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[On Parenting](#)

## A pandemic tradition worth keeping: Walking together



(Lia Tin for The Washington Post)

By Galadriel Watson

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A frenzied pace — that is how Ellie Pojarska describes her family’s pre-pandemic life. She and her husband commuted to their jobs full-time, their preteen daughter kept super busy in dance classes, and their teenage son split his time among piano, sax and tennis lessons, jazz band and the tennis team. The Belmont, Calif., family’s evenings were a jumble of pickups and drop-offs.

When the pandemic hit, that stopped. Suddenly, the frenzy was gone.

“We were worried that they weren’t getting enough exercise,” says Pojarska, 44, “and spending so much time in front of Zoom.” Although Pojarska still leaves the house to teach high school (to both in-person and online students), her husband, Rado Iliev, 42, who works for a tech company, temporarily switched to working from home. With less commute time and after-school activities canceled, “we started to walk.” All of them, together.

The family has come to embrace this daily activity, which lasts about an hour at a time. The kids — Raya, 11, and Sava, 15 — “now demand the walks even when sometimes my husband and I feel too tired at the end of a long day,” Pojarska says, adding that these outings have become vital to her family’s sanity.

Her advice: “More people need to do it.”



From left, Sava Iliev, Rado Iliev, Ellie Pojarska and Raya Iliev at the end of their street, where they start all of their walks. (Assad Rajani)

### **Get moving**

Experts agree that family walks are valuable, for many reasons.

“One outcome of this covid pandemic has been the increased recognition and acknowledgment of the importance of physical activity and the importance of outdoor play for children and youth,” says Guy Faulkner, a professor of kinesiology at the University of British Columbia and principal investigator at its Population Physical Activity Lab.

For the past year, children’s activity options have been limited, with sports, camps and other activities curtailed, but family walks are a solution worth hanging onto even after we return to something looking more like normal, Faulkner says. “It doesn’t require equipment. It doesn’t cost any money, and you can do it wherever you live if the environment is safe and appealing.”

Studies have shown many [physical benefits](#): For example, walking can help reduce people’s risk for heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes and some cancers. Even walks as short as [three minutes](#) can help improve the health and metabolism of children. [Commuting to school](#) on one’s own power, including by foot, is associated with lower rates of unhealthy weights in children.

Nature-filled locations — whether green spaces like parks or blue spaces like lakeside trails — can affect both [body and mind](#), such as reducing the risk of issues like strokes and improving sleep quality and life satisfaction. A [walk in a park](#) can reduce stress hormones and symptoms of anxiety and depression. The more green space there is around a [school](#), the less the students feel stressed and mentally fatigued. During the [pandemic](#), blue and green spaces have helped people feel more positive. Even the [sounds of nature](#) lower stress and elicit positive emotions.

However, don’t think a walk is useless if it cannot be done in a natural setting. An urban one will do, too. “I think benefits are in any environment, really,” Faulkner says. “Children develop their wayfaring, navigation skills, and their attachment to the neighborhood can also increase.”

In fact, when the pandemic initially shut down the trail near Pojarska’s home, the family explored the streets of their neighborhood, “which we kind of knew, but it turns out not really,” Pojarska says. “We have different routes now, and we have names for the routes.”

### **The ties that bind**

The biggest perk for Pojarska, though, is the closeness her family has found on their walks. “We actually talk so much more than we ever did before,” she says. “We don’t pull out our phone when we’re walking, which is always the danger at home.”

Gloria González-López, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, says family walks are a great way to “trigger different kinds of conversations” and to do some bonding that “doesn’t have to be too intense.”

For example, conversation may be instigated by the weather, by noticing a tree, by seeing dogs play — which then leads into memories, or reminders of your current life, of thoughts about the future. This kind of casual interaction is a way to develop, nourish and renew ties between family members. “Family walks give us a chance to connect with our family in creative ways.”

Pojarska agrees that the time together is special. She remembers one incident in which her son was strolling ahead with his father, and then “walked back to where his sister and I were and was like, ‘Okay, now it’s my Mommy time. You go and talk to Daddy.’ ”

She was touched. “Wow,” she recalls thinking. “He needs Mommy time!”

This strong connection can continue far into the future. As a child, González-López went for walks with her own parents and siblings. She says, “I actually get teary-eyed when thinking about it because I treasure those moments.”

### **How to make it happen**

With kids bored and restless, it may be easy to introduce family walks. “They’ve reached a certain threshold where I think many kids actually do want to go outside,” Faulkner says.

To make the outing even more enticing, you can “bring a game into the equation.” For example, Faulkner and his family throw a die when they come to intersections. “If it’s one or two, we turn left. Three or four, stay straight. Five or six, turn right.”

You could try your hand at [geocaching](#), a treasure hunt that involves using technology to find hidden objects. Faulkner and his family also searched for [Pokémon](#) back when the game Pokémon Go was popular. And you might want to set limits on indoor screen time to enhance the appeal of fresh air.

Of course, there may be challenges. Parents’ work schedules may give them little time to participate — especially as remote workers get vaccinated and head back to the office. As Faulkner mentioned, some places may not feel safe. A stroll beside a noisy, polluting freeway may not be ideal. People with physical disabilities may have to select routes that allow for wheelchairs or walkers. In some cases, a board game or a baking session together would be a good alternative.

But for those who can take it on, a family walk is a great activity. “Heading outside is good for you, it’s healthy for you, it gets your mind off of being isolated,” says Kenneth Rubin, a professor and “distinguished scholar-teacher” of human development and quantitative methodology at the University of Maryland. “Everybody’s going to feel all the better for it.”

A walker herself, González-López enjoys passing and saying hello to fellow pedestrians, including families. The pandemic is incredibly challenging, she says, but getting out on foot with loved ones is “probably one of the blessings in disguise.”

But how can you hang onto this precious activity as the world restarts, rather than sliding back into unwelcome routines? Try [establishing boundaries](#) you are not willing to cross (for example, each child will sign up for only one extracurricular activity at a time) or setting up digital reminders. Place [triggers in highly visible spots](#), such as keeping your family’s walking shoes handy at the door; this will prompt you, plus make the habit even easier.

As for Pojarska's family, after-school activities are gradually restarting. Will they be able to preserve the family walks once life returns to full swing? "I don't know!" Pojarska says. "We hope. We've talked about it. We hope we can keep it going."

*Watson is a writer and comics artist and author of children's books such as "[Running Wild](#)."*