

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Some struggles, many silver linings for families at home



The Cook-Wolf/Harris pod, from left: Cathy Harris, Ellie Cook, Maura Wolf, Riley Harris, Richard Harris, and Bodhi Harris.

Photo provided

By Sophie Braccini

For over two months families with young children in Lamorinda, like in many places all over the planet, have been forced to pivot and adapt to new dynamics and new ways to teach their children. The routine disruption was hard at first for the little ones. It was particularly challenging for students with special needs. But after several weeks, new social and emotional skills emerged, coping mechanisms developed, and as parents prepare for the summer, some of the new-found habits should be here to stay.

Carrie Rodrigues, a parent of a first- and third-grader at Burton Valley Elementary School, found it very hard to see her children struggle during the first few weeks of the confinement. "There were a lot of tears and tantrums," she remembered. As a school psychologist for the Piedmont schools she also saw how many parents struggled to get their own kids to work. "Some parents were thriving," she said, "but most were struggling, having to cope with major disruption of their work, while the children exhibited more worries, anxiety, and refusal."

Maura Wolf, who lives in Moraga, teaches leadership at Saint Mary's College and co-leads the startup Next Move, found herself with more work during the last two months while having her two children at home: a teenager and a fourth-grader. Her strategy was to get up very early in the morning, get work done before the children got up, and not engage with them between 7 and 11 p.m. Wolf, her husband and the children decided to live in a pod with their longtime next-door friends, the Harrises, which provided support on many levels.

Rodrigues noted that our high achieving culture led some parents to feel they were failing, and becoming hard on themselves. As an early-intervention specialist, she acknowledged that the time was particularly hard for special needs children. "Parents were concerned that their child was already behind and that valuable time was lost," she said. Some were faced with difficult behaviors at home and for them it was now 24/7, with no respite.

Dr. David Matz, a Lafayette psychologist who continued to see clients on Zoom, confirmed that he saw a wide range of situations, with, for the most part, people

adapting quickly. "What does not kill us makes us stronger," he said. He discussed the feeling of loss of control with some parents, and helped them recognize what they still had control over. Matz believes that this sort of hardship can be good for kids, if provided with the warmth and the confidence they need.

And indeed, many silver linings began to shine through. Several parents enjoyed discovering their children's learning styles. Rodrigues noticed her son needed movement to learn and used a standing desk and a little treadmill for him. Moraga dad Gary Hill took over rapidly and happily the teacher's role for his third-grader, understanding the way his son Luca's brain works and embracing the process. The Cook-Wolf and Harris' pod became institutionalized for both parents and children as they pooled their resources.

Working with the Orinda Union School District, Mindful Littles provided weekly lessons to third-graders to support the emotional health of the children. Lisa Sadikman who is one of the group's leaders used mindfulness practices at home, focusing on breath practices, using it as an anchor to find peace within, teaching her daughter to recognize emotions and feelings, and how to regulate them.

Gary Hill's wife, Joanna, who is a family therapist, talked about opening up to the many feelings adults as well as children were having. "When I have the opportunity to shed tears, I take it," she said, "When kids need to express frustration, I encourage it. They rebound quickly, as do I."

Most everyone said that one of the biggest benefits they rediscovered over the last two months was the healing power of nature. "What can we find in our environment to anchor us?" asked Rodrigues. "The tree outside, the feel of the wind. There is an opportunity to reorient and see clearly what is in front of us." Matz added that this slowing down might be an opportunity for some to reevaluate life choices.

The desire to embrace a slower pace was also expressed by parents who feel grateful to have dropped many of their social commitments. Sadikman, who used to say yes to everything, appreciated the break. She said she became more connected and attuned to her children and wanted to continue being that way. J. Hill on the other end decided to practice self-

compassion and forgiveness for the times when she was not perfect at every aspects of parenting.

There were many silver linings from the children's perspective as well. They enjoyed eating lunch with their parents, getting done earlier with school, having free time with family – playing board games, video games and spending more time with siblings. Some discovered new skills such as Riley Harris who created an online business reading to K and first-graders. Wolf said her children got much better at self-managing their lives, and expanded their digital media skills.

Parents are now entering a different summer. Rodrigues recommends high achievers not to worry about next year. She believes that students will be assessed and supported when returning to school. Educators will also focus on the emotional health of the children and practice "trauma-informed-education" – something almost no one has ever dealt with before. The recommendation for the summer is to just read 30 minutes a day, and include a lot of fun, creative and unstructured play, taking the pressure off. "This is an opportunity to get back to free play, the teachers will make up for the lost learning," Rodrigues concluded.

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