

The pandemic made me a private school mom

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I never envisioned our sons attending the type of school that requires uniforms and black shoes—*no logos please*. But after months in a virtual classroom with real-world hiccups, private school began to look like the only viable option. The reason: **distance learning** was a disaster for our family.

During the second week of remote learning, my eight-year-old son walked into my bathroom while I was showering. “Mom, something is not working,” he shouted over the sound of pounding water.

He stared out the window to give me privacy, but the school-issued iPad was facing our glass shower door. He couldn’t connect to Zoom—that’s why he needed help. Getting asked to troubleshoot from inside a shower wasn’t a great way to kick off the semester, but it was

better than inadvertently flashing 27 third-graders.

Pre-pandemic our kids never had devices. And while they embraced the new technology, the changed situation overstimulated them. Their little brains don't have the prefrontal cortex control to stay focused. I heard, "I hate live meetings; they're stupid," on an almost hourly basis. Two of my three boys were miserable 90% of the day. The third was just thrilled to have access to screens unpoliced.

I watched them try to make sense of words and numbers while simultaneously sending each other poop emojis and plotting their next move in Prodigy.

When I wandered over to their work spaces at 15- to 20-minute intervals, I saw their magic fingers toggle from YouTube to their Google Classroom daily schedule.

I passed through the room with *that look* and my third-grader cracked a smile, knowing he got caught. I didn't shame him or threaten him with consequences. I only said, "please try to pay attention." The reason: I couldn't blame him.

Even under ideal circumstances, it would be a herculean task to keep our kids focused, engaged and in their seats from 9am to 3pm. In the remote model though, teachers have to entertain and educate when the kids have a virtual playground at their fingertips. What human being, what teacher, can compete with the visual theatrics offered on the screen?

Equally confounding, what's a natural consequence for poor remote learning behavior? Take away the device they need for school? Put gloves on during live meetings so scrolling and typing in chats becomes impossible? Cry and beg? Over the past several months, I'd tried variations of all three.

My husband and I talked about the challenges. He works demanding hours and I was caught between a first-grader who couldn't read his assignments and my own responsibilities as a part-time college professor and full-time writer. For a while, we both agreed to declare the year a wash. "Just do the best you can," became our motto.

While our district planned to adopt a **hybrid model** before the holidays, it involves 2.5-hour days, plexiglass barriers and barricades around playground equipment. "I'd rather stay home if the school will feel like a prison yard," the third-grader said.

I get it. What kind of learning can take place when kids are placed inside a bubble? When they don't feel safe and comfortable?

I worried about the spread of the coronavirus but maintaining the remote learning status quo was equally concerning. Some days, I hid in the laundry room slumped against the washing machine during the spin cycle. Too many afternoons, I held a son in my arms after he struggled with an assignment, both of us teary-eyed and unsure how to move forward. And countless sleepless nights, I fixated on the million ways I'd failed my kids during the day.

At the same time, the boys had created an entire library of images and messages that indicated, to me at least, that they were suffering. In one gut-wrenching email, one of my sons wrote to the other two, “Help me,” which he sent complete with a sad face Memoji.

So, after months of misery, I confessed to my husband that I had been fantasizing about putting our boys in private school. “Can we really expect them not to goof off with distance education?” I wondered aloud. “I mean, I can’t stay on task in front of a screen and last I checked, my impulse control is pretty advanced.”

I told him about a local private school that offers a traditional schedule. They have low class counts (12 to 14 students per class, even without the COVID-19 pandemic). They’ve instituted physical distancing rules and students are required to wear masks when they’re not at their desks.

“Maybe we can swing it,” he said. “We can figure it out. We always do.”

I wasn’t expecting him to hop on board. We like the diversity of public school, that children come from a range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Plus, private tuition costs would rob the kids of their college funds and strap us financially for the foreseeable future. I could see every nonessential we’d planned fading away—the rented RV for touring national parks, the visits to family in Michigan, the date nights that aren’t even an option during the pandemic.

We’re not cut from private school cloth, I thought.

But we’d also reached our breaking point.

So, on a sunny Thursday in late October, our three boys jumped out of bed excited about their *second* first day of school this year. I could hear them chatter about the daily schedule while they swapped their comic-book themed tees and gym shorts for button-downs and bowties.

There were no first-day jitters. No meltdowns about which shirt or socks to wear. And no paralyzing fears about technological glitches. At drop off, they put on their superhero-themed masks and waltzed through the tall white gates to greet their new teachers and classmates. They were ready to learn.

“You know what I like about this new school?” my six-year-old son asked. “We get to use paper and pencils instead of screens.”

Me? I’m still conflicted. I feel guilty that we can offer our children a temporary solution when other families can’t. I share the outrage that the pandemic magnifies inequities that already exist—and I’m disheartened that our family is playing a part in the divide. And we’re not the only parents traveling this route. Their new school just reached capacity because of transferring students.

Some days I'm convinced that COVID-19 has permanently altered the trajectory of our children's lives—the friends they'll meet, the activities they'll pursue and the academic path they'll follow. Other days, I dream about when we won't have to worry about how we'll afford elementary school. For now, I'm grateful that our family is traveling down a new path with private school—even if I'm not entirely comfortable in these shoes.

Amy Paturel is an award-winning writer living Southern California who relies on her pandemic puppy to keep her company while her three children are at school. When she's not trying to master the art of raising three boys without losing her mind, you can find her teaching writers how to craft their own personal narratives — and on Facebook and Twitter.