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# 'I Just Can't Do This.' Some Overwhelmed Parents Are Opting to Abandon Pandemic Homeschooling



This photo released by Kara Illig shows her son, Eli Illig, 10, on his computer in Ebensburg, Pa on April 9, 2020. Kara Illig—AP

BY GILLIAN FLACCUS AND JOCELYN GECKER / AP

APRIL 21, 2020 11:38 AM EDT

**F**rustration is mounting as more families across the U.S. enter their second or even third week of distance learning — and some overwhelmed parents

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Amid the barrage of learning apps, video meet-ups and e-mailed assignments that pass as pandemic home school, some frustrated and exhausted parents are choosing to disconnect entirely for the rest of the academic year. Others are cramming all their children's school work into the weekend or taking days off work to help their kids with a week's worth of assignments in one day.

"We tried to make it work the first week. We put together a schedule, and what we found is that forcing a child who is that young into a fake teaching situation is really, really hard," said Alexandra Nicholson, whose son is in kindergarten in a town outside Boston.

"I'd rather have him watch classic Godzilla movies and play in the yard and pretend to be a Jedi rather than figure out basic math."

That stress is only compounded for families with multiple children in different grades, or when parents work long hours outside the home. In some cases, older siblings must watch younger ones during the day, leaving no time for school work.

"I think the pressure is on and I think it's on even more for some of our low-income families. It's totally overwhelming," said Rachel Pearl, chief program officer for Friends of the Children. The Portland, Oregon-based national nonprofit that pairs paid mentors with at-risk children.

"A lot of our families already feel they're not doing enough when they are working so hard and I fear they will fear they are failing at it."

Parents across the U.S. are concerned their kids are falling behind, especially in lower income families. In households where the parents earn less than \$50,000 total annually, 72% are at least somewhat concerned about their child falling behind academically, compared with 56% of parents in high-income households, according to a late-March poll by *The Associated Press*-NORC

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Meghan Perrone, a nurse, can't even begin to help her 8-year-old daughter with her schoolwork until after she gets home from work and has cleaned up from dinner. Her husband is working from home but spends most of the week holed up in the basement because his job is mainly done by phone. That leaves the couple's second-grade daughter to supervise her 2-year-old sister.

As a result, the family has pushed the weekly load of schoolwork to weekends and tries to cram as much into two days as they can. One recent Saturday, Perrone's husband and daughter finished a science project at 10 p.m.

"We don't have the luxury right now to not be working. Some people aren't working at all and they can make time to do this stuff, but that for us is just not an option," said Perrone, who lives in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania.

Those with older children may be faring better, but parents still must keep track of timing for video chats with teachers and make sure all the assignments are completed.

Sarah Karpanty, 44, a mother of two middle schoolers in Roanoke, Virginia, said the reality kicked in last week when spring break ended and home learning began.

"I wanted to get into a fetal position and hide out," said Karpanty, a professor of wildlife biology at Virginia Tech who is also teaching her own students online.

Her boys, aged 12 and 13, are independent but still need guidance navigating the new technology. Their classes involve recorded video from teachers, online quizzes and the occasional interactive Zoom call.

"When this all started we were all like, 'Thank God kids aren't affected,'" she said, referring to the coronavirus itself. "But we have to be honest, the kids are not OK."

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to go at their own pace.

California high school teacher Susan Binder said the technology can be frustrating and imperfect. Many of the apps elementary schools must now rely on — with names like Seesaw, Epic and IXL — were only intended as a tool to enhance classroom learning or share students' work with parents.

"This is a very crude bandage we're putting on a very big wound. We're just doing the best we can," said Binder, who is using Zoom and Google classroom to teach economics, AP history and government at El Cerrito High School, near San Francisco.

"A video can't look at your child's face and see the confusion. A teacher can do that," she said.

She worries this generation of students may end up suffering academically, socially and emotionally.

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"We are out of everything."

Around the world, parents and schools are facing similar challenges. In Italy, the virus' first epicenter in Europe, schools have tried to adapt to online learning with a spotty success rate. In some parts of Italy's hard-hit north, many schools went weeks without assigning lessons, and one parent said her

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Kara Illig, a mother of three in Edensburg, Pennsylvania, finally broke down one day last week.

Her fourth-grade son had six English assignments all due at the end of the day. Her second-grade daughter had to build a table that would support a dictionary using only printer paper, cardboard and duct tape. She could barely keep track of their assignments, four different school email accounts, 12 Google livestreams, and her own worries as she transitioned to a new job while working from home.

“I was feeling like a failure. I thought, ‘I just can’t do this,’” she said.

She posted a message on a private Parent Teacher Organization group on Facebook, asking: “Is anyone else having a hard time keeping up with all of this?”

She added: “My entire Facebook feed is nothing but photos of happy, organized families, sitting together at the kitchen table doing classwork and I can NOT relate.” The post immediately got more than 70 replies, most of them supportive, and earned her a call from a slightly irritated school principal, she said. Within days, the district told teachers to no longer assign work with a daily deadline.

Illig believes she ruffled some feathers, but she doesn’t regret it.

“It’s just a terrible situation and we’re all trying to adapt to and survive.”

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*Associated Press* writers Nicole Winfield in Rome, Colleen Barry in Milan and Jamey Keaten in Geneva contributed to this report.



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