

# *Time Management Tips for Working Parents*

## **Overview**

How to set up smooth-running household routines and teach children to use time efficiently.

- Managing your at-home time
- Simplifying the morning rush
- Teaching your child how to plan and spend time

Being a parent and having a career are both richly rewarding experiences, but doing them simultaneously means juggling two jobs that are demanding, time consuming, and never ending. By learning to plan your own time and to delegate tasks at home, you can help to cultivate each child's sense of independence and self-worth and create more "family time."

## **Managing your at-home time**

- *Use a single calendar for everyone's activities, and keep it in a convenient place.* This will help everyone see what's happening in the days and weeks ahead. Use a different colored marker for each person's appointments, parties, lessons, and activities. Review the schedule together at the beginning of the week.
- *Look ahead.* Plan some quiet time at the beginning of each week to review the appointments and tasks for the upcoming week. Be realistic about time commitments, consider any extra planning you may have to do, and prioritize the list. This will give you a sense of control over the week and you'll get off to a smoother start.
- *Set up routines at home.* Routines are comforting for children and make life easier for adults. Have regular times for chores, homework, and dinner. Explain the schedule to your child, and help him understand what's expected of him. He'll gain confidence from knowing that he has an important role in the family.
- *Plan meals for the week.* Make several meals ahead of time and freeze them. Use "family style" platter servings whenever possible. Have an older child help you with shopping and with simple meal preparations.
- *Ask your child care provider to adjust your child's schedule to work with your plans at home.* An infant's nap could come during the time she's at child care. You'd then have more time to play with her after you pick her up. If an older child started her homework earlier at child care, she'd have free time with you after dinner.
- *Let go.* You don't have to run your home the way your parents ran theirs. It's OK to relax your standards. Set realistic goals -- for your children and for yourself -- so one person doesn't have to do everything. It's far more important to have quality time for yourself and your family.
- *Discuss with your partner how you'll share responsibilities.* Set aside some time for you and your partner to talk about how each view running the household and

## 2 • Time Management Tips for Working Parents

parenting your children. It's important that you have a mutual understanding about the expectations and that it's clear how you'll share responsibilities.

- *Set limits on time on online networks.* Social networks like Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) can be a big help to working parents. If you need to find a music teacher for a child or a good cleaning service, you may get great recommendations right away if you request help from people in your network. But you can waste hours responding to trivial messages if you aren't careful. Set limits on how much time you can spend on networks – for example, 20 minutes a day on weekdays or twice daily visits on weekends – and stick to them.

### **Simplifying the morning rush**

The hour or so before you leave your home for work, school, or child care can be hectic, yet it sets the tone for the rest of the day. Planning and organization are the keys to getting off to a good start.

#### **Plan the night before**

Smooth-running mornings begin the previous night. Look for tasks that can be done in the evening to simplify the morning rush:

- *Choose outfits for the next day.* Consider letting your child choose his own clothes, which will cut down on struggles over dressing in the morning. Remember to pick out your own outfit the night before, too.
- *Stagger bath times.* Cut down on the morning bathroom traffic by bathing a young child at night. An evening bath can also be an important part of a peaceful bedtime routine. You may find it relaxing to bathe at the end of the day.
- *Pack diaper bags, backpacks, gym bags, and briefcases the night before.* Include any supplies, musical instruments, sports equipment, or permission slips that will be needed the next day. If practical, take everything to the car before bedtime. Have a special place near the door for your keys.
- *Prepare the next day's lunches.* Tuck lunch money into a zippered pouch in a backpack, or pack lunch boxes and put them at the front of the refrigerator. Put any reminder notes ("Remember -- you have a clarinet lesson at 3:15 today") in lunch boxes, so they'll be sure to be seen.
- *Keep coats, mittens, hats, scarves, umbrellas, and boots in one place.* Give each child a place by the door where she can keep her belongings -- a shelf, a basket, or a brightly colored plastic cube. Use pictures or clear labels and color coding to help a young child keep things in the right place. Use shelves and hooks, not hangers, for a small child. Make sure she can easily reach the place where she is to put her things. (A sturdy step stool may help.)

### 3 • Time Management Tips for Working Parents

- *Organize clothes and toiletries.* Throw away pantyhose with runs and weed out clothes that need mending or cleaning. Rearrange the bathroom shelves so that the products you use most often are easy to reach.

#### Keep the morning running on a smooth track

- *Wake up earlier.* Waking up 15 minutes to half an hour before the rest of the family could give you a head start on the day. You could spend the time exercising, meditating, reading, or showering and dressing without interruptions.
- *Invest in a coffeemaker with a timer.* If you can't get started without coffee, it's easy to have a pot ready and waiting for you in the morning.
- *Give each school-age child his own alarm clock.* Set the alarm for 10 minutes before he really needs to get up. This technique builds a gentle cushion of time between the waking-up and getting-up processes and gives children a sense of responsibility for getting themselves up.
- *Keep to positive morning rituals.* Having breakfast together as a family is a wonderful way to start the day. It provides grounding and balance before you separate and enter the stepped-up pace of the outside world.
- *Pay attention to the family's rhythms.* For example, if your child seems more relaxed when she eats breakfast before she gets dressed, adjust her routine to follow her natural inclinations.
- *Delegate responsibilities.* Let a young child set the breakfast table in the mornings. Keep cereal, bowls, and cups on low shelves where he can reach them. Communicate your expectations clearly. You might tell a young child, "Put a cup, a bowl, and a spoon on the table for Mom, Dad, and yourself." To an older child you might say, "I want you to make your bed before you come to the table," or "Please be dressed by 7:30, so we can all have breakfast together."
- *Stay with the routines you establish.* Your child will be most calm and cooperative when she knows what to expect.

#### Minimize separation anxiety

Why do happy, well-adjusted children often turn into dawdlers or tyrants in the morning? The reason is usually separation anxiety. For a young child, anxiety centers on the emotional separation of leaving -- and being left by -- parents. For an older child, it involves leaving the safety of home for the demands of school.

#### 4 • Time Management Tips for Working Parents

- *Infants and toddlers.* A very young child expresses separation anxiety by crying or clinging. This may be painful for you, but it is perfectly normal. Stay calm. Lovingly and firmly reassure the child that although you must leave soon, you'll return at the end of the day. Establish a positive goodbye ritual, such as exchanging a hug or kiss, saying a favorite rhyme, or singing a special song. Consider giving your child a picture of you that he can look at during the day.
- *Preschoolers and school-age children.* At this age, a child often expresses her separation anxiety by dawdling. It's a way to set her own time limits, establish a sense of control, and prolong her time with you. Try making a game of getting ready. This may encourage a dawdler to pick up the pace. Set a kitchen timer for 15 minutes; if your child is ready in less time, she gets a small prize (such as a sticker).

Some children dawdle because they are overtired. If your child really can't get out of bed in the mornings, he may need an earlier bedtime. If he is still reluctant to go to child care or preschool, talk about any concerns he has. Reassure him as best you can and speak with his teacher or care provider. You may be able to work with the child care provider to help your child feel more comfortable.

#### **Teaching your child how to plan and spend time**

##### **A young child**

Starting at around age 4, a child can describe events and tell you what she wants to do with her time. She can tell you about her daily routine and draw pictures of each activity. Here are some questions you might ask her in order to learn more about her day and help her see how she can be more in control of her time:

- Was there something you wanted to do today that you didn't have time for?
- Was there something you wanted to spend less time doing?
- What is the best thing you did today?

Make your young child responsible for certain household chores. It will increase his self-confidence and help him learn to handle responsibilities. Even if he is young, have him do simple tasks such as the following:

- Set the table.
- Collect the wastebaskets on trash day.
- Retrieve all his own toys and belongings and put them away.
- Help change bed linens.
- Separate whites and colors for the wash.

### Breaking down a task for your child

Teaching your child to do a chore will help to instill in her a sense of responsibility and achievement. It's also a chance to pay attention to your child, to watch and listen to her without being critical, and to enjoy being together. Here are the basic steps for helping your child learn a task:

- *Demonstrate, step by step, how to do the task.* Describe it as you do it: "First you wet the sponge, then add the soap and squeeze so that it gets very soapy. Then you wet the dish. Then you put the soapy sponge on the dish. . . ."
- *Then do the task together.* Again, describe what you're doing: "Now you get the soap on it. Now you squeeze it. . . ." Be encouraging: "Yes, it is messy. It's OK if it gets on the floor a little. We'll just wipe it up later. . . ."
- *Now have the child do it herself.* As always, narrate as she goes along: "That's it. Put the soapy dish in the clear water. . . ."
- *Watch as the child does it.* If she makes a mistake, help her find it for herself: "Is the soap all off the dish? How can you get it off?"
- *Point out the child's successes.* "You really got the sponge full of soapy water!" "That really was a hard job, but you did it!" "It takes a while to get all the soap off and you are really trying!"
- *Give plenty of encouragement.* A young child needs lots of encouragement. If she gets frustrated, suggest she stop working on the task and go back to it later. Make it clear that it's OK to feel upset. The goal is to encourage her to be involved and to try. Don't expect perfection. Reassure your child that her work will improve with time and practice.
- *Take into consideration how a child feels about doing a task.* Listen to your child's ideas about how to carry out a task. You may want to consider using some of her suggestions. That sort of ego boost lets your child know you respect her, and she'll be more likely to enjoy being involved.
- *Appreciate your child's efforts.* A young child especially may be doing something for the fun of it or to please her parents and may not see the value of the task itself. Point out why the job is important: "You did a great job. Now the dishes are clean and we have time to read a story together."

### An older child

As a child begins to understand the nature of time, he can learn how to manage longer-term projects. You and your child could choose an activity to complete over a month's time. It could be a book report for school or a difficult puzzle.

- *Using a monthly calendar, circle the date when the project is due, or the day your child chooses for its completion.* A pocket planner may help an older child or a teenager track his daily schedule or his progress on a long-term project.

## 6 • Time Management Tips for Working Parents

- *Work together to make a list of the steps your child will need to take to complete the project.* On the calendar, mark target dates for the completion of each step.
- *Praise your child's efforts.* You may want to give him an agreed-upon reward or a sticker to put on the calendar next to each completed step. This will help him understand that goals are reached by stages -- even if progress is slow.

When your child reaches her teenage years, it will become more important for her to know how to handle her time well. The time-management skills you've helped her develop will pay off when she is balancing chores or an after-school job, extracurricular activities, and complex school projects.

If you're having trouble managing your time at home or at work, remember that the program that provided this publication has many helpful resources.

When you establish household routines, and when everyone plays a role in maintaining them, you give your children valuable tools. Everyone, from a toddler to a teenager, learns the important life skills of working as part of a team, achieving goals, taking responsibility, and accepting praise for work well done.

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