

Work-Life Balance



Can busy parents pull it off?

by Kate Winn

So, how do you find work/life balance? Ask this question of any parent of young children, and the reaction ranges from laughter to tears. The issue, however, is no laughing matter.

While we all have moments when we think that our circumstances are the toughest, every work arrangement comes with its own stresses:

- ◆ Stay-at-home parents may miss their careers and feel left behind, or struggle to enjoy time with their children when the housework is just too close to ignore. One mom of three laments the fact that less understanding friends and family members frequently call on her to watch their kids or run an errand, prefacing their requests with “since you’re home anyway...”
- ◆ Moms and Dads who work from home may also find it difficult to fully focus on their job in that setting, yet can’t escape the “workplace” during family time. They are often self-employed, which is an added financial pressure.
- ◆ Parents who work outside the home tend to experience guilt when they aren’t physically

available for their children, and when they are with their kids, are often still connected to work through the “miracle” of technology. In today’s economy, the sad thing is that in some sectors,



it’s easier to take your family for granted than your job.

Compared to previous generations, moms have their attention split more than ever before, whether by choice or financial necessity. Dads also find it difficult to navigate a different role than was modeled by their fathers and grandfathers, who may not have been in the delivery room, let alone helping with homework and attending school plays.

While we may have all accepted these struggles as an inevitable fact of life, the consequences of work/life imbalance can actually be quite serious.

Our informal poll reveals that parents of young children blame the work/home struggle for a variety of physical ailments such as headaches, stomachaches, insomnia and fatigue. On top of that, many worry about what sort of example they’re setting for their children, and if it’s true that “anxious parents create anxious kids.”

For those who work outside the home, studies show that fatigue, stress, depression, absenteeism,

and ill health can also result if the balance is off. In his *Natural Health and Wellness* newspaper column, Dr. Stuart Kissinger points out that “workaholism is now understood as an addictive disorder with the same health and social risks as any of the addictions, although it is still perceived as a socially acceptable behaviour by many.” However, there has been a recent movement towards more focus on family. The trailer for the new film *Company Men* notes: “In America, we give our lives to our jobs. It’s time to take them back.”

One local father of two recently left his stressful workplace when the demands of his managerial position compromised both his physical and mental health. Since then, “my relationship with my daughters has grown tremendously,” he says. “They love how I can take them to the bus stop and I’m home for family dinner every night. I’m doing something I am passionate about and as a result I now live a much happier and more fulfilling life.”

Health Canada has devoted time and resources to researching the work-life problem in workplaces (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/index-eng.php). The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety website also boasts a page dedicated to “Work/Life Balance” issues, with tips for employees as well as encouragement for employers to improve conditions in their workplaces (http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/worklife_balance.html).

Some people take issue with the overused and impossible to attain term “balance”, thinking that somehow the quality and quantity of work and family time are supposed to equal out over a period as short as a day. However, experts recommend that we should be striving to equal our efforts over a longer period, perhaps a week or even a month.

Tips for pursuing balance

◆ *Make eating, sleeping and exercising priorities.* While it may not seem like helpful advice in the midst of work or family stress (since a nice brisk walk can’t find you a babysitter and eight hours of sleep certainly won’t get your e-mails answered), even the worst situations can seem more manageable if your health is taken care of.

◆ *Tap in to your employer.* Is flextime an option? On-site childcare? Do you have an Employee Assistance Program to call upon? If you meet resistance, you may want to pull out this tidbit from Human Resources and Social Development Canada: “Work-life balance programs and practices can benefit an organization’s bottom line while at the same time, provide other indirect benefits both to employees and employers. While some of these benefits might be more tangible and quantifiable than others, they nonetheless can contribute to significant positive organizational gain.”

◆ *If you get vacation time, use it!* If you’re tempted to cash it in or work through, take a look at these study results. One Japanese study found that there was a direct correlation between vacation time and a reduced tendency of depression and absence



from work, and University of Pittsburgh research found that an increased frequency of vacations for middle-aged men was directly related to a reduced rate of death.

◆ *Involve your partner.* This may mean letting go and accepting that not everything will be done your way. Personally, I hate to relinquish control of my daughter’s outfits and hairstyles, despite the fact that my husband is more than willing to help with this aspect of the morning routine. Also be sure to spend time connecting with your partner. It may be hard to prioritize, but fostering a strong



relationship is actually an investment in your children and your job.

◆ *Get organized.* Find a calendar system that works for you, whether it be a BlackBerry or a fridge version, and get everyone in the house to pool their appointments, lessons, etc. Chunk errands to save time, and multitask when appropriate. (Checking your work voice mail while you unload the dishes is good. While you tuck the kids in? Not so much.)

◆ *Involve the kids.* As soon as they are old enough, start assigning chores (chore charts with incentives may do the trick). Again, this may mean letting go of control. In my case, although my five-year old can’t make her bed to my standards, it’s good enough. Visual schedules are very popular in organized homes: take photos of your child getting dressed, making his bed, eating breakfast, etc., and then post them in his room to follow. Do the same with the bedtime routine.

◆ *Use technology.* Skype can work both ways: for meetings when you’re home or don’t want to travel, or for family chats when you’re away. Have someone videotape kids’ events that you have to miss, and sit down and watch together upon your return. A recent guest expert on *The Marilyn Denis Show* shared three rules for technology: no screens at the table, no screens in the bedroom, and make one weekend day each month tech-free. (This may be easier for you than your children, depending on their ages!)

◆ *Talk to the kids about your work and why you do it.* This will be more meaningful if you can convey the value and sense of accomplishment you get from your job, but even if you are forced to punch a clock to put food on the table, it is still a good lesson that we have to work for what we have.

◆ *Take “me time”.* Unless the martyr role somehow energizes you (which seems to work for some people) realize that you aren’t doing your family or employer any favours if you never take time for yourself.

◆ *Say no.* Period.

◆ *Seek professional help.* If your situation seems insurmountable, it may be time to consult a life coach, counsellor, or your family doctor for personalized, expert advice.

It’s important to keep in mind too that while we are parents, we may also be employers or play some less direct role in adding balls to other families’ juggling acts. It wasn’t until my daughter started kindergarten that I had to rework my vision of “school nights”, and subsequently rethink my homework philosophy for my students in order to help alleviate the weeknight pressure felt in many homes. Perhaps we can take our own steps to lessen the stress of others ... not only those with children, but everyone seeking this elusive treasure that is “balance.”

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