



THE PARENTAL BALANCING ACT

The notion of 'work/life balance' seems to be the flavour of the month, the latest in a long line of new age concepts to filter its way into the public consciousness. Business leaders are paying vast amounts of money to life coaches to develop work/life balance plans for their employees, magazines are devoting hundreds of copy inches to it and the government and opposition are vying with each other over who can give you the best of both worlds.

Yet every mother knows it is a juggling act. Work/life balance means keeping two balls in the air, but mothers know there is an extra ball to juggle. This third ball is the children. This life/work/children juggling act often sees the personal life ball slipping through her hands and falling to the ground.

Both parents sometimes find it hard to find a three-way balance. This three-way pull can be a great drain on their time and energy, becoming a multiple juggling act as they rush from work, to schools, to play groups, to shopping, to home, to bed, only to start the whole thing again the following morning. Children are demanding and so parents try to fit everything in; but even after superhuman efforts they still feel pangs of guilt over anything left undone. By the end of the day parents can feel exhausted from a hard day combining work and childcare.

Time is in short supply and becomes full of 'haves': you have to collect the kids, do the laundry, and finish a project at work. There does not seem to be any time left for yourself. This is where things can become dangerously close to a mere work/children balance, with the personal life being put aside and forgotten in the day-to-day rush.

This lack of time for a personal life can become a great energy drain and action needs to be taken to recover this energy. Parents need to take control of their time again. There are a couple of basic things they can do to keep their balance in this situation. The first thing to do is to look at their priorities. It is sometimes difficult to prioritise when you are in the thick of a situation, so step back and look at it from the outside. Try to dissociate and see work, life and children as three separate columns, writing them down if necessary. See everything and put everything into those columns, no matter how unimportant or irrelevant they might seem. Look for anything that pulls you in two directions at once; you will need to make a judgement call to resolve these.

Once everything is noted down, prioritise by logic and instinct. Follow a gut feeling and find the top five priorities for work, life and children. Again, make any judgement calls on anything that is a contradiction and is pulling you in two directions at once, such as wanting to take the children to school and having to be at work on time. Be willing to compromise.

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Make tough decisions; if something is not working and holding you back, drop it and replace it with something that works. If you can't get the kids to school on time, can someone else help? Be ruthless and put yourself first; if you let yourself become overwhelmed and exhausted you are of no use to yourself or your family. This exercise can be hard and might not offer all the answers, but it will give you clarity as to what needs to be faced.

Secondly, learn to become a time-management expert. Time can be controlled and when you do this everything seems less overwhelming. To be in control you need to have an understanding about what is happening to time. The best way to analyse time keeping is to keep a time diary for a couple of weeks and note down everything that is being done, when it happens and how long it takes. After a fortnight of diary keeping, behaviour patterns that are time wasters can be spotted and eliminated. A more balanced way of working, living and looking after the children can then be developed and put into action. Looking after yourself is now built into the equation as another ball is thrown effortlessly into the air again.

These two simple programmes can help to make the lives of mothers and fathers easier. Look for what is really important, prioritise and stay the course. Manage your time and become the master of it. The work/life/children balance is something that you can control, not something that controls you. Remember, you too can be a brilliant juggler with all three balls elegantly in the air at once.