Parenting in a pandemic is hard, but the best thing about lockdown is looking after a baby

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A baby is that rare sort of human individual who can actually learn new things while trapped in a small private home

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 ‘Very few people ... when they decided to have kids, considered what it might be like if they had them around while being forced to work from home during a pandemic.’ Photograph: Simon Dannhauer/Alamy Stock Photo

When we first went into lockdown, I suppose I thought: well this I could deal with perfectly well, if it wasn’t for the baby.

Obviously not being able to leave the house for months except to buy groceries and exercise isn’t something I would *choose*. But if I didn’t have the baby, this would be fine. I could rewatch all The Sopranos, work my way through that list of Korean films my friend Camille sent me. Play video games. I could bake more, like everyone else is; brew my own beer, spend every evening cooking elaborate meals.

I could find myself suddenly in the sort of situation my friend David is in: on a temporary teaching contract at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, having spent most of the year lodging in a small room, but now – with everyone else away – has been gifted full run of a mansion once occupied by the archbishop of Canterbury. Life would become one endless rained-off holiday.

But not for me … because of the baby.

 It is not hard to see why, for so many people, lockdown has provided ample opportunity to start resenting the existence of their children. Very few people, it turns out, when they decided to have kids, considered what it might be like if they had them around while being forced to work from home during a pandemic.

Both my partner and I work – her maternity leave actually ended the literal week lockdown started; our son was *supposed* to start nursery – so what this means for us is that we now split work and childcare roughly 50/50 down the middle of the day, minding the boy for increasingly frazzled chunks as we try desperately to stay on top of everything else; attempting somehow to replace the rich playtime schedule he used to enjoy, in the world before the disaster.

The pressure is real, and intense – and there is every reason to suppose that I, as his dad, am getting off relatively lightly. Consider the trend academic journal editors have noted, that women under quarantine are [submitting fewer papers](https://www.thelily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/).

The burden of care work continues to fall disproportionately on women. Even in our relatively egalitarian household, my partner is the one who has to be up in the night with the lad to feed and rock him back to sleep.

But now I want to say something wild, and shocking. Something dangerous, even – something that I’m sure almost everyone reading this is bound to hate me for asserting. Actually, the best thing about lockdown is looking after a baby.

The reason for this is really very simple. For me – and I imagine for most of you – every lockdown day is fundamentally the same. Every day, the same routine, and so every day bleeds into one.

Last year, a Norwegian island called Sommarøy – which is the sort of place where it’s perpetual daylight in summer and perpetual darkness during winter – announced as a sort of publicity stunt that [they were going to abolish time](https://theoutline.com/post/7647/can-we-abolish-time?zd=2&zi=grtxyaxz).

Now, this abolition appears to have been extended across the whole world.

The only difference is that, while the Sommarøy Time-Free Zone Campaign imagined the end of time as a sort of liberation (you could have a coffee on the beach at 2 am!), we, under lockdown, have become slaves to a flat clock, living the same day over and over again. The only exception, of course, is if things are even worse – if you or someone you love gets sick, or loses their job – if the disaster comes to you directly.

But a baby, by contrast, is that rare sort of human individual who can actually *learn new things* while trapped in a small private home. When lockdown started, our son was eight months old. He could babble, but he couldn’t say any words. He could sort of walk if you held his hands, but not very well. He could sit up, but not by himself; he couldn’t really stand.

The world is opening up for him – even the tiny, restricted world of our home.

We tried to read him books, but he was never really very interested, all he ever wanted to do was suck the sides. He was a terrible sleeper and could basically only be coaxed to do it if he was in his buggy, or lying on his mother.

But now, the baby is nine months old. He can say the word “cat”, which he typically does while literally running after the cat, as he loosely clutches one of our fingers. He can sit up fluently and haul himself up into a standing position using the furniture, which he has also started to use to coast independently about.

He’s mostly lost interest in his train and now much prefers banging and stacking wooden bricks. He also has a little Casio keyboard, which he has somehow figured out how to hack so it can play piano and organ sounds simultaneously. He is now so into books that he will literally *demand* to be read them, and has very quickly mastered all the flaps in both Dear Zoo and Where’s Spot?

He becomes more of a little person every day. The world is opening up for him – even the tiny, restricted world of our home. It is now somewhere in which he is clearly capable of recognising concepts and categories (such as “cat”), in which he has an obvious sense of his own agency. Another development has been that we were forced to get him his own remote control, to distract him from chewing the real ones. He now diligently points it at the TV, sure that something might happen if he figures out how to press the buttons right.

Of course the baby is incredibly hard work – and I’m sure if you have kids, they’re absolutely terrible in their own ways too. But during lockdown, he gives us back something incalculably valuable, in return for our care: a reminder that there might still be some progress, that the endless sameness we would otherwise exist under might one day give way to something else.

I love you, mate. As you continue to talk, as you continue to walk – as one day, who knows, you might even learn somehow to sleep.

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