

How pandemic-weary parents can recharge and connect with children without a vacation

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Reinforcing the message that children are worthy and loved does not depend on planning blockbuster events. Credit: Pexels/Keira Burton

As students and families in [some parts of Canada](#) approach [their spring breaks](#), busy parents and caregivers everywhere may be reminded of the [COVID-19 pandemic's two-year anniversary of March 13, 2020](#).

On this day, the Canadian government issued [warnings against all international travel](#). That was soon followed by [school closures across](#)

[Canada](#) and globally.

While some families who can afford vacations or for parents to take time off work [may be pushing for a getaway](#), this year many parents are likely looking for ways to rest and rejuvenate from the [parental burnout](#) that two years of pandemic parenting might have brought.

Since the pandemic erupted, [working parents](#) have been balancing their work and their [children's](#) intermittent bouts of virtual learning, along with the many other parenting challenges.

This balancing act has been one that many mothers in particular have had to grapple with, all while also shouldering the lion's share of [domestic responsibilities](#).

Busy and exhausted parents can recharge and connect with their children by prioritizing rest and sleep, as well as cultivating daily moments and experiences for sharing belonging and love.

Pandemic slowdown and burnout

At the beginning of the pandemic, those whose work wasn't accelerated by pandemic needs slowed down, some took moments to pause and reflect and some even took up [new skills](#).

In contrast, demands on time and energy of essential workers, coupled with threats to their safety and health, led to high rates [of burnout](#) and [staff shortages](#).

The start of online schooling and lockdowns and the [blurring of home, school and work life balance](#) brought [considerable stress for many families](#). Indeed, these stressors are disproportionately higher for racialized communities who face ongoing and [intersecting inequities](#)

amid the pandemic and other urgent global crises.

Considering ways to slow down, restore and take seriously our breaks is an important part of recovering from some of the grief and damage of these times.

Benefits of breaks

For adults, the [benefits of taking brief mental breaks](#) include reduced mental fatigue, boosted brain function and longer on-task behavior.

For children, [the benefits](#) of taking a break at home or [in the classroom](#) also contribute to increases in cognitive functioning and on-task behavior.

The benefits of taking a break also fulfill some of our [basic needs that underlie human motivation](#).

Hierarchy of needs

According to [American psychologist Abraham Maslow](#), our "higher-level" needs such as the need for love, belonging and esteem, and mental stimulation cannot be met until our lower-level physiological needs—such as for sleep, food and shelter—are met.

[When people's basic needs aren't met](#) their ability to actively participate in learning is significantly reduced. Psychologist Jacob Ham, director of the Center for Child Trauma and Resilience in New York, explains that faced with [basic needs](#) deprivation and trauma, people's brains go into "survival brain" mode instead of "learning brain" mode.

One fundamental basic need is sleep. A lack of sleep for children has

been found to cause long-lasting adverse effects, including [poorer mental health and well-being and worse quality of life](#).

This is especially important now as the pandemic has had a negative impact on many children's sleep. A recent review of existing research on children and sleep in the pandemic that included studies from Canada and China found that "[sleep duration recommendations were not met in nearly half of healthy children](#)."

Researchers found sleep of school-aged children and adolescents was directly or indirectly affected by dramatic changes in children's lives. However, they also cautioned about drawing firm inferences from studies based on predominantly online surveys of parents.

Parents can aim to protect sleep windows for their children and themselves—and renew commitments to bolstering their own mental health to be in an optimal place to be present in relationships and support their children.

Taking a break while tending to basic needs

We've compiled more ways that busy parents can recharge themselves along with their children that can help fulfill some families' physiological, safety, belonging and love needs.

1. Spend time in nature

Spending time outdoors that brings a sense of contact with nature has been associated with many physical and mental health benefits. [Research shows](#) that spending 10 minutes three times a week or more outdoors can help lower stress. This break, try to explore local [child-friendly Parks Canada attractions](#) or municipal parks or conservation areas in your area

you may not have visited before.

2. Family activity night

Engaging in a family activity, such as a [family game night](#), can help parents and children work together to generate ideas, solve problems and enjoy the many benefits of spending positive time together as a family. Or consider creating an [indoor camping night](#) (this does not have to involve real camping equipment) or indoor beach visit involving things like rolling out towels, reading age-appropriate books alone or together or playing summery music.

A family activity night can meet many of your children's needs, including safety and security, love and belonging.

3. Get active

The [health benefits of regular physical activity](#) for adults and children are well-documented. March Break is a fantastic opportunity to seize the benefits of the mood and energy boosts that come with physical exertion.

4. Connect daily

Connection is a critical component of [secure and healthy attachment in children](#). When we connect with our children, they feel a sense of belonging and that they matter. Connecting with our children also fulfills our belonging and love needs as parents.

This March Break, [simple yet powerful ways to connect](#) with our children—from cultivating humor to taking the time to look your child in the eye or being present when you do chores together— may reinforce the message that they are worthy and loved. Ways to connect [with school-](#)

[aged and teenage](#) children will vary, but connection remains the fundamental goal.

5. Reduce screen time

Screen time has [increased dramatically during the pandemic](#), especially among younger Canadians.

While [screen use](#) to stay connected with friends or family has been important in the pandemic and has been part of family survival strategies, some [of the negative consequences of screen time include time taken away from healthier habits](#).

This March Break, making a conscious effort to ensure everyone gets a little more rest and allows their [minds to wander](#) and bodies to enjoy the outdoors or physical games together even if just for a short [time](#). This can help give your brain the break it needs, and also create more space to be present with each other.

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