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# Managing Work and Family: The Challenge

By Bonnie Michaels

Many parents - men and women - have been very successful in coordinating their work and family responsibilities. Principles such as strategic planning, organizational systems and communication skills that are traditionally practiced in a business setting can prove to be equally as effective in managing family life.

As a parent, these principles can contribute to successful parenting. And successful parenting can carry over to successful work habits and productivity; less absenteeism, tardiness, stress and distractions. You can look at your present situation, evaluate your options and find creative ways to balance your family and work responsibilities - and still have time left over to take care of your own needs!

You may also need to learn not to feel guilty about having a career. You should recognize that it's important for you to have a career and that, even if you're not home all day every day, your children can develop into happy, confident, independent adults. The following will help you choose strategies and ideas that other parents have used to effectively meet the challenge of managing career and family responsibilities.

### What Can You Do?

Look at your life as a whole:

- Plan ahead
- Develop resources and back-up resources
- Set priorities
- Communicate effectively with your child, your child's caregiver or teachers, back-ups and supports
- Make time for yourself

Make it policy to always have a back-up plan. Knowing you have at least one option will help you feel in control, even at the worst times. When you hit on a good alternative, think of one more, even if it's a "choice of last resort." For instance, if your child comes down with the flu, your back-up plan may involve a neighbor or relative who's available on short notice to stay with the child. But in the event that person isn't available the day you have an important presentation to a prospective client, you should research sick child care centers and know what other options are available.

Keep a sense of humor and talk to other parents, colleagues at work, neighbors, or women that you meet through professional organizations. You aren't alone, nor are you the only one dealing with these responsibilities - even if it sometimes feels that way.

### Feeling Guilty Doesn't Help Anyone

Some parents feel guilty because they think that if they work, their children won't be happy or develop into responsible adults. It's important to remember that the qualities and values you want to instill in your children can be taught and reinforced whether or not you are working outside the home. Those qualities include: security, trust, sense of mastery, competence, humor and curiosity. It's also not the quantity of time, but the quality and sensitivity of interaction that make a difference to your child. When we think of good parents, we often think of the traditional mother figure who stayed home, baked bread, and cooked a full dinner seven nights a week. Well, no one has yet proven that staying home and baking bread contributes to a child's development in any way!

Some tips to help you eliminate those occasional feelings of guilt include the following:

- Focus on the positive things you are doing for your child, such as setting an example for independence and growth.
- View your relationship with your child's caregiver(s) like that of a family member. Insist on input and feedback on your child's development.
- Involve yourself in your child's life: arrange for school visits, invite your child's friends for an overnight visit. Set up special times or outings so you can find out what your child is learning, thinking and feeling. Keep the conversations light, but listen to what your child has to say.
- Remember, your attitudes affect your child. A calm and confident attitude has a very positive effect on your child's development.

It's not only children that can make parents feel enormous guilt. Elders can also create these guilt feelings when they say "you never come to see me" or "I haven't heard from you in so long." With elders, helping them get what they need is an important part of dealing with the guilt. What are they really trying to say to you? Elders often spend a great deal of time indoors alone. They are probably saying they're lonely. If you can't visit them, a cheerful conversation may raise their spirits. Letting them know you care is important even if you can't be there in person.

Remember to look at the big picture, look at what you are doing that is good. If you have doubts, talk with a counselor.

## Separating the "Work Self" from the "Home Self"

In the 1989 book *Children of Fast Track Parents*, Andree Aelion Brooks discusses the two different sides of ourselves that we must develop, that of the career person and that of the parent. Sometimes these two roles are contradictory. For example, in the office we may be critical of errors made by our subordinates, but at home we need to be tolerant of our child's mistakes. At work we constantly drive ourselves to work quickly and efficiently, while at home we often need to step back, relax and just enjoy the moment. We set high standards at work for ourselves and others, but at home there needs to be room for individuals to grow, develop and make mistakes.

Keeping these ideas paramount will be very helpful in managing your home life. When you need to get help from family members to get chores done, you can defeat your purpose by being too much of a perfectionist and criticizing others' efforts. Getting the job done is important, but showing family members you trust them and appreciate their efforts will not only get the chores done, it will create a positive learning experience for all involved.

## Get Organized

One of the most important parts of delegation is motivating your helpers. Think about how a good manager motivates her subordinates to help, and then think about how you can transfer those skills to delegation at home. Each member of your family has a different "hot button": knowing what is important to each of them will help you find creative ways of getting things done. For example, try games, prizes, contests, contracts, or races. By keeping a sense of humor, you can make otherwise tedious chores fun, and you'll get more participation from family members. Short-term it may take a little more effort on your part, but long-term it will work toward everyone's benefit.

Here are some pointers to help you get organized:

- Prioritize: Decide what really needs to be done. Once you make a decision, don't dwell on the other tasks you've put aside. Pace yourself. Keep your focus on one

activity instead of many.

- Use different means to get the job done: delegate, exchange chores with others (friends, neighbors and relatives), find ways to save your energy, and, if your financial position permits, hire outside help.
- Plan ahead. Develop back-up systems for sick days, vacation days, unexpected events. Check out resources available to you and your child: community groups, churches/synagogues, women's organizations, self-help groups, day care centers, after school programs. Keep a list of who you can call on for what.

## Communicate with Confidence

Skillful, effective communication is very important. Some ideas to help you include the following:

### With Your Children:

- Use probing skills to find out more about your child's day, ask what's important, how he/she feels about school, caregivers, friends and himself/herself.
- Learn to recognize body language that indicates your child is upset or wants to say something to you.
- Use decoding skills to find out what is really on your child's mind. Use clear language to make sure you both understand what is being said.
- Give instructions in a manner that your child understands. Get clarification. Practice instructions that you might give in an emergency.

### With Elders:

- Use the same probing skills you use on others to find out about their day.
- Find positive ways of giving feedback when there are many grievances. Find ways you can help them to get what they need; work for understanding.
- Read some background material on aging to better understand about this period of development.
- Above all, have patience and a sense of humor. It will keep things in perspective.

### With Spouse

- Find caring ways of saying things.
- Begins by discussing things you need.
- Be ready to compromise.
- Don't accuse. Use "I feel" statements.

- Keep a sense of humor!

### With Caregivers:

- Communicate your expectations. Don't take anything for granted.
- Give a list of your child's favorite foods, games, toys, medical information.
- Make sure the caregiver knows about major changes in your child's emotional or physical development, or changes in your life that might influence your child.
- Spend a few minutes a day talking to your caregiver to get a clear picture of your child's day, including activities, emotions, appetite.
- Call in once or twice a day when possible. Make sure your caregiver knows where you can be reached if necessary.

### With Supervisors:

- Negotiate time off for family responsibilities: don't just take it.
- Know your company's policies regarding personal days and flex-time. Make sure your supervisor knows how and when your work will be completed. Have at least one idea or suggestion in mind.
- Set up a win-win situation.
- Keep the *company's* bottom line in mind when negotiating.

## Taking Care of Yourself

It is imperative that you make time for *yourself* daily - even if it's just for a bath or a long phone call to a friend. Time out from responsibilities is extremely important to avoid burn-out. Exercise, take a walk, read a book, watch a movie.

Use your sense of humor to help minimize the stress caused by minor annoyances and frustrations. Some days nothing goes right - just remember, things will change. Also try to involve other adults in your child's life. It will take some of the pressure off you, and will give your child a chance to experience other role models.

Above all, know you are doing the best that you can. Your spirit and courage is everything a child needs for happy and healthy growth.

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