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10 Tips To Take You Through The Week

Working Moms Share Strategies

by Erin Mantz

On the morning network television shows, in mom blogs and throughout countless controversial articles and books, people are talking about moms opting out of the workforce. In fact, the media has been buzzing about the recent Pew Research Center survey, which found that only 21 percent of working mothers with kids under 18 view full-time work as the best arrangement — down from 32 percent in 1997. Sixty percent of working mothers said a part-time job would be best, up from 48 percent 10 years ago, and 19 percent said not working at all would be ideal. Yet a local look tells a different story. Some moms are still opting for full-time, and they are happy.

Across the Washington, D.C., metro area, 69 percent of moms with kids under 18 are working. Our city ranks second in the country, just behind Minneapolis, for having the highest number of working moms according to DC's Creative Class Group, a global advisory services firm that develops new ideas and strategies for business, government and community competitiveness. Stephen Pedigo, the group's research partner, is not surprised by DC's ranking. "The DC area has a lot of highly educated people — and the highest percentage of female CEOs in the country," he says.

In Washington, like anywhere, some moms work because they have to. Simply put, they need the money. But what happens when moms who financially *could* stay home, choose to work full-time? What do they get out of it? How do they do it? I talked to dozens of moms to find these answers and define tips for getting through the week.

Explanations of *why* they work came quickly and easily. Many echoed the same reasons — they enjoy it; having a career makes them happy; they are better moms when they come home to their kids at the end of the day; they like to be challenged; they like the adult interaction and intellectual stimulation; they have invested too much education or career-climbing to stop now. With the "why" so well defined, the real question seemed to be this: *How* do they do it?

Whether you are a mom who works outside the house, one who stays home or a woman expecting her first child and contemplating what's to come, these tips may help you. This is not about the mommy wars or whether working is right or wrong — these moms have made their choice to work full-time, and they know why it's right for them. This piece is about strategies they have created to stay sane and sail a little more smoothly through the days. Along the way, I discovered one common characteristic that defined them all: They sounded really happy.

This article is the first in a series where we share moms' secrets for success in getting through the day. This piece features full-time working moms. November will cover moms who are working part-time, making flexible work arrangements work, and December will focus on stay-at-home moms.

Tip #1: Be up-front and honest with your boss.

At her job as communications officer for the Department of Veterans Affairs, Kai Fawn Miller of Falls Church

doesn't hide the fact that she's a mom. So, when she didn't travel without her breastfed daughter, her supervisor at work understood why. This mom of a 17-month-old girl also juggles her role as director of the Northern Virginia Working Moms Network, a group that supports, encourages and provides an outlet for local working mothers (find it through www.meetup.com).

Lili Dunn, a senior vice president of investments for Avalon Bay in Alexandria, also clearly defines her role. She sets boundaries and protects her time. "If I have to travel for work, I try to make it a day trip and not miss my boys' bedtimes," Dunn says. She takes vacations, blocks out time for kids' events and devotes weekend time to family. Oh, and Dunn's husband is a stay-at-home dad, so if you ever wondered if that would solve all your problems, it doesn't. You still have to set boundaries for yourself!

Tip #2: Create a schedule, and stick to it!

When you have four kids under 6 years old and hold down a demanding, full-time job, sticking to a schedule isn't just one way — it's the only way, according to mom Morna Willens of Capitol Hill. As senior director for federal government relations at the Recording Industry Association of America, Willens spends time each night preparing for the next day. "I make lunches in advance and write out the next day's activities for everyone involved. Everything has to run on time," she says. During the school year, her kids don't do a lot of after-school activities on weekdays. Those are concentrated on weekends, when Willens and other family members have more time to attend and enjoy.

Tip #3: Make meal plans.

Becky Richards of Washington, D.C., knows her biggest challenge as a working mom — getting dinner on the table. So, she rises to that challenge by planning and preparing meals ahead of time. "Every weekend, I make a meal plan for the coming week and cut up fruit and vegetables," she says. "Whoever gets home first — my husband or myself — knows what's for dinner and starts it." Some moms use online resources, such as "The Six O'Clock Scramble" e-newsletter, run by local mom Aviva Goldfarb. (Learn more at www.thescramble.com.)

Tip #4: Tag team with your spouse, partner or friend (if possible, whenever possible).

"I always feel like I need more time for my 3-year-old daughter and for myself," says Roshanak Tolouei Semnani, Ph.D., of Kensington, who works as a staff scientist at NIH. So, she has a strategy that kicks in at 5 p.m. and goes to 8:30 p.m. most weeknights. She tag teams with her husband. One cooks dinner while the other plays with and reads to their daughter. She admits she is lucky to have a husband whose job enables him to be home often enough to play a key role and credits the line of work she is in — research — for having the flexibility to leave work at 5. Now, if someone could just formulate a strategy for the rest of us moms whose husbands can't even get home to *eat* dinner...

Tip #5: Let some things go.

"Give yourself permission to let some things go," says Carolyn Semedo Strauss, CPCC, of Alexandria, a life and career coach for parents at Apply Within. She urges moms to get in touch with what is most important to them and remember what gets them out of bed in the morning. In talking with parents, she reminds them to be creative and open to help. A mom herself, Strauss also heads up the "Enterprising Moms" networking group of DC Working Moms, where more than 120 mompreneurs share tips online as they try to balance work and home. For more information, e-mail Strauss at Carolyn@applywithin.com.

Tip #6: Plan ahead for kids' school events, games and important dates by sitting down with a calendar and your kids.

Scheduling around summertime and school year events presents the biggest challenge for Colleen McEnroe of Bethesda. Now that her son is 16 and her daughter is 13, she works a 32-hour week ("school hours" of 7:45 a.m. — 2:45 p.m.) as a senior legal assistant for the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company. But she worked full-time for her son's first three years and learned that family communication concerning advance scheduling is critical. Even today, she sits down with her kids to go over the calendar so she knows what's coming and how to arrange for either her husband or herself (or, ideally, both) to attend.

Tip #7: Leave the office at a predetermined time — every day.

Sometimes, this means first figuring out what works once you get the feel for things like traffic or day care center closing times. For Melissa Lewis of Capitol Hill, this means leaving her job as a senior associate at a lobbying firm at 5:30 p.m. sharp in order to pick up 18-month-old Kate from day care on time. "The biggest challenge is finding a routine that works for everyone — mom, dad, baby, work and day care," says Lewis. "Day care closes at 6:15, and

it's difficult to get off work in time to pick up my daughter. I work in Arlington and day care is on Capitol Hill." With baby number two due in November, Lewis now considers staying home altogether so she can spend more time with her children, and because it was so hard to find time to pump breast milk at work.

Tip #8: Keep looking for a strategy that works for you.

How would you like to work full-time and not have to worry about child care? You could rest assured that your child is loved, safe and stimulated — and all for free. Meet Katie McGraw of Washington, D.C., who works full-time as an administrator at Howard University while her husband Daniel is a stay-at-home dad. Even so, Katie stresses it's still important to be as organized as possible. Her number one challenge is feeling like there is never enough time to do everything. Her answer? "I'm still looking for a strategy for that!" she laughs. In the meantime, an understanding boss, terrific family friends and her husband as the primary caregiver to their one-year-old daughter make it all worthwhile. And, somehow, Daniel is managing to stay home *and* write a textbook for culinary students. (How he is pulling off being this productive is what we really want to know!)

Tip #9: Find your release.

Moms find it hard to take care of themselves, but it's important to find some stress relief. For some moms, it's yoga or jogging. For others, it's catching up with an old friend, having a mom's night out or listening to a favorite CD. It could be walking the dog alone, sticking to that pedicure appointment or catching up on celebrity gossip by paging through the latest *People* magazine. So, go ahead and soak in a hot bath, laugh at your favorite comic strip or just sit and do nothing. You'll be a better mom and employee for it.

Tip #10: Explore the possibilities of a more flexible work arrangement with your current employer — whether it's different hours, full- to part-time, one day working from home or a job share (you might be surprised).

Several moms I spoke with happily reported success stories about finding greater flexibility in the work force than they ever thought possible. One pitched a job share to her company, and they accepted this arrangement, though it had never been done there before. She went on for six successful years of job sharing and inspired some other moms to do the same. Another mom walked in to quit because the full-time hours were taking too much time away from her being a mother. Her boss immediately asked her to please stay and told her she could work part-time. (She had never even thought to ask him if she could go part-time, thinking it would never be an option.) Another mom flexes her schedule. Still another recently moved to a schedule of 90 percent — gaining just enough time to feel better able to balance work and home. Moms all over our area are making flexible work arrangements work — and we'll show how in our November issue.

Erin Mantz is *Washington Parent's* editor at large. She lives in Potomac with her husband, two sons and their dog.

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