

Balancing Work and Family

A person's work is an important part of life. It gives parents money to take care of children and to provide for their basic needs. For most parents however, returning to work after the birth of a child can be a major challenge. When parents work they need to learn how to balance the needs of their children and family, and the workplace. This tip sheet offers some suggestions to help parents learn to cope with the day-to-day stress of managing work and family responsibilities.

COMMON PROBLEMS FACED BY WORKING PARENTS

Many parents have mixed feelings about the return to work. This is normal. They may feel relieved that their child is old enough to cope without them but may also lack the confidence in being able to return to work. Some parents find the very nature of work stressful or may worry about their ability to earn enough money to support their family. All of these things inevitably affect the family. Stress and worry also make people irritable and exhausted, making everything more difficult to handle.

WHY DO PARENTS EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS JUGGLING WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES?

Inflexible and unreasonably long working hours contribute to workers becoming stressed. Being unable to focus on work due to constant disruptions or poor communication between staff may lead to conflict and dissatisfaction at work. Staff who have little job security or a lack of trust in management are less likely to be loyal and committed to their job. When parents are unhappy, are in conflict or feel uncommitted to their work, work stress can impact negatively on family life.

On the other hand, when parents have difficulties managing children's behaviour, or are in conflict with their partner, work relationships and performance can suffer. If parents arrive at work feeling stressed and upset after a difficult morning, they are more likely to experience conflict at work.

The successful management of work and family roles requires both to be viewed as important. Success in one makes it easier to do well in the other.

HOW TO PREVENT FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES DISRUPTING YOUR WORK

▽ Be organised

Being organised can prevent major stressors from arising. For example, if you have a special place for everything you need you will not waste precious time searching.

▽ Teach children to do things for themselves

The more children learn to look after themselves, the more time a parent will have to get themselves ready. Use praise and encouragement to help children become independent in skills such as dressing, feeding themselves, making their bed, and packing school bags.

▽ Develop a leaving home routine and have some basic ground rules

Children are easier to manage if they can follow a basic routine every day. Wake them up at the same time, get dressed, have breakfast, get ready for school, play

quietly (if there is time), then leave. Keep to the same order and offer praise and encouragement if they cooperate with the morning rules.

▽ Avoid unnecessary conflict before work

Arguments and disagreements with children or partners before work can make the getting ready to leave time a difficult part of the day. Try to avoid disagreements before work, although if your child is misbehaving you will need to follow through with your normal discipline routine.

▽ Avoid scheduling important early morning meetings

Avoid planning early morning meetings or stressful tasks at the start of the working day. These can add unnecessary pressure in being on time. Sometimes with children even the best-laid plans can become unstuck.

▽ Make sure you and your partner work together as a team

A home runs more smoothly when the work is divided fairly and you and your partner work as a parenting team. Write a list of tasks that need to be done and divide them amongst the family members, including all adults and children who are old enough to contribute. Check your budget to see if you can afford to have any housework done by someone else. Make sure you look for practical and emotional support from your partner.

▽ Choose your childcare carefully

Parents have greater peace of mind when they know their child is being well looked after. Choose a quality childcare centre by speaking to other parents and visiting to check it out for yourself. Do the children look happy, busy and not distressed? Do staff spend a lot of time



talking with children? Is the environment safe and clean?

✔ **Make your family your priority**

When you are at home with your children do not spend lots of time thinking about or worrying about work. This is your family time. You will be more productive and successful at work if you can relax and enjoy your children when you are with them.

HOW TO PREVENT STRESS AT WORK AFFECTING HOME LIFE

✔ **Have realistic expectations about your work**

Sometimes parents have unrealistic expectations of themselves in terms of what can be accomplished at work. Get rid of unrealistic expectations or negotiate more realistic and achievable tasks with your supervisor.

✔ **Make your work a priority while you are at work**

Although there will be times when parents cannot help thinking about children when they are at work (e.g. when children are sick, in trouble, or there are special events at school), avoid letting family matters disrupt your concentration often.

✔ **Complete difficult tasks early rather than just before leaving for home**

It is useful to complete stressful or difficult tasks earlier in the day, so that when it is time to leave for home you are less likely to carry stress and worries home with you.

✔ **Be assertive in letting your needs be known and find out about your workplace entitlements**

Make your personal, family and child care needs known to employers and superiors at work. Be prepared to request time off to deal with important family business. Make it your business to know what you are entitled to in the way of carer leave, family leave, flexible working hours, and child care.

✔ **Use commuting time to unwind**

After work, listen to relaxing music or a book on tape. Switch off work and think

about the next set of challenges that lie ahead when you get home.

✔ **Avoid being overcommitted**

Be prepared to reduce unnecessary or extra commitments if you feel you simply have too much to do.

✔ **Ensure you have alternating periods of work and play**

It is essential that you take holiday breaks when they are due. Everyone needs contrast to have a balanced life. Get involved in recreational activities you enjoy on your own and with your family outside work. Make sure you switch off from work. Make your family your priority when on holidays.

✔ **Manage negative thoughts with effective coping statements**

When you are at home, be prepared to interrupt worrying thoughts about work and postpone thinking about work until another place and time. Try to catch unhelpful thoughts, such as *I have so much to do. I can't possibly get it all done. I can't cope with all this work pressure*, and tell yourself something more helpful like *I am at home and off duty. I will think about that tomorrow morning when I will work out a plan to deal with my work load.*

✔ **Develop a relaxing coming home routine**

Much family conflict can be avoided by ensuring that the first hour after the arrival home from work is pleasant. Greet your partner and your children in a

FOR FURTHER HELP See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet or contact:

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loving and caring manner. Hug or kiss them and ask about their day and show an interest in what they say. Get changed out of work clothes and then switch onto helping out with the necessary tasks.

KEY STEPS

How to prevent family from disrupting work:

- **Be organised.**
- **Teach children to do things for themselves.**
- **Develop a leaving home routine and have some basic ground rules.**
- **Avoid unnecessary conflict before work.**
- **Avoid scheduling important early morning meetings.**
- **Make sure you and your partner work together as a team.**
- **Choose quality childcare.**
- **Make family your priority when you are with them.**

How to prevent stress at work affecting home life:

- **Have realistic expectations about your work.**
 - **Make your work a priority while you are at work.**
 - **Complete difficult tasks early rather than just before leaving for home.**
 - **Be assertive in letting your needs be known and find out about workplace entitlements.**
 - **Use commuting time to unwind.**
 - **Avoid being overcommitted.**
 - **Ensure you have alternating periods of work and play.**
 - **Manage negative thoughts with effective coping statements.**
 - **Develop a relaxing coming home routine.**
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