

Plight of a Single Father

When it comes to sharing my story of how I've dealt with the COVID-19 global pandemic, I honestly can't even think where to start. When in doubt, always start from the beginning, that's what my grandfather uses to tell me. To begin, let me tell you a little about myself, I am a single father of two amazing boys, James he's my oldest, he's twelve years old and autistic (high functioning), Connor, he's my youngest and a handful, he's eight now. We've been on our own and doing well for about 5 years when COVID came around and everything just got hard.

Saying we're starting from the beginning may be slightly misleading, because this story's beginning really started for me a month prior to the pandemic starting in the United States. One unassuming Saturday morning I woke up to my son's fighting, which if you have boys, you know isn't that rare of an event. I had to punish them for this but also had an appointment for a haircut in less than an hour. Quickly coming up with a punishment I just took my son's PlayStation from his room and asked him to read a book and think why he shouldn't pick fights with his brother. I left to get my haircut and halfway through my phone starts blowing up. I assume this is work or something of the like but after three or four calls back-to-back I had to stop the haircut and take the call. I look at my phone and I see it's my son James calling me, I assume he just wants to ask if he's off punishment. I answer the call expecting to hear his voice and low and behold I get greeted with "This is Officer Ramirez and we're responding to an emergency call at your home". Luckily the barber was less than 5 minutes from my house, and I rushed over as quick as possible. I asked the officer what was happening, he proceeded to inform me that my son had called 911 to report that I had taken his PlayStation and they were legally required to respond to these calls and had to inform CPS. A storm of panic washed over me; I had never thought that leaving my sons to their own devices for thirty minutes to get a haircut would have caused so much havoc. Within days I was contacted by a detective and a CPS worker, both informed me that apparently this was an overreaction from the officer and did not need to escalate to this point but would still technically be on file against me from this point.

I know you're probably wondering, "what does this have to do with the pandemic". Well up to this point in my son's life I had never left them on their own for more than 20-30 minutes at a time. When schools first shut down, my entire support structure was gone. I was working in clinical research and was not only considered essential but was heavily pressured not to even reduce my hours. With great disdain from my employer, I had to take my first two weeks of pandemic as leave, and I honestly had no idea if I was going back to work. The fiscal strain aside the idea of losing all the things I had worked hard to establish as a norm was mentally crushing me daily.

I had always been close to the neighbors, specifically a little old lady names Annette. Thank god for Annette. One day she came by, we had a practice of exchanging meals and baked goods, I suppose she could see the stress on me. She suddenly hugged me and asked softly, "is everything alright, Hunny". Very few times in my life have I cried in front of anyone, this was a moment where my body took over and I broke apart, not broke down, I broke apart into tiny little pieces of nothing sobbing in this barely more than a stranger's arms. I slipped it all out and she let me talk for hours it seemed. At the end she smirked and asked me such a strange question. "Ryan, you know im retired. Don't you?". I don't know if it was my upbringing or just my stubborn ways of being alone for the last 5 years, the thought to ask for help hadn't even crossed my mind. Me

and Annette spent the next few days working out the specifics of how my sons could stay at home and be watched over by her. She had me set up cameras throughout the house that she could watch when she had to go next door and was always available at a moments notice. She helped me spread word around the neighbors and next thing I knew I had a system of individuals looking out for my boys daily. This was the only thing that gave me the confidence to even consider going back to work.

I ended up negotiating for a reduced hour schedule to spend more time at home. But all through the pandemic I still haven't lost the fear that because of that one-time James decided to call 911 if anyone found out that I had a neighbor watching my sons would they be taken from me. I woke up in cold sweats have had stress dreams and honestly can't come close to describing the mental toll I've felt through all this.

This was my first 2 months of the pandemic; I wish I could say that things have gotten better since. I've lost friends and loved once since then had a mental breakdown and left my job. Re-assessed my entire life and took on a much less paying but less stressful job.

It hasn't all been doom and gloom though. Over December 2020 to January 2021, I met the love of my life, restarted school, and restructured my entire life's direction. There is a silver lining there, but this is one dark cloud I wish never came around.