

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

HBR Readers on Juggling Work and Kids... in a Pandemic

by Harvard Business Review Staff
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A few months into the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, we reached out to working parents on HBR's LinkedIn Group and asked them to share advice about how they're getting things done in these impossible circumstances. Great ideas flowed in by hundreds from around the globe, and we've collected 18 of our favorites here. Some of the main themes include setting boundaries and carving out time for focus; getting extended family involved; and embracing "good enough" while remembering to play, laugh, and be present.

Stagger your day

My husband and I both work from home, and we stagger the times we wake up. I wake up early in the morning while the baby is still asleep to do my work and he wakes up late. I go off to sleep by 10 PM after feeding the baby and putting her to sleep. And he stays up till about 3 AM to do his work. This is the only way we can reserve energy for a kid during daytime.

—*Tanya M., mother of one, U.S.*

Start your day with a D3 review

Every day when I look at my to-do list, both work and home, it seems overwhelming. The first thing I do is give it the D3 review. Which of these items can be: 1) Delayed; 2) Delegated to another member of your team (it is not dumping on them, it is an opportunity for them to learn new skills); 3) Doesn't need to get done! Paring down what "has to be done today" reduces my stress!

—*Lori K., mother of two, U.S.*

Borrow from agile

We have a Kanban board (software development version) for household chores. To-Do — Doing — Done. The kids (as most of us) prefer a pulling system rather than a pushing one. It gave them a feeling of independence in terms of what and when to do their parts. It led to less nagging and as a parent, I became more a coach than a boss. The system developed over time, with chores becoming more equally sized in terms of time (and tediousness), rules like "you can't take the same chore two times in a row," and due dates.

—*Magnus A., father of four, Sweden*

Find the teaching opportunities

We established the "International Corona School" and the "students" would get stars for doing things and doing them right. The tasks included taking care of the cat, setting the table, taking out the garbage, hanging the clothes ... and the total number of stars achieved on a given day would double if these things were done "over and above" or without being asked. We included "extracurriculars" such as cooking classes, or experiments such as observing how mold grew differently on slices of toasted bread after we touched them with washed hand and unwashed hands. I wore a ribbon in my hair and the kids called me "Frau Bego" to symbolically separate school time from the rest of the day.

—*Begoña S., mother of three and stepmother of two, Austria*

Grandparents make great teachers

I asked the grandparents to get involved with the homeschooling during lockdown (by Skype, so socially distanced). The kids and grandparents both loved this idea, and they all prepared for it and looked forward to it every week. They taught about curriculum-related history topics, but in greater

depth than expected at school, and introduced the kids to two foreign languages! Better than if we'd home schooled alone, and it meant my husband and I could get more work done.

—Sally H., mother of two, UK

Outsource, be honest, and let go of perfection

I am a single mom by choice with a toddler. While the current crisis was beyond my imagination, I did put quite a bit of thought and planning into building a sustainable, enjoyable life for us. Here's what helps me get through.

- Outsource what you can afford to outsource. If you have the resources, hire someone to deep clean your home once a month, pay the extra to have groceries and other essentials delivered (and tip really well for the privilege), and budget for childcare. Some of that went out the window with the pandemic, but knowing the limits of what you can accomplish is key.
- Be honest and upfront with colleagues. I cannot ever join a call during dinner or bedtime. And, I can't always dial in to an unplanned call outside of my normal hours either. It's OK to set boundaries.
- Let go. The house isn't pristine, the grass needs to get cut, and I order takeout once or twice a week. It's not perfect but it's good enough.

—Victoria T., mother of one, U.S.

Nap time is focus time

If your child still takes regular naps, block your calendar for the duration of the nap: no Zoom or phone calls. Set aside this time to either focus on tasks that require your full attention or have a quick coffee break or alone time to recharge.

—Lilla N., mother of two, The Netherlands

Make time to connect with your partner

Open communication matters. Talk openly about what your expectations are; be realistic.

Communicate with your spouse about what your priorities are and how to divide household responsibilities. Delegate what you can. Outsource what you can. Let the rest go.

Supporting each other goes beyond the to-do list. It is also about being present for each other. Proactively create a plan together for how you will connect with each other: whether it's 15 minutes midday between Zoom calls or after kiddo bedtime. Make a point to ask about your spouse's stories or worries from work. The more you can connect and help each other feel heard on the big things, the less the little things will matter.

—Shanna H., mother of one, U.S.

Show each other your work

The crisis is bringing our families together in new ways through the remote work, education, and play, all done from our homes. For instance, in the past, I would go to my industry trade shows and conferences without my family, leaving home on Sunday night and not seeing them for a week. Today I connect to the events remotely from home, with my family “joining me” for selected public parts like spectacular industry shows and keynotes with celebrities.

—Peter K., father of three, U.S.

Chores for all, respect space, practice gratitude

Some things I’ve learnt as we have huddled together over this period:

- A pre-set, intentional meal time is a good and needed rest from work. Have a menu planned that the family looks forward to and leave the phone face down.
- Create chores for all to take part in, no matter how young or old. We each call this place home and it is a great way to increase the sense of family.
- Give everyone a space that others learn to respect. Knock and wait for a reply before entering!
- Practice intentional gratitude — it is a great time to learn to have a positive attitude, regardless.

—Praise M., mother of four, Singapore

Let go of screen guilt

Honestly, giving ourselves permission to use media (learnings apps, Netflix, and YouTube principally) was simply a necessity. We finally lifted the guilt associated with screen time. And thinking long term, the increase in quality family time in comparison to the increased screen time, I evaluate as a net positive for the family.

—Adam H., father of three, U.S.

Work late, carve dedicated time, smile through the chaos

I certainly won’t win mom of the year for these tips, but they’ve kept me sane to date.

- Taking on a few late-night (or all-night work sessions to play catch up). I’m a firm believer in getting enough sleep, but sometimes having made a dent in my work to-do list really helps me cope mentally with the juggling in the day (more than a decent night’s sleep would have).
- Carving out dedicated time. So much of my day is spent multitasking, and I realized pretty quickly that letting my daughter color in my office while I finish up a deadline or my baby crawl around my feet while on a conference call doesn’t count. So, even if it’s 30 minutes to share lunch, play and laugh and be present.

- As someone who normally sweats the small stuff, I’m trying not to take the late submissions, kitchen messes, or bad days too seriously. I don’t want to look back on this time with regrets for how I showed up for my family each day. I want to remember how happy we all were, cooped up in our home, in amongst the chaos.

—*Nicola B., mother of two, South Africa*

Step back if you need to

My husband travels regularly for his job as an insurance adjuster and has been out of town for most of the shutdown. I tried to balance it all by myself, but it was too much — I felt like I was going to have a stroke and the kids were miserable. I saw a social media post from a teacher advising not to worry about the kids falling behind academically — they’re trained and ready to fix that later. It’s the emotional trauma that can’t be repaired and can lead to so many other lifelong problems. That influenced me enough to take family medical leave until school or childcare resume. From that point on, I threw myself into their non-traditional instruction and made sure that another sunny day didn’t pass us by.

—*Erin K., mother of two, U.S.*

Set boundaries, for your children and yourself

We’ve had to develop some new boundaries for us all to thrive.

“Stoplight” boundaries for my teens:

- Red light: Don’t bug me right now unless someone is bleeding or something is on fire.
- Yellow light: It’s OK to interrupt me briefly if there’s something that seems urgent.
- Green light: Come on in if you like — I’m not in a meeting, but bring some homework or a book so that we can work quietly together.

Boundaries for me:

- Set clear “at work” hours and keep them.
- Make it clear to my family when I’m off the clock. This includes staying out of my home office as much as possible outside of working hours.
- When a critical deadline or short-fuse project calls for a few extra work hours, I need to own this, be transparent with my family about the departure from the norm, and apologize. I need to be sure my kiddos know I’m not choosing work over them when I’m supposed to “at home.”
- Step outside and get at least a little natural light every day.

—*Quinn B., father of six, U.S.*

Don't go it alone

Grow your “extended family.” It’s so easy to set up a group on WhatsApp or Telegram where fellow parents can share their tips and crowdsource solutions that are relevant to your context. Don’t fall for the idea that you have to wing it alone; there are so many parents in the same shoes as you.

—Osemhen O., mother of two, Nigeria

You can't do it all after bedtime

I can caution against my poor strategy of relying too much on doing everything after my toddler’s bedtime when productivity feels highest. Good strategies include using a robot vacuum cleaner.

—Linda L., mother of one, Sweden

Help your grown kids

As a grandparent, our children are working and trying to balance work and home with their children 24/7. They are managing despite lots of stresses. However, we older parents need to be sensitive to their needs (they’re always our children, that never ends). We need to kick in and help them, too, if we live close enough or maybe travel to help. Ask them, “Can I take the kids for the weekend?” to give them a break. Give them some alone time, make them recharge! It’s a way to help our children and show them our love for family. Don’t wait for them to ask but be proactive and ask them. They will appreciate it.

—Rob P., father of two and grandfather of two, U.S.

Take the long view

My stress went down when I realized that looking back at this time in 20 years, the situation will be for my kid “that cool year I had a six-month holiday.” After all, plenty of people take a sabbatical or a gap year ... it’s a unique experience for her.

—Patrice O., father of one, Canada

This article is adapted from the forthcoming HBR Working Parents series book, “Getting It All Done,” which will be released in December 2020.

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