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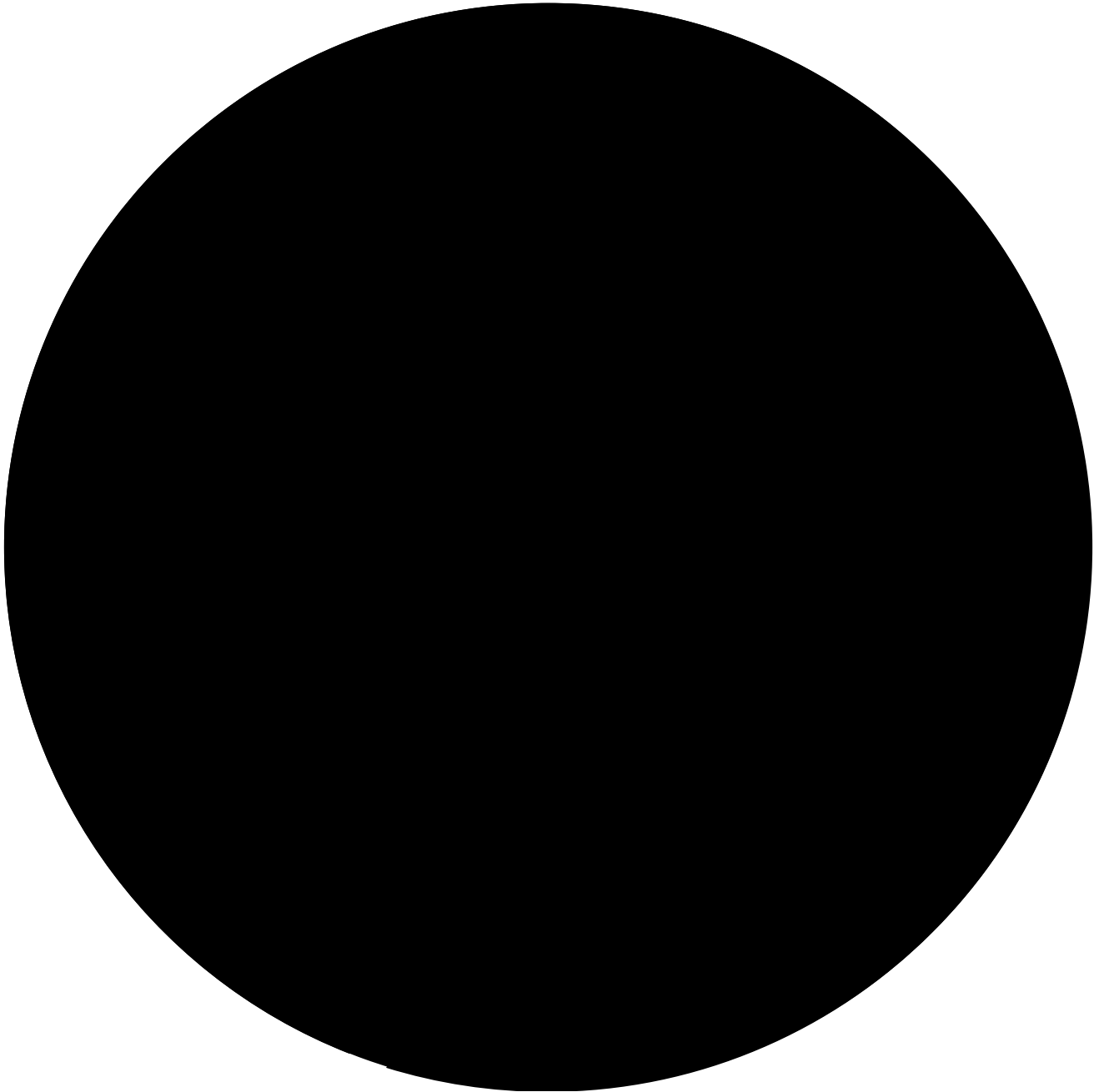
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7 Tips for Working From Home With Kids When Coronavirus Has Shut Everything Down

by
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The World Health Organization has declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. Things are changing quickly every day, and most of us have seen our typical routines turned upside down. More and more workplaces are allowing or requiring [remote work](#), while school and daycare closings and “social distancing” restrictions mean that whole families are suddenly spending a whole lot more time at home together.

That means many working parents are facing an unprecedented situation: working from home with kids and without access to the camps, babysitters, playdates, and even Grandma-dates that you might normally rely on to get through a school break or a snow day.

It won't be smooth or perfect, but there are a few strategies you can use to make your new situation a little easier. We have real-world tips from remote workers who've balanced career and children in close proximity to help you through this difficult moment.

1. Get Creative With Your Schedule

If you have another adult home with you, consider a split schedule. "Our entire family was housebound for 15 days last winter when there was a polar vortex in Wisconsin," says Melanie McKay, a scheduling manager for Kaplan Test Prep. (Full disclosure: I also work at Kaplan and McKay is a colleague of mine.) "At the time our kids were two, six, seven, and nine. My husband and I both had to work from home and school was cancelled. At the beginning of each day, we decided who would be the 'on point' parent. That person would work at the dining room table, feed the kids, and suggest activities for 'bored' children while the other parent worked in a different room."

Of course, it may not be possible to get all your work done during regular business hours if you're also on duty with the kids. "One way we maximized work time was by working odd hours," McKay says. "I worked before the children were awake. My husband and I staggered worktimes during the day, and one of us worked in the evening when the children were in bed." You'll also need to take meetings and deadlines into consideration. Which ones can be shifted around, and which are cast in stone?

Whichever time slots you end up working, there will be an adjustment period as you retrain your mind to focus during your new "business" hours. You may enjoy mornings, but getting up at 4 or 5 AM to work is different from getting up early to exercise. So set yourself up for success. Pick out tasks in advance, and then gather all of the tools and information you'll need to complete them. Your tired brain will thank you later.

2. Be Up Front With Your Boss

You might need to make adjustments to your work schedule in order to watch your children. Before you do, talk to your boss or HR.

Begin the discussion by contextualizing the news. Remember that this isn't your personal situation, it's a community issue. Convey this point tactfully by stating the facts in a straightforward way. It's also always good to come into this kind of conversation proactively with a clear action plan, says Muse career coach [Melody Godfred](#).

So for example, Godfred suggests you might say:

"As I transition to working from home, I wanted to share that I am also responsible for my three kids, who I will be homeschooling for the time being due to school closures. I am creating a schedule that I will share with you so that you're aware of when I will be available or unavailable for calls or collaboration. I am absolutely committed to maintaining the level of excellence you expect and will remain in close communication with you so you're clear on how I'm meeting our goals. I appreciate your support and look forward to navigating this together."

And remember that having this kind of conversation will help everyone—you, your boss, and even your team. "If you clearly communicate your needs, you not only help to make your own life less stressful during this time, but you also open the door for your coworkers to have this conversation as well," Muse career coach [Kaila Kea](#) says. "They may also be struggling with balancing work and family life, just like you, but don't know how to address it."

3. Stick to a Routine

Maintaining a daily routine will help everyone stay occupied and manage some of the anxiety caused by this big change. Go ahead and write out a schedule (including which parent is on primary kid duty if you're trading off) and pin it to the wall or the refrigerator so kids can refer to it throughout the day.

"The kids had a list of things to do each morning (dress, brush teeth, empty the dishwasher, read for 15 minutes), and we steered them toward different activities on each day such as puzzles or fort building," McKay says.

With some schools closing for a month or more, you'll want to build in "school" time every day, too. (Bonus: School time can equal pockets of work time for you.) If your kids' schools have set up remote learning, follow the plan and use the resources provided by their teachers. If not, you can use the free resources at [Khan Academy](#), which has also shared suggested [daily schedules](#) for students ranging from preschool to grade 12.

Even toddlers will benefit from a routine, though you'll need to guide their activities more than with older children. (Think of how a daycare or preschool structures the day, with set snack times, nap times, activity times, and play times.)

Just resist the temptation to have a screen time free-for-all: "Rationing screen time was an important part of my child engagement strategy," McKay says. "They knew that those were the only two hours that they would get to watch screens all day, so they focused on the show and let me focus on work."

4. Use Visual Cues to Minimize Interruptions

If you share childcare duty with another person, refrain from interrupting them during their heads-down work time. If the working parent can move into a different room, the adult on active child duty should keep the children away from the door. As the saying goes, "Out of sight, out of mind." Act as if the parent who's working remotely isn't home during their scheduled work shift.

This is much harder to do if you can't move into a different room. However, there are strategies you can use to minimize interruptions. Designate a specific area as your work zone and use it consistently. This might be your kitchen table or a chair in your living room. Build the association that when an adult is sitting there, they're working. You could even use masking tape on the floor to mark where the "walls" of your "office" begin and make a rule that children must stay outside the lines. Consider wearing noise-cancelling headphones to both block out noise and serve as an additional visual cue.

If you don't have another adult to help, visual cues become even more important. "I've had to implement strategies that keep kids out of client calls," says Carrie Sharpe, communications consultant and co-owner at He Says, She Says, who homeschools her five children while working from home. "For example, I hang a stop sign on my office door so the kids know not to barge in. They know that when the stop sign is hanging there, they need to be quiet."

Adults living in small spaces can hang a stop sign on their laptops or on the wall next to them during video or phone calls. Give younger children the opportunity to make or decorate a homemade stop sign. Not only will they have a fun craft to do, but once they realize that everyone has to respect *their* sign, they may be excited to help enforce the no interruptions rule.

Another way to enforce this rule is to signal when it *is* OK to talk to you. Take the stop sign down after your meeting is over. Remove your headphones. If you have an office door, open it. Tell older children when you'll be free to talk. If they understand when they *can* interrupt you, they're more likely to wait until that time.

5. Let Kids Make Some Choices

Giving children the ability to choose some of their own activities and self-serve meals and snacks helps build independence—and allows you to get more unbroken time for work. "I had lists on the fridge of lunch choices and snack choices. The children could get all of their own snacks, so I didn't have to spend twenty minutes taking them through the options," McKay says. "I also had a list on the fridge labeled 'Bored?' with about fifteen activity suggestions such as

coloring, dance party, and crafts. The last item on the list was ‘clean.’ Obviously no one wanted to make it to the bottom of the list and get stuck cleaning, so they chose something else.”

For younger children, you may need to prep and package food into single servings the day before and leave them on the counter or on a low shelf in the fridge, while older children can put ingredients together into a meal.

Similarly, while older children can pull out and put away activities on their own, toddlers will need a little more help. Consider setting up activity stations for them to choose from. This can be as simple as opening up the bottom cupboards in the kitchen, making a pile of clean socks for them to match, or putting playdough on the coffee table.

6. Communicate With Your Coworkers

Even with the best-laid plans, your children will interrupt your work. They’ll scream just as you unmute during a conference call. They’ll bomb your video meetings. Or you may just need to take them outside for 30 minutes so they can burn off energy. Your coworkers will be more understanding about interruptions if you warn them ahead of time. And after all, you aren’t trying to game the system by working while watching your children—you’re making the best of an unprecedented situation, and you’ll probably have coworkers going through it with you.

“If you have a conference call and know there might be some unavoidable noises in the background, call attention to it at the beginning of the conversation,” says Alissa Carpenter, author of [How to Listen and How to Be Heard: Inclusive Conversations at Work](#). “This way if/when it happens, people are a little more prepared and not as thrown off by the distraction.”

If you’re working a split schedule, inform the people you work with the most. For example, you can say, “I have two children, and as you know, all of the schools and daycares are closed. I’m sometimes going to be working at odd hours so I can get everything done. And you’ll probably see and hear my children during meetings. Thank you in advance for your patience.”

Put your revised business hours in your email signature, on your voicemail, and in the company messaging system to remind everyone of when you’re on and when you’re not. Before going into a conference call or video meeting, warn the attendees that there will be children in the background. Then mute your mic until you’re ready to talk.

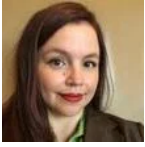
7. Plan Breaks With the Kids—and Downtime Without Them

Working for a few hours in the early morning or evening gives you the opportunity to take breaks during the day. “I work in blocks and prefer to do most of the schoolwork in the morning,” says Sharpe. “Some days are work heavy, while others are school heavy.”

Temporarily remote workers can take a page out of Sharpe’s book by working and parenting in blocks. During your “off” time, play with the kids, preside over schoolwork, or get outside. Consider drawing, board games, dance parties, and scavenger hunts. Video calls with distant family members can give everyone someone different to talk to. Keep a running list of activities—the adults and children can pitch in thinking of ideas—and deploy the ones that work in the moment. If you give the kids your full attention during breaks, they can look forward to them, and it might just be easier for them to get through your working blocks too.

Just as important: Make sure each adult in the house also has downtime to themselves. Parents who work while managing children are always on, and that can take a toll on everyone’s patience and energy levels. So, for example, you might make space to read a book, work on a craft project, or exercise. In a house with multiple adults you can trade off—and try to discuss when and how you’ll each take your downtime in advance to avoid arguments. Solo parents might need to wait until the weekend to use an early morning or late evening for alone time.

Juggling work and childcare is an intense but survivable experience. Many remote workers successfully navigate this reality every day. While your situation is different from families who regularly work at home while taking care of children, you can build a temporary structure for your temporary circumstances. With a little bit of planning, lots of discussion, and an adaptable attitude, you'll be able to better weather your COVID-19 stint at home with the kids.



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