closet to set it up like a mini-classroom with household items such as sheets or string lights.

### Stay organized

If kids are doing work for multiple classes, they’ll need to keep their assignments straight. Jones suggests having a different-colored clipboard for each class—and maybe

even hanging them on the wall. Having a whiteboard for listing tasks also can help kids stay on top of their work.

And there should be minimal distractions in the space. Remember: toys stay in the playroom.

### Think ergonomically

It’s best to have a desk and chair fit for a child, which means it should allow his or her feet to touch the ground. A chair should be comfortable, but not too comfortable in case he or she loses focus.

Keep monitors at eye level so your child doesn’t have to slouch over it.

Also, the more natural light the better.

In the end, the ultimate goal, according to Jones, is for your child to look at the space and think, “OK, this is my little school now.”

How did Jones get so excited about spaces? His background is in graphic design, but he has always been skilled at carpentry, sculpture and painting. When he designed his son’s room 17 years ago, he immediately fell in love with the craft.

“What’s great about doing kids rooms, is you can just have fun with it,” he says. ■



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Socially  
distant



socially  
Awkward

by Katie Beecher





**I**t's not very surprising that there's been an uptick in mental health issues after living in a state of isolation and uncertainty for so long. There's no guidebook for us to follow, and improvising when it comes to health and safety is not ideal. "We are already seeing the impact of the pandemic on individuals and families. Stress, anxiety, mood disorders and family conflict are all on the rise," says Dr. Alison L. Miller, a psychologist in Lutherville.

What's more, we're operating in a world where there are fewer social cues and, therefore, an inability to sense how we're being received.

## Reading Social Cues

We rely on facial expressions when interacting with another person, but masks reduce our ability to read those small cues. "Before, when we took walks and another person was coming close to us we might have smiled or nodded," says Sarah Fitzsimmons, a licensed therapist in Towson. "But with more than half of our face covered it's harder to read people, and that can make us more anxious."

What's important to remember during these times is that anxiety is not our enemy, it's our brain's way of alerting us to possible danger. "Some anxiety about COVID-19 is probably adaptive, as it will encourage us to follow public health guidelines and think about the choices we're making," Miller says. Anxiety only becomes an issue when it starts to consume us. For this reason, both Fitzsimmons and Miller encourage people to try separating feelings from facts.

"Ask yourself: Do I have a factual reason in this situation to be anxious? Am I going into a crowd of people, or am I feeling anxious just walking out to the mailbox? Do I need to be taking extra precautions right now?" Fitzsimmons says.

Even after the pandemic, the specialists agree that there will probably be an adjustment and healing process. Choosing not to socialize or to stay away from certain situations is perfectly OK. "It's important to give yourself a lot of patience and self-compassion," says Dr. Jon Hershfield, director of The OCD & Anxiety Center of Greater Baltimore at Sheppard Pratt. "There's nothing wrong with you, we all need time to adjust."

That being said, it's vital to recognize that other people might not be at the same level of comfort you are. "As long as their behaviors are not putting you at risk, we must accept that friends and loved ones will not necessarily feel the same way that we do," Miller says. "Compassion and support are imperative to keep our relationships strong."

This requires better communication, both with loved ones, acquaintances and strangers. Though it may be awkward, Fitzsimmons says that we have to be willing to ask the uncomfortable questions. "We might have to ask people if they're comfortable with a certain amount of distance or if they're OK with me taking my mask off," she says. "It's a great opportunity to practice having difficult conversations and making decisions."

And when it comes to social cues, it could be that we might have to adopt more outward, physical gestures. "In other cultures and parts of the world, people nod, bow or place their hand on their heart as a way of acknowledging someone else's presence without communicating too much," Hershfield says. "We may have to rely more on hand signals, like giving a thumbs up to let someone know it's OK."

## Dealing with Separation Anxiety

As a specialist in childhood anxiety disorders, Miller has also seen increasing levels of separation anxiety, which she believes could be linked to the lack of socialization opportunities that children have at the moment.

This can be especially detrimental to children once they return to school since they're not used to being away from their parents. That's why, if parents are seeing difficulties in separation, Miller suggests brainstorming

*"It's important to give yourself a lot of patience and self-compassion. There's nothing wrong with you, we all need time to adjust."*

Dr. Jon Hershfield, director of The OCD & Anxiety Center of Greater Baltimore at Sheppard Pratt



ways for the child to practice separating in short increments. This could be going to a store or getting ice cream with a neighbor or relative, or going to another child's house to play. By doing this, the child can build their separation skills so that the transition period back to school is easier.

It's important, too, for parents to reflect on their own anxiety when deciding what to allow their child to do.

"Ask yourself whether it's your fear being excessive or if you've properly assessed the situation and believe it isn't safe for your child," Hershfield says.

**"People feel comfortable with different levels of risk, and this is a wonderful opportunity for parents to model an acceptance and respect of differing opinions and choices"**

Dr. Alison L. Miller, a psychologist in Lutherville.

All three specialists agree that children, especially teenagers, shouldn't be kept completely isolated. "One of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence is to separate from parents, and that means identifying and spending much more time with other teens," Miller says. "Parents still get to make the rules, but it is imperative to consider your child's mental and physical health."

Talking to your child and brainstorming ways for them to safely socialize not only lets them be included in the conversation, but also helps to lower conflict.

Fitzsimmons also encourages parents to use the term "physical distancing" instead of "social distancing" when talking with their child. "We don't want to teach kids to be emotionally distant, we want to encourage them to have a physical space bubble but still show that it's important to have social connections."

## Navigating Playdates

Both Fitzsimmons and Miller say that the best way to feel comfortable about sending your child on playdates is to find families whose pandemic protocols best match yours. This means communicating with parents of your child's friends and asking tough, straightforward questions.

"People feel comfortable with different levels of risk, and this is a wonderful opportunity for parents to model an acceptance and respect of differing opinions and choices," Miller says.

Due to their own confusion and lack of knowledge, parents may be struggling to figure out the best ways to help their children through this difficult time. The fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic combined with isolation and quarantine can have a strong impact on a child's mental health. Both Dr. Miller and Fitzsimmons have seen an uptick in depression and anxiety in kids, which is why it's imperative for parents to monitor their children's moods as best as they can.

Validate and empathize with their emotions, Miller says. One trick is to replace the word "but" with "and," Miller says. "Instead



## Getting Social

It's important for children to socially interact with friends and family, and FaceTime and Zoom are perfect ways to do that. But it can be difficult for children to stay interested in these types of interaction because they're all about conversation. We've put together a list of socially distant social activities recommended by our three specialists:

- Writing letters to friends and family
- Playing video games that allow children to talk with each other, such as Madden, FIFA, Minecraft, Roblox and Fortnite
- Playing virtual board games, which can be found at [playingcards.io](https://playingcards.io) or [unofreak.com](https://unofreak.com)
- Using screen share on Zoom to watch videos, play on a game website or doodle on the whiteboard feature together
- Using Facetime or Zoom to play with dolls or dress up, do arts and crafts or create YouTube or Tik Tok videos
- Signing up for a virtual camp or class
- Hiking, biking or swimming
- Making a bonfire in the backyard
- Creating a treasure hunt around the neighborhood

of, 'I know you're feeling scared but it's pretty safe to go swimming in a friend's pool,' try 'I know you're feeling scared. That makes sense with all of the scary things we've heard for the past few months! It's ok to feel scared AND to do things in a safe way,'" she says. "We can swim at your friend's house and keep a good distance from them. Even if you're feeling nervous about it, it's something I've researched and feel that it's safe to do."

Finally, take baby steps. Don't expect your child to go from 0 to 60. Ease back into social situations one step at a time with masks, outside play, socially distanced play, socializing in small numbers and for short amounts of time. ■





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# You Can Do

## A Back-to-School Survival Guide for Parents of Kids with Special Needs

By Erica Rimlinger



**Teaching kids** with special needs is not just a vocation. It is a specialized skill, and for some, it's even a calling. When COVID-19 shuttered schools this spring, parents of kids with special needs found themselves, overnight, forced to assume the role of special educator, all while parenting, quarantining and, in some cases, simultaneously performing other jobs.

Now, with public schools in the D.C. area announcing a virtual start this fall, parents face this news with hard-won insight into the strategy, energy, time and skill required to help kids with special needs learn at home.

Speaking for myself, I can only say (with a hint of desperation creeping into my voice), "I am not equal to the task." Or, as I have read on social media in countless posts in countless variations, "HELP! I can't do this again!"

Washington FAMILY consulted the experts to find answers and, hopefully, provide a bit of reassurance as you and your child begin a new school year of virtual learning.

### Your Child's Rights

Education attorney Alexandra Rosenblatt, whose second-grade daughter has Down syndrome, wants to remind parents that a

child has the same educational rights at the kitchen table as they do in the classroom.

"While almost all children struggle with virtual learning, the struggle for children with disabilities is significantly greater," Rosenblatt says. "I see a lot of parents hesitant to request more support, services and modifications to meet their child's needs. Some parents worry about being a 'problem parent.' Some parents simply don't know they have the right to ask for more support and services," she says.

What happened when schools closed in the spring "isn't going to cut it" this fall, Rosenblatt says. She advises parents take time to "identify what didn't work." For example: "If the recorded videos did not work for your child, then advocate for more live instruction. If whole class or small group virtual learning didn't work for your child, then advocate for more one-to-one instruction," she says. "If the work presented was not modified the way it should have been, ensure the school is modifying the workload and worksheets based on how your child learns best."

Schools must, Rosenblatt emphasizes, "follow what is in the IEP. If you don't agree with what's in the IEP, schools have to hold an IEP meeting."

### Your IEP

What's in the IEP anyway? Annie McLaughlin, a board-certified behavior analyst and parent, advises parents to find out—in great detail. "Spend time reviewing your child's IEP and try to understand what your child knows and doesn't know," she says.

McLaughlin, who works with parents to translate and construct better IEPs, encourages parents to ask educators questions such as, "What are these goals based on? How did you choose that number? How are you measuring progress? What supports are used in the classroom? Can I make that happen at home? How?"

McLaughlin also encourages parents to seek definitions for terms such as "grade-level phonics" that would be unfamiliar to a layperson. "Go to the common core website. Email teachers," McLaughlin says. "Get examples. Ask the teacher, 'Can you take a video of yourself doing that skill?' Ask them to train you."

Rosenblatt agrees that parents should be as informed as they can and keep detailed records. "Keep an electronic or physical COVID notebook," she advises. "Make notes each day about how successful learning was, whether the work and instruction were





appropriate for your child, what behavioral and academic challenges your child experienced that day, and your own observations about what skills your child is losing or gaining. Children will be entitled to compensatory or make-up services. Keeping your own data on what didn't work and why will help get that compensation down the road."

If you "know in your gut" your child is falling behind, having that "data piece is so important, so you can show what's happening," she says. And parents don't have to go in to IEP meetings alone. "If parents who don't know how to articulate or find what data they need to support what they're asking, that's where advocates and lawyers can help." Don't assume if you're not getting something, that it can't be done, she says. "If it's doable in one district, it's doable in another."

## Your Team

Shawn Gardiner teaches pre-K for 3-year-olds in an inclusion classroom. (Inclusion means typically developing children are included in a class with kids who have disabilities.) Gardiner says moving to online learning this spring was difficult for the kids in her class. "We spend so much of [class] working

on social skills and hands-on play. Trying to work this into the virtual format is really challenging," she says.

As a caregiver, enlist your child's educational team for support, she says. Teachers are trained to do the heavy lifting academically. "For young children, try not to worry about scheduling time to do 'academic work.' Use the virtual sessions to see what your class is working on and so your child can connect with their peers. When offline, schedule time for screen-free play together where you talk to your child," Gardiner advises.

Rosenblatt concurs that parents shouldn't expect to teach, but play a supporting role. "Children with learning differences and deficits need a lot more specialized instruction that parents simply cannot provide and should not be expected to provide," Rosenblatt says. "I strongly urge schools and parents to add services and supports into the distance-learning plans to address caregiver training and support. If caregivers cannot be available to help with the instruction, the school needs to address this in the distance learning plans."

McLaughlin says, "As much as possible, parents should familiarize themselves with

the technology tools that the school will be using. If you need training on how to use the technology, ask for that through the special educator or the IEP process."

More than anything, speak up if you need help. "Communication is key," McLaughlin says. "Let the special educators know what is working for your child and what isn't working. The special educator should be able to look at the individual learning characteristics of your child to recommend supports that can help. Even if they don't know what the answer is, raise the question."

Teachers want parents to approach them with questions and concerns, Gardiner says. She encourages parents to speak out and ask everything. "Don't hold back. I feel like some issues took longer to fix because parents didn't want to trouble me by asking when they came up," she says. "Ask as soon as you have an issue! It's my job."

Gardiner acknowledges her parents' pain, saying, "This is hard. I'm a teacher and mother of a 4-year-old, and I'm still figuring out what works. Teachers are so willing to be flexible, and we understand how stressful the situation is. We can work with you as long as you let us know what you need." ■





# Playing it Safe

## Youth sports in the COVID-19 climate

BY COURTNEY MCGEE

**D**uring this pandemic, so many cherished routines have been sacrificed, and the loss of sports is one that really stings for lots of kids. Not only do sports provide a way to stay fit and have fun, but they are also sources of socialization and confidence. And, of course, they are outlets for stress relief for kids who are feeling isolated and fearful in today's world.

Some of us were able to keep our kids busy in the spring and summer with outdoor activities. Camps were operational with added precautions, and a number of sports teams were thankful to continue some degree of practice time (with or without the ability to compete in matchups). As the weather cools and many sports move indoors, there will be added challenges for organizers, parents and young athletes.

So, we wonder: Will kids be able to stay involved and active and avoid deconditioning as they await return to the games they love? I checked in with three local experts to see where they stand on the subject of youth sports during these precarious months.

### Kids need to play

Alex Jacobs, owner of Coppermine Fieldhouse, runs their facilities in Baltimore County and Carroll County, and oversaw servicing of more than 4,000 sports campers this summer, with abundant protocols including temperature checks, sanitizing stations and controlled drop-off and pickup areas. Masks were mandated in public spaces, but camps were exempted.

Jacobs looked at risks for coronavirus in youth under age 19 and felt confident his crews could manage participants and regulate the environment.

"Coppermine is a private entity, with customers. Everyone who enters the facility has been sent protocols in advance," he says. "If they want to participate, they will follow protocols. If people understand the amount of caution being put into operations, they will see

that it is probably safer to do these organized activities than it is to go to a store or other public places."

"Kids need to play sports," Jacobs says. "Parents need this help, too. It's exhausting, physically and mentally ... not just to do all the things grownups need to do, but also to manage keeping a child active and involved."

Parents understand the risk, and the parental feedback collected by Coppermine was overwhelmingly positive, with about 90 percent of parents being all-in, and the other 10 percent feeling extra cautious, he says. The kids who have stopped playing out of caution will not be left behind when things start to normalize again, he believes. Others may use this break as a time to reevaluate whether their sport is still important to them. If they aren't missing their sport, this can be a great time to discover new interests.

Whatever pastime they choose, however, "becoming dormant is not an option," he says. "If you want to stay healthy, you have to be active. Staying on lockdown and avoiding sports and exercise denies you of building immunity. You miss out on mental health benefits, endorphins and interaction with other kids. Zoom and FaceTime are OK substitutes, but not a long-term solution."

And while exercise can be done anywhere, he points out that team dynamics bring additional benefits.

"Being part of a team, that collective effort, the relationships, resolving conflict...kids get life lessons through sports," Jacobs says.

And young athletes miss the role-model presence of coaches when their sport is sidelined. "Coaches are important mentors for kids, supporting them, pushing them to challenge themselves, giving positive reinforcement, giving opportunities for leadership and confidence," he says.

As colder weather drives sports indoors, COVID-19 precautions will pose more of a challenge. Jacobs says that with basketball, for example, they will operate fewer courts



and might not have spectators. They will keep sanitizing and safety protocols strict, and do whatever they can to keep operating safely.

### Kids need to move

Dave Miele, co-owner and director of operations at BEAST Baseball, agrees wholeheartedly that kids should keep playing sports during the pandemic.

"Young athletes must stay active and fit to promote growth in their sport-specific skills, as well as their physical and mental fortitude," he says. "I believe they can practice any sport they choose, as long as they are following guidelines from state and local officials."

**"Being part of a team, that collective effort, the relationships, resolving conflict...kids get life lessons through sports."**

Alex Jacobs

Parents need to make educated decisions about allowing their athletes to participate or not, he says. And common sense must prevail: If a parent or an athlete has been sick or near someone who is sick, then they simply must stay home.

Most schools have already cancelled fall and winter sports, but athletes can still find ways to practice and even compete if they desire.

"Club and travel-level organizations around the area have plenty of opportunities available for athletes to stay in their game with the absence of school-organized competition," Miele says. "Gyms are now reopening at limited capacity, too, which gives another option for older athletes to get training. If you're not comfortable with team organized sports during this time, there are other options for keeping kids moving. Try some type of recreational activity, like running, bike riding, swimming, hiking, kayaking or canoeing, just to name a few."

### Kids need other kids

For those who crave team interaction during the pandemic, there are ways to play safely, says Dr. Robin Motter-Mast, chief of staff and medical director of care transformation at Greater Baltimore Medical Center.

"Youth sports can still be safe, and physical activity is absolutely necessary to support a child's healthy growth and development," she says.

When evaluating activities for their child, parents should consider the amount of risk the activity will incur, if your child or someone in your family is at an increased health risk, if the program promote behaviors that reduce possible virus spread and if it maintains a safe environment.

"Expect all activities, inside or outside, to look a little different," she says.

In Motter-Mast's opinion, contact sports such as wrestling, football, basketball and

lacrosse are the most dangerous for COVID-19 transmission. Tennis, cross country, golf and gymnastics are the least dangerous.

Parents should be compassionate and resourceful to keep their child active and connected with friends and teammates, she says.

"If you or your child is fearful about participation, there are virtual gym classes and personal coaching widely available online, as well online games that encourage movement and provide competition for engagement," she says.

Youth sports are more than child's play—they can profoundly affect mental and physical wellbeing, too.

"For children and youth, closures of schools and parks, cancellations of organized sports and recreational activities and increased accessibility to and time spent on screens may negatively impact their physical activity, leading to a more sedentary lifestyle," Motter-Mast says. "This may trigger declines in mood and sleep behaviors, and can lead to a further increase in childhood obesity. While sedentary behavior certainly has no effect on the immunity, exercising in moderation is associated with improved immune competency and a reduced risk of illness.

"The bottom line," she says, "is to keep moving!" ■

## What's Risky? What's Not?

Dr. Motter-Mast provides these guidelines for evaluating activities.

- **Lowest Risk:** Performing skill-building drills or conditioning at home, alone or with family members
- **Increasing Risk:** Team-based practice
- **More Risk:** Within-team competition
- **Even More Risk:** Competition between teams from the same local geographic area
- **Highest Risk:** Competition between teams from different geographic areas

### Factors for assessing risk of group play:

- Physical closeness of players and the length of time that players are close to each other or to staff
- Amount of necessary touching of shared equipment, such as protective gear, balls, bats, racquets, mats or water bottles
- Ability to engage in social distancing while not actively playing, such as during practice, on the sideline or in a dugout
- Age of the player
- A player's medical health and any pre-existing medical conditions
- Size of the team—more players equal greater risk
- Number of non-essential visitors, such as spectators or volunteers
- Travel outside the community—teams should consider competing only against area teams





# Choosing Happiness Over ZOOM

By Ali Karpa



# One mom's decision to log out of distance learning

**I'VE BEEN GETTING** a lot of calls lately from friends asking my opinion about what they should do with their children this fall. My perspective on the subject is unique.

As an ICU nurse practitioner, I deal with patients diagnosed with coronavirus every day. I have witnessed how COVID-19 can make a totally healthy person critically ill in the matter of hours. This is happening all over the country and all over the world. We are in the middle of a pandemic. In times like this, survival is key.

Survival for children and families is universal. We all want our basic needs met: food, water, shelter and safety. Unfortunately, not everyone has the privilege of these during this crisis.

Many children in this country rely on public school systems to meet their needs. Schools provides them with free meals if eligible and a safe environment that they may not have at home. For parents, it is a source of childcare.

Many of these families do not have the luxury to choose between in-person school or online learning. They cannot afford to stay home from work or hire a full-time nanny. They may not have a job or a steady source of income. For these families, there are no choices; there is only survival. I am deeply concerned about them and cannot imagine the turmoil they face as the crisis continues.

On the other hand, I do not have any concerns about my children or the children of my friends who call me to work through their decision-making process. We are relatively privileged to have choices; many of us can afford to stay home, hire a nanny or put our children in private daycare. For our children, school isn't a part of survival like it is for others.

When the schools shut down in March, I tried to get my kids to do their Zoom calls. But they didn't like it. My shy 6-year-old daughter didn't like that her teachers and friends could see her on camera. So then we tried to do Zoom without a camera, but it was still not successful. Her voice was a barely audible whisper when she was called on in class to say good morning.

Most of the time she was cranky because Zoom started before her usual kindergarten day. I couldn't get her to do the homework despite a lot of threatening. She started telling me that she didn't like reading or math, and I began to fear that distance learning was turning her off to learning in general. It took her almost four months to adjust to kindergarten when it started last September; transitioning to Zoom started feeling like that all over again.

As for my 3-year-old son, he was impossible to get to sit still for his nursery school Zoom meetings. He was not able to focus on

site words included "Amazon" and "FedEx." My son loved playing with his train set and dressing up in his super hero costumes. He has been improving his math skills through his consumption of M&Ms.

Together they jumped on the trampoline and tried out our new ropes course in our backyard. They learned to climb our tree and to make picnics for lunch out front. We took family bike rides to the end of our street and played with pine cones. My kids didn't have a schedule, and without the pressure of Zoom, they were happy.

This carefree life of ours lasted for about

**My advice to those who are anxious about making the right decision for school is this: Do whatever you think is best for your family and be grateful you have the privilege of choice.**

the discussion or listen to his classmates the same way he could in a real class environment. When he did join in, his naturally loud voice dominated the entire conversation. Unfortunately, he seemed more of a disruption to the other students who were able to sit, listen and participate at an appropriate volume.

It was then that I started wondering if learning only for the sake of learning—virtual education—means much at all. I think the value of the traditional classroom experience encourages children to be innovative, creative, assertive, social, communicative and caring. But if this is not available, what is the value in Zoom?

With other things in the world to worry about, I stopped caring whether my kids "passed." Passing school has nothing to do with survival.

Instead logging into Zoom, my kids slept in and were not rushed in the mornings. My daughter enjoyed doing art projects that she made for herself every day and working on perfecting her gymnastics routine. Her new

six weeks. Unfortunately, it was not sustainable with my work schedule as an ICU nurse practitioner. The kids would keep me up all day, and I wasn't able to sleep to prepare for my night shifts.

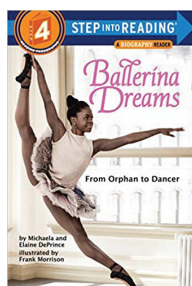
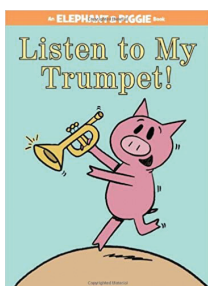
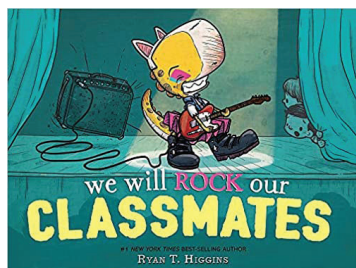
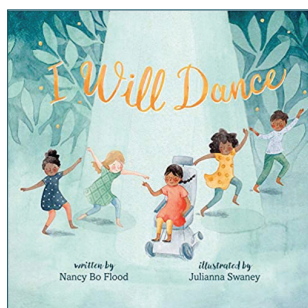
So we put them in daycare for essential workers in April, and they have been there ever since. We are lucky that our kids could return to a normal school-like environment where there was no pressure to follow a curriculum. They love their teachers, new friends and activities. This has truly been a blessing for our family.

My view on the world has shifted a bit as maybe it should when we focus on survival. My advice to those who are anxious about making the right decision for school is this: Do whatever you think is best for your family and be grateful you have the privilege of choice. ■

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*Ali Karpa is an acute care nurse practitioner in the ICU at MedStar Montgomery Medical Center. She is a wife and a mom to a chocolate lab and two human children, ages 3 and 6.*





# In the Spotlight

## 12 Children's Books About the Performing Arts

BY JENNIFER ROTHSCILD, COLLECTION ENGAGEMENT LIBRARIAN,  
ARLINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

In addition to being fun to participate in and watch, the performing arts hold many benefits for children. They help teach teamwork, critical thinking, resilience, empathy and communication, all while fostering creativity. These children's books, including nonfiction titles about popular performers, will engage readers with stories about dance, music, comedy and stardom.

### PICTURE BOOKS

#### 'I Will Dance'

**Written by Nancy Bo Flood,  
illustrated by Julianna Swaney**

Eva longs to be a dancer, but she was born with cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. Then she learns about Young Dance, a real inclusive dance company in the Twin Cities that teaches people of all physical abilities. There, Eva is able to perform with all different types of people.

#### 'The Magic Flute'

**Written and illustrated  
by Christopher Raschka**

With his trademark illustrative style, Raschka retells Mozart's opera for young readers. Prince Tamino must rescue his love Pamina. Along the way he undergoes several trials and is aided by a magic flute, an enchanted lock and more. Raschka manages to keep the grandeur and drama of the original story while still being accessible to children.

#### 'We Will Rock Our Classmates'

**Written and illustrated  
by Ryan T. Higgins**

Penelope the T-Rex is back in this follow-up to "We Do Not Eat Our Classmates." She can't wait to rock out at the school talent show but is full of self-doubt after one of her human classmates asks if dinosaurs can even play guitar. Luckily, her dad helps her see that being a dinosaur is only part of who she is.

### EARLY READERS

#### 'Listen to My Trumpet'

**Written and illustrated by Mo Willems**

Piggie has a new trumpet and cannot wait for Gerald the elephant to hear her play. Gerald appreciates Piggie's enthusiasm but is

afraid to tell her that she is not making nice music with all of her "blurks!" and "quarks!" However, Gerald knows that friends tell the truth, and when he does, he learns something very surprising.

#### 'Ballerina Dreams: From War Orphan to Ballerina'

**Written by Michaela and Elaine  
DePrince, illustrated by  
Frank Morrison**

Michaela DePrince was born in Sierra Leone and moved the U.S. after being adopted by an American family. She is now a professional ballet dancer, a journey detailed in this early reader memoir. Teen readers should check out at her full-length book, "Taking Flight."

#### 'Katie Woo, Star of the Show'

**Written by Fran Manushkin,  
illustrated by Tammie Lyon**

Katie is sad when she's cast as the earthworm instead of the princess in the school play. She wanted to be the star! She's disappointed, but she (and readers) will learn a valuable lesson in how all the parts in a play are important in this installment of the popular early reader series.

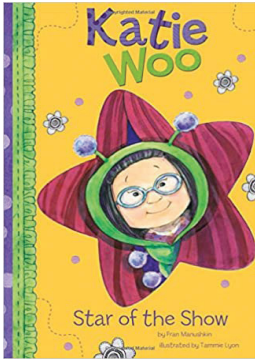
### MIDDLE GRADE

#### 'Better Nate Than Ever'

**Written by Tim Federle**

Nate feels trapped in his small town of Jankburg, Pennsylvania. When he sees a casting call for an upcoming Broadway adaptation of "E.T.: The Musical," he comes up with a way to sneak to New York and make his theater dreams come true. But first he must deal with stage mothers, wacky casting directors and his own dysfunctional family. Readers will rejoice to know Nate has more adventures in subsequent books.





**'Rhythm Ride: A Road Trip Through the Motown Sound'**  
Written by Andrea Davis Pinkney

In 1969, Berry Gordy converted his garage into a recording studio and recruited neighborhood kids to come sing on his brand-new record label. Those neighborhood kids became household names, and Gordy's label created a sound that helped define an era. Pinkney takes readers on a journey through the music of the time period.

**'Stand Up, Yumi Chung!'**

Written by Jessica Kim

Yumi suffers from many #shygirlproblems but dreams of being a stand-up comedian. She has a notebook of material—she's just looking for a stage. When a comedy camp taught by one of her idols mistakes her for one of its campers, she jumps at the chance. Only now she's caught in a web of lies, and she'll need her new self-confidence to get out of it.

**YOUNG ADULT**

**'The Backstagers: Rebels Without Applause'**

Written by James Tynion,  
illustrated by Rian Sygh

When Jory transfers to St. Genesius, everyone

treats him like the new kid, except the Backstagers. Jory's a bit reluctant to join the lowly stage crew but soon discovers there's a whole new world backstage—literally. But in order to put on the best show ever, they have to deal with the supernatural first. Luckily, there are more installments of this graphic novel series, as well as prose chapter books.

**'If I Stay'**

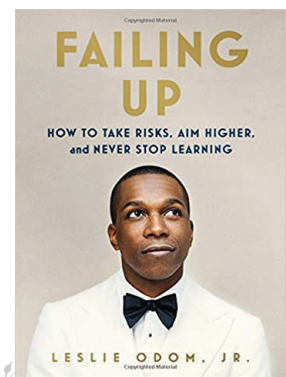
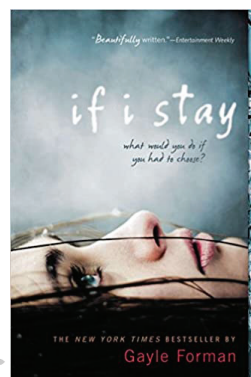
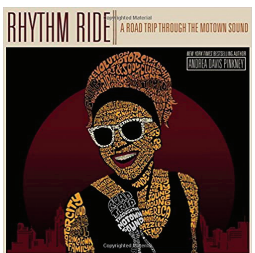
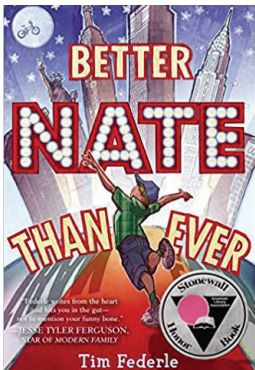
Written by Gayle Forman

After a car accident kills her parents and brother, classical cellist Mia lies in a coma in the hospital. Suspended between life and death, surrounded by her friends and extended family, Mia flashes back on her life, especially her relationship with her rocker boyfriend and the role music played in their lives.

**'Failing Up: How to Take Risks, Aim Higher, and Never Stop Learning'**

Written by Leslie Odom Jr.

Before starring in "Hamilton," Leslie Odom Jr. put in years of work and study to become the best actor and singer he could be. Using stories from his life, he shares advice and questions for readers to think over as they go about creating their own journeys, no matter the field. ■





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## Washington FAMILY



# Erica Scherzer



**OCCUPATION:** Stay-at-home mom and volunteer

**LIVES:** McLean, VA

**FAMILY:** Husband, Max; and daughters, Brooke, 2 ½; and Kasey, 1

Do you know a local parent who juggles multiple priorities while making a positive impact in their community? Nominate them as a subject of our Mom/Dad Life column by emailing [editor@washingtonFAMILY.com](mailto:editor@washingtonFAMILY.com).

PHOTO COURTESY OF ERICA SCHERZER

## How is your family coping with the coronavirus pandemic?

Honestly, pretty good. I hate to say that in the middle of this terrible pandemic, but my husband's employed, we have a lot of resources at our disposal and we have the privilege to be able to stay home. Are we bored? Yes, we're bored. Would I love to be able to just go hang out at Starbucks and go see a bunch of friends and go to a restaurant to eat? I would love to do all those things. But I also realize that I'm in a unique, blessed position where I can abstain from doing those.

My sister's a surgeon, so I've heard some awful stories of people coming in with COVID and their family can't say goodbye to them. Hearing those things just puts it in perspective. In the grand scheme of things, yeah, we're bored, but it could be a heck of a lot worse.

## How do you take care of your mental and physical health?

I'm actually a big mediator. I got into it maybe a year and a half ago after I had my first daughter and [was adjusting] to motherhood and the identity shift. It's something I'd read about for years, and once I finally put it into practice for myself, it helps. ... And then I also try to stay off social media as much as possible!

## Let's talk about your volunteer work. How do you choose the organizations that you get involved with?

A lot of them have, in some ways, picked me. Humane Rescue Alliance, for example. Back when they were Washington Humane Society, one of their employees ran into me at a baseball game and knew that I had a passion for animal welfare. [Max and I] just loved their mission, their vision and got heavily involved. I ended up joining the board a while after.

We did start a new initiative called Nats for Masks ([natsformasks.com](http://natsformasks.com)). Essentially we are providing masks and relief efforts for lower income communities in the DMV area. Right

now we're focusing on schools in Wards 7 and 8 in Anacostia, but depending on how much we raise, we'll increase from there. [Max and I] are cleaning out our personal collection of memorabilia. We have so much stuff over the years—jerseys, balls, hats, cards, you name it, and we're raffling items off. People can also enter by volunteering their time, by making masks, by donating food. It's just our way of trying to make the best of a tough situation, and we're matching all money raised.

## What do you find so rewarding about volunteering?

I get a lot out of this. I absolutely love doing the work. I love doing the program development. I love brainstorming ways to raise more money or come up with new ideas. It's incredibly fulfilling.

## What has baseball season been like for your family this year?

I think one of the challenges is not hanging out with the other spouses as much. Normally, you'd have big get-togethers, huge playdates, team parties, things like that. And right now we can't exactly get an entire team together in a house and take those chances.

## What's something that makes juggling all of this—your family, baseball, your personal responsibilities—a little bit easier for you?

Routine is definitely a big part of it. I'm also a big believer in waking up before my kids do every day. So I get up at least an hour to two hours before they do, and I start my day on my terms, in my own way. The days where I slack on that don't tend to go as well.

And keeping perspective if things go sour: Just like the Nats go 1 and 0 every day, we try to go 1 and 0 in our household every day, too. ■

Visit [WashingtonFAMILY.com](http://WashingtonFAMILY.com) for a longer version of this interview.



A close-up photograph of a dog's face, likely a Weimaraner, with brown and white fur and striking green eyes. The dog is looking slightly to the left of the camera.

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