

Working Parents + Shelter-in-Place. Mission Impossible?

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As I've been talking with clients this week, the reality of long-term school closures and shelter-in-place orders seems to be hitting working parents the hardest.

It can feel impossible for two-parent homes where both partners work from home — and gets even harder when one parent works outside of the home, for single parents, when kids have special needs, or if elder care is thrown into the mix.

Three main ideas here, curated from what I'm hearing, reading and experiencing myself as a working parent:

Set Expectations

Get radically real about short-term (now to 3 month) expectations of yourself:

As a professional. Anyone responsible for kids at home is just not going to be as productive and/or available as usual. **It's okay.** This is an unprecedented situation in our lifetimes; you and your team need to figure out how to work through it together. Shift the mindset from "I/we can't get this all done" to "here's what I/we can get done."

- Assess your and your team's current deliverables, initiatives and capabilities.
- Reset short-term priorities and deadlines.
- Re-assign/share the workload across the team.
- Establish preferred times for meetings or availability for real-time interaction. (E.g. meetings only between 9-12 and 2-5.)

Proactively align on all the above with everyone who needs to know – cross-functional partners, customers, suppliers, boss, etc.

As a working parent. You will not be able to offer the same level of time, attention and expertise that your children would normally receive from teachers, caregivers, etc. during this time. **It's okay.** Do your best, they will survive. Shift your mindset from "I'm being a bad parent" or "my kids are missing out on XYZ" to "we will get through this and learn previously unimagined lessons about life."

Set Structure

Involve everyone and make a family work plan:

Figure out a schedule and division of labor that works. For all. You'd be surprised that even young kids can contribute to brainstorming ideas and making a plan. (Whip out some flip charts or post-it notes – they'll love it!) And by involving them, they tend to be more enthusiastic about sticking with it. Things to consider:

- Can you and your partner or older kids work in "shifts" to take care of younger kids?
- Can you enlist or employ friends, family, babysitters, tutors to virtually engage your kids on a regular schedule that you could rely on? Via video they could talk, read, play games, sing, do dances, do schoolwork, etc.



- What are the most engaging/reliable activities that kids can do with little to no supervision? (e.g. movies, online gaming, schoolwork.) Schedule those activities during important work time. They *will* be getting more screen time; get over it.
- What work can you do while sitting near/with them? (e.g. status reports or emails at the kitchen table while they do schoolwork and ask an occasional question.)
- As you prioritize your precious time, what is the best way for you to spend the free time you'll have with the kids? Having fun? Relaxing? Getting outside? How do you want to “be” during that time?
- What are your rules for the time when you need to be uninterrupted? (e.g. door is closed, don't knock.) How can you reward them for sticking to the rules? (e.g. an enthusiastic high-five, cuddling and reading for 15 minutes, going outside to play.)

Make sure everyone in the family understands the schedule/plan and experiment! Try it for a week and then revisit – What worked? What didn't? What to try next?

Recharge

You'll need energy to pull off this mission:

We all know the metaphors – “put your oxygen mask on first,” “you can't pour from an empty cup,” etc. Well, they are true. Especially now.

- You will need to get creative, and insistent, about making sure you are getting adequate sleep and time to relax and recharge.
- Include a favorite activity in your plan, make a pact with someone, do what's needed to make it happen.
- Take time off from work, use the weekend as a weekend (it's still there, even though days seem to be blurring together.)
- Give yourself some perspective – look ahead 10 days, 10 weeks, 10 months and 10 years from now. How will you feel then, how will you look back on what is happening now.

You are not alone! We are all in this together. Would love to hear what's working for you so we can help share information with others. Often, the first question our clients ask us in a session is: “What are your other clients doing about WFH?” Let's spread the best practices.

About the Author

Tawny Lees, M.B.A., is the COO of Mariposa. She coaches, facilitates, leads, ensures client satisfaction, and is a coach/client matchmaker extraordinaire. Her coaching career began in 2004, inspired and informed by over 18 years of corporate leadership experience. She held VP roles in the financial services industry in functions as diverse as Risk, Sales, Service, Operations, Change Management and Marketing. Despite literally growing up in crazy-paced organizations, Tawny maintained a grounded perspective on leadership. Her education includes an M.B.A. from the Haas School of Business, UC Berkeley; a B.S., Finance with Economics minor at California State University, Hayward; and an organizational coaching certification by John F. Kennedy University. Tawny coaches virtually and locally in the SF Bay Area and can be reached at tawny@mariposaleadership.com, or follow on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/tawnylees/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tawnylees/).

