

Balancing Work and Family

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Balancing work and family is a highly personal endeavor, and there is no magic formula. It takes planning and resolve, and you'll need to make choices along the way that align with what's important to you.



At one time, the typical American family looked like this: a breadwinner father who commuted a short distance to work and earned a very good living, and a stay-at-home mother who took care of the kids and family home with aplomb. Life seemed easy and manageable, with plenty of time for family meals, parent relaxation, and important life lesson discussions, and little in the way of work or technological distractions.

Today, things are different. There are many more two-parent dual-income families and single-parent households, along with increased work expectations, longer commutes, and a 24/7 mindset. The result is often a more harried existence for today's parents as they try to balance their work commitments and family obligations — a juggle that is one of the major issues people face during their working years. Yet day after day, week after week, year after year, millions of families survive and thrive, despite their busy schedules. So how do they do it?



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There is no magic formula, and what works for one family may not work for another. It takes planning and resolve, and you'll need to make choices along the way that align with what's important to you. As you think about your own plan to balance work and family, here are some things you might consider.

First, decide what you want

Whether you're single or married, in your 20s, 30s, or 40s, thinking about children or already have them, you need to know what's important to you. Is your job important for financial reasons, personal satisfaction, or both? What kind of parent do you want to be? Are you happy in your current job? Is it a job that's compatible with raising a family?

These are questions you should spend some time considering. Once you've envisioned the type of life you want, you can strive for it and make decisions along the way to help you get there. As with anything, there will likely be tradeoffs along the way.

Pick the right partner

In an oft-repeated message, Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, remarked that one of the most important things you can do for your work/family balance is to pick the right partner. She was talking to women, but the advice applies equally to men.

responsibilities? Are you both willing to embrace a 50-50 partnership and share household and child responsibilities to help support your partner's ability to work? Do you value the goals and aspirations of the other? When both sides have similar ideas on work and family, there's a better chance of balancing both successfully.

Think about your career

Not all careers and jobs are created equal. Some involve more hours, more face time, more stress, and more travel. Your work can be a huge part of your life, so think carefully about whether your work will allow you (or is allowing you) to be the parent you want to be. You may land a well-paying but demanding job only to realize later that the long hours aren't compatible with raising a family in the way you would like. Women are more often affected by this situation, in part because fewer working women than men have stay-at-home spouses.

Along with your salary, consider the workplace flexibility and employee benefits that your job offers, including maternity and paternity leave. If you were to take a leave of absence from your job for a few months or years, would it be relatively easy or difficult to step back in where you left off?

Let's assume you're in the trenches trying to balance work and family. The details are different for everyone, but there are a few common themes.

Sync your work and child-care schedules

For employed parents, child care is often necessary. A detailed comparison of day-care centers, home day care, and visiting or live-in nannies is beyond the scope of this discussion, but obviously you need to evaluate your child-care options and select the one that best meets your needs. That is no small feat. And once you've made your decision, consider reviewing it periodically to make sure it continues to be a good fit for your child.

Your day-care provider will likely become a big part of your life, and your weekly routine will involve navigating the transition between your job and day care. In two-parent families, spouses may trade off this responsibility (e.g., one spouse drops off in the morning and the other picks up in the afternoon). To help in this effort, many parents rely on flexible work schedules, such as flex hours (e.g., 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.), working from home one or more days a week, working four longer days instead of five regular days, or working part-time.

In some cases, a flexible work arrangement can be the deciding factor

hurt to ask your employer. If you'd like to modify your current schedule, think about your ideal work arrangement, then request a meeting with your manager to discuss your well-thought-out proposal.

If a flexible work arrangement isn't possible, you'll have to decide whether you want to make a change. Some parents may decide to continue in their current job despite the inflexibility, while others may look for another job or leave the workforce altogether. And some parents may decide to move to a lower-cost area in order to get by on one income or a reduced income, or move closer to extended family who might be able to help with child care. There are no right answers, only what works for you and your family.

Stay organized and share the to-do list

Staying organized can go a long way toward effectively juggling work and family responsibilities. Here are some tips that may help.

- Make a list (with your spouse, if married) of all household and child-related chores that need to get done on a weekly basis, such as grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry, bill paying, bath time, helping with homework, driving to activities, and so on, and divide up the list in a way that is fair and mutually

personal responsibility and to lighten your load!

- Make another list for more occasional items, such as doctor's appointments, car maintenance, lawn care, and seasonal items and figure out how and when these tasks will get done.
- Use the weekends to get ahead for the upcoming week. For example, make dinners that can be reheated during the week or throw in an extra load of laundry. But don't spend your entire weekend on chores. Being on a constant treadmill of "to-dos" can lead to stress, resentment, and burnout.
- Try to build in some time for family fun and relaxation. In addition, try to carve out time for individual pursuits to the extent you can. The happier you are personally, the better you'll be able to manage your busy life.

Embrace flexibility and communication

Life doesn't stand still. Children grow. Relationships evolve. Work expectations change. It's important to stay flexible and make changes when necessary. Is your work schedule still manageable? Are your children thriving in the routine you've established? Are you happy with the division of household responsibilities between you and your

communication open with your partner.

Minimize distractions

Every family faces external pressures and distractions — work overload, a 24/7 mindset, technology, extended family, an endless stream of extracurricular activities. Only you know what your family can manage. Pick and choose your activities carefully and be wary of overscheduling. Learn to say "no" sometimes so that when certain opportunities come along that you really want to participate in, you'll be able to say "yes." Remember, you're the one who has to execute the juggle every day, so guard your time wisely.

Keep the big picture in mind

At the end of the day, try to have realistic expectations and keep everything in perspective as best you can. Working outside the home when you have children requires a significant amount of mental and physical stamina. Let go of the idea that you have to try to "do it all." Remember, it's a marathon, not a sprint. Even so, be prepared for times when it's hard to balance everything. In those moments, take comfort in the fact that you are providing for your family's financial future and doing the best you can.