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Eight strategies for helping kids wait while you have to work

Eight Strategies for Working at Home While Caring for Kids

The world has turned upside-down for families with young children, especially for those in which both parents are working and for single-parent families. They have the impossible task of trying to do their jobs while caring for their kids who are still very dependent on them and who, from a developmental perspective, have limited ability for self-regulation.

It is particularly difficult because most kids associate their time at home with connecting with their parents—playing, reading, exploring—even if in life prior to the pandemic it was just for a few hours between six and eight pm (if you were lucky!) Now, children must adapt to this new reality: even though everyone is home, mom and dad need to work and kids are suddenly expected to entertain themselves for extended periods. (Not that this is a bad thing—I am all for giving kids time to learn to make their own fun. But the fact is that most families I talk to have never created this kind of space/experience for their children, so this is another big change in their routine that children have to adapt to.)

As a result of strategizing with parents over the past few weeks to help them cope during this insane time, I have come up with a list of eight specific ways that you can help your kids wait during times when you have to work.

1. Have a morning meeting to preview the schedule for the day. If you can make it visual, even better, using photos that depict each of the tasks or activities: eating breakfast together, mommy and daddy on their computers, independent play time, family play time, bath, bedtime books etc.

2. Use a Timetimer (<https://lernerchilddevelopment.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=cc5fb566be790dc68f5832292&id=f1524e4908&e=08f5c5c3ec>) so your kids can see exactly how much time there will be for each segment of the day. Knowing what to expect helps children feel more in control; for example, when quiet, independent playtime will be over, how much time they will have for outside play, or when story time with dad will begin.

3. Create check-ins with your child between work commitments. This is a time to reconnect with your kids and help them engage in a new activity. A mom I spoke to yesterday has set a firm limit with her colleagues that she will need a minimum of 20 minutes in between meetings. If meetings can't be spaced to accommodate this plan, she will join a few minutes late and/or hop off a few minutes early. While this plan has reduced her work time, it has made this mom much more productive overall. (Sometimes limits aren't just for kids, which brings us to strategy #4...)

4. Set realistic expectations with your boss and colleagues. Almost every parent I have talked to since the start of life during lockdown feels like they are failing at parenting and failing at their jobs. Even when they carve time out for work, they are not at their most productive because they are constantly diverted. I strongly suggest you collaborate with your boss to set up a system that will manage expectations and maximize your productivity. For example:

* Connect each morning to discuss what tasks are essential and which can wait.

* Go over all the meetings scheduled and assess whether your participation is critical or whether the information being shared is something that can be done via email.

* At the start of each meeting, let your colleagues know how long you will be able to participate for so whatever information you need to share or hear is addressed during that time.

My close friend, Lesli Rotenberg, Chief Programming Executive and General Manager, Children's Media and Education at PBS, manages a team of over 100 staff, many of whom are parents of young children. Her digital team is using the SLACK app to enable staff to post their availability each day so that everyone is clear on what to expect. Research on worker productivity (<https://lernerchilddevelopment.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=cc5fb566be790dc68f5832292&id=9a3095c321&e=08f5c5c3ec>) shows that these kinds of family-friendly and flexible approaches benefit both companies and families.

5. Give your child a "job" to do while you are doing your job. Kids love the concept of jobs so capitalize on that. Start an activity with your child. Then, when you have to go back to work, tell him that while you are doing your job, he has a job, too. This helps your child focus on something concrete and productive while you are gone. It provides some "scaffolding" to help him manage the "in-betweens." Here are some examples from families I have talked to this week:

* Crystal read the first few pages of a book with her child. When she had to go back to work, she told her son that while she was working, he had a job, too—to finish looking through the pictures of the book very carefully so that when they are back together again he can tell her the story in his own words.

* Harlan started making some pretend food out of Play Doh with his daughter for her animals. When he had to do a call, he told her that it was her job to keep making lots of food so that when he finished his job, they could make a big dinner party for the animals.

6. Tell your child that he has a "memory holder" in his brain. This is a place where he can store all the ideas/questions/feelings he wants to share with you until you can give him your full attention again. I find this to be a highly effective tool because it gives children a sense of control—and that there is something they can do with their thoughts and feelings while they have to wait. For older kids, you can suggest they draw or write down the things that come to their minds at times when you are not together, to share later.

7. For older children, who are working on pen and paper activities, develop a coding system they can use to note things they want to share with you or that they need help with once you are able to be present. For example, a five-year-old was doing a math game. Her dad started it with her. When he had to go back to work, they developed a plan that she would circle any items that she needed help with and put a star next to items that especially interested her and wanted to talk about with him. Using this tool helped her work

with and put a star next to items that especially interested her and wanted to talk about with him. Using this tool helped her work independently for much longer periods.

8. If having your child in the room with you as you work is an option, be sure to make the ground rules crystal clear and have a plan for implementing them—that you can control—to avoid constant power struggles.

* Lay out activity choices that are acceptable for your child to do in your work space—that you are comfortable with and can control. For example, no balls or other objects that get kids riled up. Think Play Doh, blocks, coloring, audio books.

* Create a very clear, defined, space where your child can play. It's best if you can establish some physical boundaries, for example that your child sits at a child-size table. One family moved a tent into the office where their child could safely play which worked well. The more "gray zones" there are—limits that are not clear—the more likely it is that you will lose control of the situation, reducing your productivity and causing more stress for everyone.

* If your child is having a hard time cooperating with the limits you have established, be sure to have a Plan B that you can execute swiftly and dispassionately. "I know it's hard to be in the room with mommy and not be able to talk or play together. It's time to move you to a space where you can play more freely until mommy is done with her work." This may mean creating an area—which could be your child's room—where you can put a boundary up (using gate or monkey lock (<https://lernerchilddevelopment.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=cc5fb566be790dc68f5832292&id=bf7cab5ef1&e=08f5c5c3ec>)) where your child can safely play in situations during which you cannot adequately supervise him.

I realize that not all of these strategies will work for everyone. You may have to adapt them to your current reality. Most importantly, remember that young children have limited self-regulation under even the best of circumstances, so managing your expectations for their ability to play and function independently will be critical.

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Claire has been a practicing clinician for over 30 years, partnering with parents to understand the behavior and development of their young children. In addition, she provides consultation and training to local preschools and pediatric residents.

Claire is also the author of numerous parenting

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Claire writes a column for PBSkids.org (<https://lernerchilddevelopment.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=cc5fb566be790dc68f5832292&id=57a1b97ee2&e=08f5c5c3ec>) and has also written columns for Parents Magazine

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She has been a source on early childhood development for NPR (<https://lernerchilddevelopment.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=cc5fb566be790dc68f5832292&id=c40f0eb66b&e=08f5c5c3ec>) and numerous national daily newspapers such as The New York

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