



TRIPLE P GUIDE

# Balancing work and family during COVID-19

The presence of COVID-19 has impacted us in many ways. For many parents, the boundaries between work and family life have changed, and balancing work and family responsibilities has never been more important. In addition, many families are facing additional stresses, such as job insecurity, financial pressure, and uncertainty about the current situation.

It can be difficult to navigate changes in routine such as working from home while meeting family responsibilities, as well as periods of lockdown and social isolation. There's no perfect way to get the balance right and what works best may be different for different families and vary as things change. The key is for parents to take care of themselves and work towards a balance between work and family, and have a sense of being calm and in control. It's a challenging time for everyone, especially families. This guide offers suggestions to help you find solutions for your family. There will still be some tough days but choosing some strategies to use when you can will help make things a little easier.



## Recognise that balancing work and family is challenging

Balancing work and family responsibilities can be tricky at the best of times. During the constantly changing landscape of COVID-19 it is especially hard. Many children are home and require care, help with schooling, or more supervision. Many families are also caring for or worried about elderly family members. Periods of isolation, job instability and economic uncertainty, and concerns about health and safety

all add additional stress. Parents working from home may miss the social interaction that work usually provides. Parents working outside the home face different challenges. Working in 'front line' positions (e.g. health care, child care, working in essential stores, cleaning) and commuting to work can lead to worries about potential virus exposure. For these parents, supporting children and teens in their various forms of learning can be extra difficult.

Children and teenagers who are doing 'virtual' schooling may become bored with staying at home, spend extra time using technology, and feel isolated from their peers, and they may not understand the restrictions on their life. Increases in challenging behaviour in children are also common and place extra pressure on parents.

All of these things inevitably impact on parents' own wellbeing. Feeling worried, irritable, guilty, frustrated, angry and exhausted makes it even harder to manage daily demands. All parents need to consider how to help their children through this time while also finding time to take a break and look after themselves. Calm, relaxed parents are more able to provide the safety and stability children need in uncertain times.



### Take care of yourself as best you can

Taking care of yourself is a responsibility not a luxury. The most important thing you can do for your family or work is take care of yourself. Find some time to focus on your own needs. For example, take advantage of time you would normally spend commuting and schedule some self-care. This might be something like talking to a partner or friend about how you are feeling, a video meet up with friends, getting some fresh air and sunshine, or viewing or sharing something uplifting on social media. Try to manage any unhelpful emotions such as worry, guilt or anger. Stress management skills such as mindfulness, meditation, relaxation and/or deep breathing can also help reduce stress. Combat negative thoughts with more realistic, helpful coping statements like — *This is hard but I'm handling it* or *It's natural to feel a little overwhelmed I need to focus on one thing at a time*. If you focus on your own wellbeing (e.g. exercise, eat well, try to get enough sleep, avoid using alcohol or drugs to handle stress), you are more likely to stay healthy and be available for your work and your family.



### Have realistic expectations

Be realistic about what you can accomplish each day. This might be different to what you can usually manage, and that's OK. Give yourself permission to do what is achievable and avoid setting unrealistically high expectations that lead to unhelpful feelings of guilt and frustration. Everyone wants to be a good parent but aiming for perfection (both at home and work) is unachievable and sets you up for unnecessary stress. Give yourself permission to do things 'well-enough.' Consider how you spend non-work time to ensure your most important priorities are met. Avoid spending all your free time doing unnecessary chores. Consider if anything can be delayed and encourage children to be independent and contribute to household chores. Let go of unrealistically high standards and focus on what is most important.



### Set times to focus on family

When work and family boundaries are blurred, it's easy to let work take over and feel guilty about not spending enough time with your family. Setting specific times to engage with your family and have quality time together will help you know your family's needs have been met and allow you to concentrate on work when working. This is especially important if you find yourself working in what would normally be family times such as the evening or weekend. Make sure you have time to talk, play and do activities together, like going for walks, working on projects or cooking as a family. You may need to be extra creative when normal opportunities for social activities are limited.



### Talk with your employer and colleagues

Aim to work with your employer to find solutions that work for both you and your employer. If possible, negotiate work hours that fit with your family and childcare needs. This may include requesting certain shifts or avoiding scheduling meetings at times when your child is most likely to need you. Talk to your employer about whether flexible work hours are possible. Avoid taking on extra work and reduce unnecessary commitments. If saying 'No' to work is not possible or risky, ask for extra time to complete tasks if you need it. Let your employer know about any family commitments you have, such as supporting virtual schooling. Many employers will be dealing with similar issues themselves. They may also be able to make some accommodations to make life easier. Use your discretion about which of these suggestions may work for your current employment situation.

Share your experiences with colleagues as well. Co-workers can be a great source of support and they may be more understanding when work changes are required if they know what you are juggling. If you are working remotely, and opportunities for informal chats are low, consider setting up a video call or chat group where people can share their experiences.



### Be clear about work time and space

Let your family know when you are working and under what limited conditions you should be interrupted. Create work boundaries and set some clear ground rules about being quiet and respectful when others are working, and how to politely interrupt and ask for help if needed. Try to work at set times if you can, to avoid work taking over your entire week. Where possible, it's also best to work in the same space, so you are not associating work with everywhere in your home.



### Ensure children have adequate child care or supervision

Knowing your child is safe and cared for allows you to concentrate on work. If working from home, see if it's possible to work at times when young children require less supervision, or 'tag team' parenting responsibilities with your partner or another support person. Teens require less supervision but it is still important to monitor their activities.



### Encourage behaviour you like

Use praise to encourage behaviour you'd like to see more often. For example, if your child plays quietly while you are on a work call, use descriptive praise — *Thank you for being so quiet when I was on that call. That was really helpful.* Act early to prevent and manage any challenging behaviour. Set your child up with things to do when you know you need to concentrate on something, and encourage them to play or study independently. You can even set up some small incentives or treats for blocks of time when your child follows the rules. If rules are broken, give a clear instruction of what you want your child to stop doing and what to do instead. Praise them for doing the right thing. You may need to back up your instruction with a brief consequence (e.g. loss of a privilege like screen time for a short time) if problems continue. Afterwards,

catch your child following the rules and praise them. It's best to praise as soon as you can, especially with younger children, but if you find yourself forgetting to praise you can always praise later.

With older children, try to stick with the same, or similar, ground rules, rewards and consequences as pre-pandemic. Maintain similar routines and bedtimes to provide a sense of structure and keep things as normal as possible. Monitor excessive social media or technology use by implementing family screen-free time and providing other engaging activities. Praise teens for behaving well and acting responsibly. Privileges can be withdrawn for a short time if rules are broken. If teens are emotional, validate their experiences. Make time to listen to them and check you understand what is going on for them. Help them name what they are feeling and ask if there's anything you can do to help.



### Focus on work when you are working

You can work more efficiently by focussing only on work during work times. Avoid distractions like checking the news or social media. Task lists and setting yourself specific goals to achieve can help you focus your attention and work more efficiently. If you are interrupted, try to get straight back into the task you were working on as soon as possible. Working efficiently will allow you to get more done in less time, which will reduce workload-related stress and give you more free time.





## Schedule breaks

Scheduling regular breaks helps with concentration. Many people find that 20-30 minutes of focussed work followed by a 5-minute break works well. If children are home, this is a good time to spend a few minutes of quality time with your child or check in on what teens are doing. This will help your child know you are there for them and care about what they are doing even if you are busy with work. Build in time to plan out the day and debrief with a co-parent or other support person.



## Develop clear transition routines

Whether you are working in or out of the home, developing a clear transition-to-work routine will help you focus on work. Do the same things in the same order daily. Having predictable routines also helps children know what to expect and what you expect of them. If you are working at home with children, having mini transitions during breaks will also help.

Something as simple as giving your child a warning you are going to work in five minutes then saying goodbye will help.

End your work day well. It can be hard to switch off from work when it is right there in your home. Be clear about the end of the work day and try not to think about work after this. Aim to have a clear finishing-work transition at the end of the day. This might involve making a list of what to do the next work day (so you don't have to remember and worry about it) or taking a shower or a walk. If you use technology for work, put practices into place so that it doesn't intrude on family time (e.g. turn off push notifications, close email programs). Unless you need to be on call 24/7, consider putting away computers and phones for a period of time so you have a complete break from work. If you find yourself thinking about work during family time, simply acknowledge the thought then let it go so that you can focus on the moment and enjoy family life.

**Get more tips and strategies online to help during this crisis: [triplep-parenting.uk.net](https://triplep-parenting.uk.net)**

You may like to look at the parenting tips in these Triple P – Positive Parenting Program resources:

- *Triple P Guide: Parenting During COVID-19*
- *Top Parenting Tips for Parents and Carers During COVID-19*
- *Triple P Guide: Supporting Healthy Relationships and Managing Disagreements During COVID-19*
- *Top Parenting Tips for School Life During COVID-19*
- *Teen Triple P Guide: Parenting Teens During COVID-19*
- *Stepping Stones Triple P Guide: Parenting Children with a Disability During COVID-19*
- *Top Parenting Tips During COVID-19 for Parents and Carers of Children with a Disability*
- *Triple P Online*



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