Balancing Work and Family

A person's work is an important part of life. It gives parents money to take care of their children and to provide for their basic needs. For most parents however, returning to work after the birth of a child is 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. 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 unreasonable 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 behavior, 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 organized

Being organized 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 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 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 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 organized
• 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
Coping With Stress

Being a parent is busy and demanding and it is normal for parents to feel stressed at times. However, if parents often have high levels of stress, it can be hard for them to deal with their children's behavior calmly, and they may be less likely to spend time with their children. Children are likely to grow up happy and learn what is expected of them when their parents are calm and consistently use positive parenting strategies. Although it is not possible to be perfectly calm and consistent all the time, there are things that parents can do to help cope with the everyday demands of rearing children. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you learn to manage day-to-day stress so that you can act calmly and consistently with your children.

WHAT IS STRESS?
Stress is a natural response to a threat or a challenge — it is your mind's and body's way of preparing you to do your best. When a person experiences stress, their body may feel tense and they may have lots of things going through their mind. Everyone feels a certain amount of stress each day, which helps to create the energy to get things done. Stress can be helpful if it only happens now and then, and in moderation. Feeling very stressed all the time is not helpful. The more stressed you feel, the harder it is to cope with things going on around you. Stress can also lead to feelings such as anger, frustration, irritability, anxiety, tiredness, despair and depression.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS?
Being a parent is a challenging job. There seems to be so much to do. You have to balance the demands of your children, your partner, your household, your friends and family, and your work. It is not surprising that parents sometimes feel stressed. A lot of the stress of parenting can come from what you expect of yourself. Parents can set themselves up for unnecessary stress when they expect too much. It is unreasonable to expect that you can always keep the house tidy, that your children will always behave perfectly, that you will always be on time, and that you can always say Yes when others ask you for help.

Stress can also be caused by how you think about things. The way you think about yourself and what is going on around you can affect how you feel. Unhelpful ways of thinking that increase your stress include expecting the worst to happen, exaggerating the bad things and ignoring the good things, blaming yourself, or thinking that you must or should do things. For example, imagine your child has just knocked over a cup of milk at the breakfast table. If you think that you are a bad parent because you cannot even teach your children how to hold a cup properly, or you think that there is something wrong with your child because they spill things, or you imagine that your partner will walk in and yell at you for not controlling the children, you are likely to feel stressed. These thoughts all make the problem seem worse than it really is. On the other hand, if your thinking is more realistic and you tell yourself your child is only young and learning how to drink from a cup, and accidents will happen, you are less likely to feel stressed.

HOW DOES STRESS AFFECT PARENTING?
The way we feel affects the way we get along with others, including our children. When parents are under stress, they are less likely to be calm and consistent with their children. When their energy levels and concentration are affected, parents may spend less time with their children, provide less supervision or be irritable and impatient. Parents under stress may have explosive outbursts over little things their children do that normally would not worry them. If they get angry, they may be more likely to criticize their child and the risk is that they may lose control and harm their child.

When under stress, some parents may be very aware of what their child is doing but their view of their child's behavior may change. They may see ordinary child behavior as bad or accidents as being done on purpose. Some parents can feel so irritated that they just want their children out of the way, regardless of how they are behaving. Sometimes parents feel so tired and worn out that they cannot bring themselves to praise or reward their children for good behavior or carry out a discipline routine, even if it is needed.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE STRESS
There are a number of warning signs that let you know you are getting stressed. These include:
- tense or stiff muscles
- headaches
- irritability or anger
- disturbed sleep
- tiredness
- problems concentrating
- feeling stressed or unable to keep up with everything
- stomach upsets or diarrhea
- skin reactions such as rashes or pimples
- repeated infections or viruses
HOW TO REDUCE STRESS

- Consider Some Lifestyle Changes

Stress can be a sign that you are trying to do too much. If this is the case, you may need to make some changes to your lifestyle. Try to reduce demands by decreasing your workload, sharing responsibility for chores and child care, politely saying No if people ask you to do too much, and getting support from friends and family. If your child’s behavior concerns you, seek help about the problem rather than allowing it to continue. Maintain a healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and regular exercise (at least 20 minutes, three times a week). This can help prevent swings in your mood or energy levels. Each day, try to make time to do at least one thing you enjoy doing by yourself — half an hour can make all the difference.

HOW TO MANAGE DAILY STRESS

- Notice Tension

When you feel stressed, your muscles get tight and tense and it gets harder to pay attention to what you are supposed to be doing. Try to notice where your body gets tense. Is it in your shoulders, neck, jaw, or other parts of your body? As soon as you notice tension in your body, do something about it. You will find it is easier to deal with stress when it first starts.

- Learn To Relax

As muscle tension is a sign of stress, relaxation techniques that reduce physical tension work well because they stop the stress cycle. There are many different ways of relaxing your mind and body. It is up to you to decide what works for you. Here are some suggestions:

- Breathing. Take some slow, deep breaths. Breathe in slowly through your nose, deep into your lungs. As you breathe in, it may help to imagine you are filling a balloon in your stomach. When you have taken a full breath, pause for a moment and then breathe out slowly through your nose or mouth. Be sure to let out all the air. As you breathe out, allow your whole body to just let go. You can even imagine your arms and legs going loose like a rag doll. Keep your breathing smooth, slow and regular. Each time you breathe out you may like to say Relax or Calm or Let go or any other relaxing word or phrase, silently to yourself.

- Muscle relaxation. Try to relax through the day by loosening up any tense muscles. To get started, find a quiet spot where you are not going to be interrupted. Get comfortable by loosening your clothes, removing your shoes, and taking off your glasses if you wear them. Sit with your legs uncrossed, your feet flat on the floor, your head held straight and your hands resting on your thighs. The aim is to relax your body while keeping the rest of your body relaxed. When you tense one part, feel the build up of tension, hold for 10 seconds and notice where it is particularly tense. Release the tension in part slowly so you can identify the muscles that are relaxing and notice how it feels, then relax for 20 seconds and enjoy the pleasant feeling. Follow this routine for each part of your body. Clench or tense each muscle once. If an area feels especially tight, you can tense and relax it two or three times. Work through each muscle from your forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, tongue, jaw, lips, neck, hands and arms, shoulders, back, chest, stomach, bottom, to your legs and feet.

- Imagination. Distract yourself by thinking of a pleasant, happy memory or an exciting event coming up. You may like to imagine a peaceful scene where you feel relaxed and happy, such as a favorite holiday place. Try to imagine what you can see, hear, feel, taste and smell.

There are many other things you can try, such as exercise, a warm bath, meditation, or listening to relaxing music. Find a relaxation technique that works for you. Once you choose a technique, practice it every day for at least 2 weeks. This will help you learn to relax as easily as you tense up, and you can use your relaxation any time you start to feel stressed. To be able to do this well, you will need to practice.

- Catch Unhelpful Thoughts

When you are feeling stressed, unhelpful thoughts may go through your mind. You may find they just pop into your mind without warning. Unhelpful thoughts are often believable at the time, but may seem unrealistic, exaggerated or even silly if you think about them later. Here are some examples — I can’t cope with this or They never do as I say or He did that just to get at me or I’m a terrible parent or It’s all my fault.

Try to catch thoughts that make you feel more stressed or upset. This can take some practice. One way to do this is to write down the thoughts that made you feel that way.
**Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts**

When you catch an exaggerated, unhelpful thought that increases your stress and makes you feel worse, such as *I can't do anything right*, you can also try to challenge or debate it with yourself until you reach a more realistic or helpful way of thinking about the situation, such as *I've managed well for most of the day, but bath time and preparing dinner have been a struggle. Tomorrow I'll bath the children earlier.*

To challenge unhelpful thoughts you can ask yourself whether what you are saying to yourself is true — is there any evidence?, you can look for other explanations for the situation, or you can ask yourself what you would say to a friend in the same situation.

You may find it easier to simply replace the unhelpful thought with one of your coping statements.

Remember, it will take time and effort to catch your unhelpful thoughts and challenge them with more realistic and helpful thoughts, but this will be time and effort well spent. With practice, you will find that you begin to challenge unhelpful thoughts quickly and easily.

**Develop a Coping Plan**

You can combine all of these ideas into a personal coping plan. Think of a stressful situation — it may help to think of a recent situation in which you found it difficult to stay calm. Work out what you could do and think to prepare yourself before entering the situation, what you could do and think as you go into the situation, what you could do and think to stay calm during the situation, and how to review and congratulate yourself afterwards. Include coping statements and relaxation strategies that you can use with your positive parenting strategies. You can develop plans like these for any situations you think might be stressful. It is also important to recognize there are some things you cannot control and that it is alright to make mistakes.

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**When To Seek Help**

If you or your partner often feel very stressed, find it difficult to stay calm, or have trouble coping, seek professional advice. Professionals who have skills in stress management can help you reduce any unnecessary stress in your life and develop some coping skills for everyday stress.

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**Key Steps**

- **Think about helpful changes you can make to your lifestyle.**
- **Try to notice tension early.**
- **Find a relaxation technique that suits you and use it when you feel tense.**
- **Think of coping statements to say to yourself before, as you enter, during and after a stressful situation.**
- **Make sure you believe what you are saying to yourself.**
- **Catch and challenge any unhelpful thoughts that increase your stress and replace them with more realistic or helpful ways of thinking about the situation.**
- **Develop a coping plan of helpful thoughts and actions for any stressful situations you know are coming up — include coping statements, relaxation strategies and positive parenting strategies.**

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**For Further Help**

See the Positive Parenting booklets 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.

**Triple P**

Positive Parenting Program