

Enforced home time magnifies the good and bad in family life

Brad and Arynn Abercrombie and their five kids are isolating, but not isolated.

Brad, employed in the oil and gas industry, is working from home. Their four daughters have adjusted to online learning through Elk Island Catholic Schools – although they wish they could go to school, or a mall, and see their friends other than through videochats.

However, the social isolation and school closures due to COVID-19 have been helpful for their four-year-old son, Dax. He has kidney disease and is taking immune suppression drugs, so he's much more susceptible to germs and illness. He's healthy now even after an unsuccessful transplant in December, with a kidney from his father. They're waiting for the COVID crisis to abate to take the next steps.

Prior to the pandemic, the Abercrombies had a busy schedule filled with work, school and lots of visits with family and friends – many of them through Resurrection Parish. Since then, their lives have slowed down and their time for family and faith connections has ramped up.

"We're actually finding it kind of just a little reprieve, I guess, from the busy life that we're used to. We're living in what I'm calling our happy little bubble here," said Arynn, a stay-at-home mom.

"We've had more time together to pray as a family, at home. I've always wanted to start our day with morning prayer, but the kids would get on the bus at 7:20, so it was too early. It never happened. Now we do that every day. We read the Gospel reading every day. We say the Angelus at lunchtime every day. So that part has been really positive. It's kind of a give-take," Arynn said.

"We're taking this time, the sacrifices that we have to make by staying home and staying isolated, as a time to grow together as a family, as a time to grow together in faith with our increased prayer. We're just trying to see the blessings in this time. To me, that's the slowed down pace and more family time."

The Abercrombies consider themselves lucky. Other families are finding life a lot tougher.

Counsellors say that spending more time together at home can be critical, depending on the state of the family. It may draw families closer by finding greater connection to each other, or further apart.



Delicia Adams

“We’re just noticing almost like an amplification, or sometimes an exacerbation, of some of the issues that are already going on in their lives,” said Delicia Adams, a family counsellor with Catholic Social Services in Red Deer, which serves a large part of central Alberta. “COVID-19 really kind of amplifies that.”

Overall, CSS reports that Counselling Red Deer alone has seen a substantial increase in the number of sessions over the last six weeks. Its two counsellors had 208 sessions – face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations – with clients from February 1 to May 21. The number of sessions is comparable to last year, but the workload has increased. This year Counselling Red Deer has two active counsellors instead of three.

The exact numbers are confidential for privacy reasons, but Adams herself had nearly double the number of clients in March 2020, when the virus was first hit Alberta, that she had in March 2019.

COVID Survival Tips

- ▶ Take time for yourself, even in a busy family, especially if you have others depending on you. Spend five minutes in the bathroom for a personal break and close the door if at all possible.
- ▶ Take stock of what COVID-19 has affected and how roles have changed in the family, from employment to schooling to child care, family, friends and faith life.
- ▶ Set one to two goals that you'd like to achieve during this time of self-isolation. It may be as simple as organizing the closet or finding ways to improve your marriage or deepening your relationship with God. Ask: How can I progressively move forward so I can come out of this better than when I went in?
- ▶ Recognize who you are as person and ask yourself what will refresh you if you're feeling drained and overwhelmed. It might be going for a walk in the neighbourhood if you love nature, or trying a home workout or developing a new skill like baking.
- ▶ Be as honest, age appropriate and reassuring as you can when children ask about COVID-19. Set small, achievable goals. With younger kids, admit you're not sure when this all going to end, but assure them that you'll get through it together. Then suggest something they might enjoy doing. Have them look forward to something.
- ▶ Around children, be mindful of adult conversations and sources of information, such as TV news, that are within earshot.
- ▶ If you've tried different scenarios, done your best thinking, and reached out to others for support and still not seeing changes, then reach out to CSS or a similar agency for support
- ▶ Source: *Delicia Adams, family counsellor, Catholic Social Services*

Although those sessions can't be directly linked to

the effects of COVID-19, anecdotally Adam said her clients are coming to her with issues related to the outbreak. Issues of loneliness, anxiety, depression, unemployment, finances, child care and family dynamics are coming to the forefront. In many cases, whatever issues were present before have become more acute.

Since the COVID outbreak, Adams said her counselling sessions are over the phone or videoconferencing, with some of her clients wanting more therapy, others less.

“There have been others who found it challenging just not being able to get out and socialize with people, or being with their family members 24-7, or having significant changes to their work and now they’re maybe full-time parenting. Some people really want to come in for therapy, and other people just know what they need and they need a little bit of distancing for a time.”

In addition, children will deal with situations like COVID-19 differently than adults.

“Parents are maybe feeling a bit stressed or overwhelmed by trying to play both roles of parent and teacher,” Adams said. “That can be hard for also the children. The kids are now being parented 24-7. The kids also don’t get the break of being able to go to school, be around other adults, be around their friends, just be able to be silly, just kind of do their own thing.”

Adams said it’s important to set goals and look forward. Parents should also be mindful of their conversations and worries in front of children, and answer any questions as best they can even if there’s no answer everyone’s question: When will the COVID-19 end?

“We try to convey the tenets of our faith, that things happen for a reason,” Brad Abercrombie explained. “We may not understand the reasons and we may think they’re bad, but God’s hand is at work.”

“I don’t have the answers myself. I struggle with that myself. I don’t need to know all the answers. That’s been a bit of a test of my faith in the last year with both the unsuccessful kidney transplant and everything you see on the news with COVID and the seemingly unnecessary death and pain that people are going through.”

If there’s an “upside” to COVID-19, it’s the chance for families to slow down, take stock and find what Adams calls the “connectiveness” to each other.

“Fortunately, for the people that I’ve been working with – and also for a lot of my colleagues too – it seems to be pulling people closer together. And that was my hope, actually, going into this,” she said.

“It can afford the ability to really clarify some of their values or their priorities, kind of strip things down to the bare minimum and say OK, what is

it that I actually value? What's most important?

"Human nature is that, typically, when we're going through a crisis or things are really challenging, sometimes that's when we get the most clarity about things. How can I live my life differently coming out of this, whether that's showing more gratitude, reaching out to more people, being more helpful, spending more time with family and friends in meaningful ways, turning off the TV and turning off electronics, developing my skills."

The Abercrombies seem to have found that sweet spot.

"We may not be your typical representative family in that we've actually quite enjoyed the so-called isolation," Brad said. "We can do with less of everything both materially and being busy."

"It's definitely different having to stay home, having to worry about if our groceries are carrying the virus, if the pharmacist is going to breathe on us when we go get a prescription," Aryn said. "But I think just finding the blessings amidst the troubling times. I think people are just more relaxed and not as stressed about school and work. We've actually gotten along really well."

Their biggest worry is their son's health. Dax is stable now. And even if they found a kidney donor, Alberta Health Services' Living Donor Services shut down, and elective surgeries such as Dax's transplant are considered non-essential.

Aryn said her biggest stressor is the relaunch of businesses – schools, in particular — and the potential entry of COVID-19 or any other germs or viruses into their home.

"We really tried, during our transplant experience and now, to really just live the idea that God does have a handle on things. Things are happening for a reason, for a purpose," Aryn said.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, "I'd like to find ways to slow down life, kind of the way it is now," Aryn said. "I don't think we can keep this pace, but maybe there's some things that we can do to slow things down a bit once regular life picks back up again."

Aryn said the pandemic has been a teaching tool for their family. The biggest lesson so far: "Just really trusting in the Lord. Trusting that there's a plan through all of this and that we're going to be OK."