



Balancing Family and Work

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Balancing family and work is a challenge for contemporary American families. This fact sheet provides helpful information on how dual-earner and single-parent families can balance the competing needs of both family and work. Keeping these areas in balance will help you reduce stress and have a healthy family life, healthy relationships at work, and a sense of satisfaction about yourself.

Woman's Changing Role in the Work Force

In years past, a woman's decision to work outside her home was usually based on three factors: marital status, contributions from other family members (husband's salary), and children. Women worked outside the home prior to marriage, but a woman married to a man with an adequate income usually stayed home to focus on her husband, their home, and his career. A married woman with children nearly always worked only at home.

Attitudes toward women in the workplace have changed since WWII when "Rosie, the Riveter" went to work to further the war effort. Many females enjoyed the sense of competence they felt when they discovered that they could work and contribute financially to their families. Men often experienced less stress when not pressured to be the family's sole provider.

The role of women in the workforce has evolved in the past forty years. In 1960, approximately one-third women with children were employed outside the home. In 2003, 60.7 percent of mothers in two-parent families were employed. The percentage of married women with infants employed outside the home has fallen slightly since 1998, but still stands at about 53 percent. Women's occupations are also changing as they move into careers previously dominated by males. Women today fill approximately one-third of management positions, an increase from 19 percent in 1972. Most women, however, remain in jobs with little authority and low pay.

Attitudes about women working outside the home have changed markedly in the past four decades. A national survey reported that as late as 1977, most Americans (65 percent) believed the husband should be the breadwinner and the wife the homemaker. By 1996, opinions on traditional sex roles had reversed, with 60 percent in favor of a relationship where the couple shares responsibilities for the family. Four out of five Americans say it's fine for a married woman to work even though her husband makes enough money to support the family. The same survey reports that 83 percent believe most women have to work to support

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their families. Also, during the last 25 years, divorce laws have become more liberalized, and the greater number of couples divorcing guarantees that more women must seek employment outside the home to provide for themselves and their children.

All of these events have resulted in a more complex family life for dual-earner and single-parent families. They now face the challenge of balancing responsibilities in both the family and work areas. Most people agree it has become more difficult to achieve this balance. Nearly half (48 percent) believe they are somewhat successful at the juggling act, and an additional 31 percent believe they are very successful. The number of people who feel they aren't very successful in balancing family and work is highest between the ages of 30 to 39. This is the age group that is most likely to have younger children at home.

Superwoman

Marian Thomas writes: *The good news is superwoman is dead. The bad news is she left behind an entire generation of women who are still struggling to figure out how to balance home and work.*

Much has been written about "having it all." To many couples that means a challenging career, a loving marriage, a house in the suburbs, two adorable children, and an interesting social life.

Jane, a cosmetologist, and her husband, Bert, a mechanic, work long hours and most nights fall into bed exhausted. Although they have good, reliable childcare, both feel guilty about not spending more time with Janet and little Bobbie. Jane sums it up: "We both love our jobs and our family. We do the best we can, but nobody ever told us it would be this difficult!"

Bert and Jane have jobs that pay well. People who work in lower-paying jobs have similar frustrations and less money available to help solve their problems. Even though we may “have it all,” we need to recognize “we can’t do it all by ourselves.”

Even though family situations differ, the common concerns about balancing family and work involve relationships, time, and energy. People ask themselves, “How can I work *and* have time with my partner or for myself *and* be available for the kids *and* get the shopping done *and* find time to mop the kitchen floor, not to mention PTA, church, Boy Scouts, and soccer?” This balance is very difficult to achieve. Because employment has specific time and job requirements that must be met, sacrifices are often made in the areas of home and family. Approximately 95 percent of adults in a national survey reported they are concerned work takes too much time away from their families. Dual-earner couples make up about 40 percent of the present work force. Stress builds when there’s more work to do than time or resources available to accomplish it.

The challenge of balancing family and work can be a difficult one and affects both men and women in either dual-earner or single-parent families. Women who work outside their homes often speak of being torn between family and work responsibilities. Men, whose wives work outside the home, sometimes resent being asked to take on household responsibilities and chores. Other men who are willing to do their fair share sometimes report that they don’t know how and are frustrated because they don’t meet their partner’s standards for housework: “If I do the dishes, I don’t put them away right. If I dress the kids for pre-school, I don’t match their clothes right! I don’t mind helping, but I do mind never doing anything well enough!”

For a single parent, the time and money crunch can be doubly severe.

Kathleen, a department store clerk, explains her situation: “I never seem to have enough time. I have to spend time with the kids, and the housework won’t do itself. I fall into bed about 1:00 in the morning and get up at 6:20 to start all over again. I’m as tired when the alarm goes off as I was when I went to bed. Thank goodness my husband pays his child support. There’s no way I could work any more hours than I do and still be there for the kids. I miss too many of their school and sports activities as it is.”



The Work-Family Connection

Conflict between family and work responsibilities often causes stress. When conflict results, both the family and work suffer. Research has identified three principles to explain this conflict.

1. Family and work settings have a built-in potential for conflict.

You may feel overwhelmed with the demands you have at work and at home. You may feel you have little energy or time to do all the things you are required to do as a parent and an employee, and still have time for yourself.

2. Family and work environments influence each other.

Positive and negative feelings go with you to work and to home. You may have had a great day at the office and arrive at home ready to spend time and have fun with your family. When things are going well at home, you go to work knowing your family life is under control. On the other hand, you may come home after a difficult day at work ready for an argument at home. After a difficult night with a sick child, you might go to work exhausted and have difficulty focusing on your job.

3. Balance between work and family settings will minimize stress.

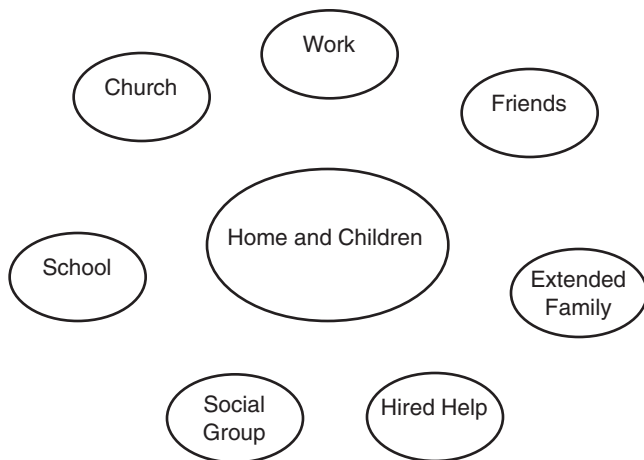
Balance is easier to achieve when your job helps you reach family goals, and family activities help you be successful in your job. Ideally, what you take home from your job helps your family, and what you take to work from your family relationships helps you in your job. Arriving at a balance between family and work will mean different things to different families. What is important is that you have a balance between these two areas that is comfortable for you and your family.

Strategies to Attain Balance Between Family and Work

Identify your support system

Who can be counted on to help when help is needed? In the following diagram, the inner oval represents the needs of home and family. The surrounding ovals represent categories of people who might be willing to help.

Next to each category write the names of people who could be counted on if necessary. For example, if daily childcare is needed, who can be relied on to provide it: husband, relative, friend, paid baby-sitter, childcare center? Who will provide childcare in emergencies, or when the child is ill?



Realistically Evaluate Your Employment Decision

Do you need to work full-time? If finances allow, perhaps part-time employment will provide both a personal sense of accomplishment and extra money. If you work part-time, will you receive health care, retirement, and vacation benefits? Consider money needed for eating out and convenience foods. Calculate how much the decision to work will cost in time for family, child-care, clothing and dry cleaning, and household chores. Is full- or part-time the best decision?

Organize Family Activities

Set priorities for the family. What tasks are essential for the health and safety of the family members? What tasks are less important at this point in your family's life? How can the family be organized to meet the needs of its members? What needs to be done daily? What can be done monthly or on a specific week-end?

Conduct a family meeting to identify the tasks to be done and who will do them. A chart like the one below can help define and track individual needs and responsibilities for each member of the family. Let the children volunteer for tasks appropriate for their age. They can also decide what the consequence would be if they don't do their task. For example, if one task is to make their bed before going to school, the child might decide the consequence for not making their bed would be to have to make the bed of a brother/sister or parent for the next number of days.

| Share the Load | |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Person's name | _____ |
| Personal care | _____ |
| Chores at home | _____ |
| Schoolwork | _____ |
| Bedtime and mealtime | _____ |
| Getting along with others | _____ |

Be sure the chores are posted where both parent(s) and children can see them.

Children develop self-esteem, competence, and responsibility by helping with household tasks and family decision making. Knowing that their contribution is expected and appreciated helps all family members feel valuable. Creating structure lessens the chance that one member will be expected to do too much, and feel overwhelmed.

Hold weekly family meetings to review the chores assigned to each family member. Give praise for accomplishing tasks for the week. Re-evaluate chores based on the activities for the coming week. Use chore time as family time. Working with the children on family chores can help them stay focused and complete the project.

Be Realistic. Are housekeeping standards realistic? Does the kitchen floor really need to be mopped four times a week? Is laundry a daily necessity? Who cooks and shops? How can chores be shared?

Don't set expectations that can't be achieved. This only sets you and your family up for failure. Instead, you and your family want to feel successful in managing family and work.

Plan Ahead for the Next Day. Spending time working away from home means that there will be fewer hours available in the day to accomplish the same number of jobs around the house. To make mornings less stressful:

- Take time on the week-end to plan meals, chores, and activities.
- Before bedtime, help youngsters organize themselves for school the next day by setting out their clothes and school items.
- Set out your work items and clothes for the next day.
- Have a morning routine that children can rely on to start the day. If possible, have both parents share in getting through the morning routine.
- To lessen separation anxiety, especially with younger children, tell them who will take them to daycare and who will pick them up at the end of the day.
- Take time for breakfast. The children can help set the table for breakfast the evening before.
- Get up early to prevent starting the day in a rush. If you are responsible for getting the children ready in the morning, get yourself dressed and ready before you waken them.

Afternoon and evening time can be equally stressful.

Family members need time to make a transition from work/school/daycare to family life at home. This transition can be easier when:

- You (and your partner) can leave work on time and leave your "work life" at work.
- You use your commute time to shift gears and plan activities for the evening.
- Children have clear tasks to be done, such as setting the table for dinner, finishing homework, or taking care of pets. For the young child, a nap may be helpful.
- Clothes are changed so you and your family are dressed for family activities.
- Family members have a small snack to hold them until dinner. Children can help prepare the snack the evening before so they know where to get it when they return home.
- You and your family spend some time re-connecting by sharing a snack or meal and talking about the day's experiences before the tasks of the evening are started. Even 10 minutes spent with the family sitting together and talking about their day can help to set the tone for the rest of the evening.

Reward yourself.

Working and keeping a home running smoothly requires tremendous effort and energy and sometimes becomes a grind, not only for adults but for children. Family members can take a few moments together to list the rewards each enjoy most. Family members can write their favorite things on a chart like the one below. These need not be expensive. They can be activities such as bike riding or games, favorite foods, or thoughtful snacks or drinks provided at the right moment. If time is a factor, and it usually is, it's possible to limit time in a positive way: "Let's play 15 minutes of a favorite game after dinner," or "Let's ride our bikes to the store and back." Taking time for fun makes working easier and more pleasant.

| Favorite Things | |
|-----------------|-------|
| 1. | _____ |
| 2. | _____ |
| 3. | _____ |
| 4. | _____ |
| 5. | _____ |

Managing the responsibilities of work and family is one of the most challenging tasks for working parents. Identifying priorities, strategies, resources, and strengths can help establish that necessary balance to reduce stress and keep you and your family physically and emotionally healthy.

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