

As any parent knows, life with children can be like a roller-coaster ride, with ups, downs and bumps along the way. One of the most common and difficult challenges of parenting is managing the demands on our time.

Parents find themselves not only managing their own time and priorities, but those of their children as well. Personal priorities give way to managing family responsibilities. Spontaneity is replaced by routines and the need to plan and prioritise, ensuring a stress-free, well-balanced family life.

In our busy lives, parents are commonly juggling careers, household chores, family schedules, school and sports commitments, and maintaining relationships on top of finding time for themselves, quality time with the kids, or time simply to unwind, think and plan for the future.

We tend to do things we value and enjoy the most, or place a high priority on, first. Everything else gets put off to a time when we imagine it will be quieter, easier or less stressful. Having many things to do, with insufficient time to do them in can leave you feeling overwhelmed, frustrated and unmotivated. Our “to do” lists can seem never-ending, often resulting in low self-confidence, stress and anxiety.

Prioritising and planning without guilt are keys to overcoming this. Identifying your priorities and taking action prevents avoidance, procrastination and perfectionism.

Equally important (but often overlooked) is the need to look after yourself. If you do, everything else falls into place.

Let’s look at ways to ensure your time is managed to your family’s maximum benefit.

Communication, planning and preparation

These are essential for effective time management and retaining a sense of control. Hold regular family discussions, enlisting everyone’s co-operation. Delegate tasks and household chores. Review and organise your family schedule in advance, both daily and weekly.

Set and write down goals, making appointments committing to your priorities. Plan and schedule realistic, adequate blocks of time in advance. Group similar tasks like internet/email, phone calls and housework. Undertake harder tasks when you are at your best or without children.

Get organised

We all have the same time available to us. How we use it makes the difference. Ask yourself: “What am I going to focus on today?” Use positive language to boost your confidence, self-belief and motivation.

Prioritise

Multi-tasking is a myth. Prioritise daily, focusing on and completing one thing at a time. Anything else you achieve is a bonus. Identify your priorities by asking: “What is the single most important thing I must or want to do today?” This alleviates feeling overwhelmed, out of control and under pressure to get everything “done”.

Support systems

Establish a support network of family and friends – learn to ask for and accept assistance. Use time-saving ideas and technology, like online, bulk or late night shopping. Consider employing additional support like a cleaner, gardener or babysitter.

Use one time-management system such as a diary, calendar or electronic planner, in lieu of “to do” lists. This makes managing your time and commitments simpler, easier and more effective. If you find lists helpful, do a small daily list at the start or end of each day. Do what works for you and your family.

Motivation

Identify what motivates you and take action. Provide an incentive to get started, remain focused and motivated like listening to music, or a reward upon completion. You will gain energy, confidence and momentum from accomplishment and be wondering why you didn't take action sooner. Focus on your achievements, rather than beating yourself up over what didn't get done.

Simplify

Keep your expectations realistic, supporting a well-balanced life. Keep things simple, relieving stress, pressure and feeling overwhelmed. Children (and adults) value time to play, imagine and be themselves, without structured activities everyday. At times, we all need to be flexible, relax, and go with the flow.

Avoid comparisons to other parents who appear to have and do it all. There is no such thing as the "perfect" parent.

Boundaries

Setting boundaries around work and family life helps manage additional, unexpected or unreasonable demands on your time. Whether spending time with family or at work, focus on quality, not quantity. Be consistent. Commit to and focus on the task at hand, avoiding distractions and rescheduling where necessary.

Become comfortable saying "no" without guilt or explanation. Limit activities like television and computer use – if only for one night a week. Catch up on or undertake important tasks when the kids aren't around or during evenings.

"Me time"

To ensure the availability and success of "me time" you need to make it a priority. Plan and write down realistic time slots for "me time" and use your support systems. Take advantage of every chance without children around, even if it is only for a short time. Use this time just for you, not to catch up on chores and other jobs that can be done later.

Identify ideas for "me time" by making a wish list of all the things you would like to do just for you. Write down your passions, interests, desires and dreams. When it comes to self-care, little changes often make a big difference.

A sense of balance in all areas of our lives is important because it minimises regret, resentment, and anger. When we make time for the important things in our lives, we're not making sacrifices or missing out. Managing our time well helps us be healthy parents, physically, psychologically and emotionally, and great role models for our children.

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