

Leading Issues Journal

July 2001 Issue

In this Issue

The Centre for Leadership for Women features ten articles by Ellen Galinsky on topics that are of concern to parents on an international scale.

Ellen Galinsky is the President and Co-Founder of Families and Work Institute (www.familiesandwork.org), a Manhattan-based non-profit organization conducting research on the changing family, workplace and community. A leading authority on work-family issues, Galinsky is the author of over 20 books and reports, including, *Ask the Children*, *The Six Stages of Parenthood* and *The Preschool Years*, co-authored with Judy David. She has published more than 100 articles in academic journals, academic books, and magazines.

Central to all the articles featured is the theme of, "The Balancing Act," as Ms Galinsky suggests strategies to achieve a balance and enjoy work and home life.

Also featured is the transcript of an interview with Ellen Galinsky on ABC Lateline on 3 May 01 where Compere and Reporter, Tony Jones asks Ms Galinsky about the results of her recent study with Children.

You can access the Centre's interview with [Ellen Galinsky](#) here.

I would also like to invite you to Have Your Say on what issues are of concern to you in relation to balancing your work and family. Share your experiences and views in the Centre's discussion on [Balancing Work and Family](#).

Articles By Ellen Galinsky

(click on the underlined title to view)

The Balancing Act:

[The Balancing Act: Coping With Mommy Guilt By Ellen Galinsky](#)

The Balancing Act: Coping With Mommy Guilt By Ellen Galinsky

If you're like most working mothers, you're probably used to feeling guilty.

It's no secret that many of us who are managing our jobs and families worry that we're shortchanging our kids of time and attention. One woman I spoke with complained: "Whenever I finally sit down to do something *I* want to do, my children are like homing pigeons — they're in my face with a million things they need me for *now*. I know I should deal with them calmly, in a matter-of-fact way, but I end up getting angry and yelling. Then I'm consumed with guilt." Another admitted: "I worry that my three-year-old wouldn't whine so much if I were home with him all day." Still another mother — who candidly describes herself as "guilt propelled" — feels bad when she *is* with her children, because she's neglecting her work. (Of course, she feels guilty at the office, too.)

What I now tell everyone: Listen to your guilt. Much has been written about how our culture puts enormous pressure on women to be "supermoms." That's true, but it doesn't mean guilt should simply be written off as "normal." In fact, I've come to the opposite conclusion.

I try to look at guilt as being like a fever, a symptom that tells us that something may be wrong. Instead of brushing it off, which could be risky and lead to more serious consequences, you're better off examining the guilt and treating the underlying cause. That way, you can start to "heal" yourself *and* your family. Follow these steps to managing your guilt, rather than allowing it to manage you:

Look at what's causing you to feel conflicted. While guilt has many triggers, most can be traced to a gulf between the realities of life and our expectations — in other words, all the "shoulds" that govern our behavior. The woman whose children interrupt her, for instance, believes a good mother should always be able to control her temper. The mother of the whining three-year-old feels that if she were raising her child right, he wouldn't whine.

Ask yourself whether your expectations are realistic. If you decide they are, and you don't want to be ruled by guilt, you need to make some changes in your behavior. The woman who yells at her children, for instance, explored a number of anger-management techniques, such as letting her kids know in advance that she's taking some "mommy time," or using a silly code word to signal that she needs a time-out.

The mother of the whiner, on the other hand, needs to bring her expectations in line with reality. While parents can help children learn to express themselves without whining, they can't stop it altogether. Whining is a function of a child's age, not of whether his or her mother happens to work. A bigger issue, though, is the guilt this woman feels about working. Like so many in her generation, she was raised by an at-home mom and worries that she is not doing the right thing. But 30 years of research suggest that you can't tell how a child will turn out based on whether or not the mother works — a fact she (and you) may find comforting. What matters most: how parents parent, the values they live by and whether their children are a priority in their lives.

The bottom line: If you ignore guilt, it will eat away at you. If you give in to it, and then overcompensate by indulging your kids or never disciplining them, you can hurt them in the long run. But if you pay attention to your guilt and see it as a signal to

examine your assumptions and how you are parenting, it can be a positive force, a way to become not just a better parent but a happier one, too.

February 24, 2000

A Note from the Families and Work Institute:

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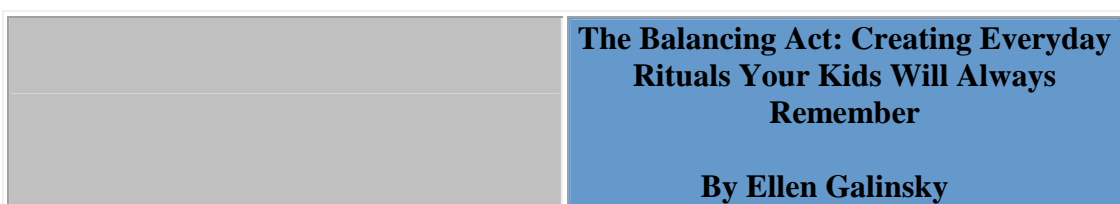
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The Balancing Act:

Creating Everyday Rituals Your Kids Will Always Remember



The Balancing Act:

Creating Everyday Rituals Your Kids Will Always Remember

By Ellen Galinsky

Which do you think your kids will remember most? That pricey family vacation to Disney World or the tea with toast and jelly you always make them when they're sick?

Surprise: It's the tea and toast, or rather, the small, everyday routines that endure. One young girl I interviewed, for instance, talked about how her dad would send her off to school every morning with a cheerful "Go get 'em, tiger!" She told me that a vacation or gift only lasts for a short time. "Family traditions happen again and again," she said. Other people I questioned recall silly but affectionate nicknames or conversing in pig Latin.

Even the simplest rituals make children (and parents) feel that they're part of a unit, which is key to imbuing kids with a sense of security. A study at the Families and Work Institute found that roughly one out of three kids gave their parents an "A" in establishing routines and sticking to them, but another third gave their parents a "C" or lower.

Here's how to create a few traditions you'll all treasure. None is particularly inventive, but that's the point: It's the ordinary rituals that become the memories we carry from childhood into adulthood.

- **Make the dinner table a place for sharing.** One couple I spoke with designates meals as a time to swap news and events of the day. The children take turns talking about each period of school and what happened afterward. The parents listen, ask questions and keep the conversation moving, but the floor belongs to the kids. Not surprisingly, their daughter later told me, "I never really understood the concept of not telling your parents stuff. They always ask what we do at school, so we tell them."
- **Make the most of car trips.** Think long car rides inevitably mean cranky, bored kids in the back seat screaming, "Are we there yet?" — and equally frustrated parents? Many families make travel a pleasure by playing games to pass the time. One family played I Spy, sticking with simple statements such as "I spy a red car" when their children were younger. But as the kids got older and more sophisticated, so did the game. They'd look for vanity license plates or objects that rhymed: "I spy something that rhymes with line." The game lasted anywhere from five to 45 minutes, but the impact was the same: much laughter and silliness.
- **Tell special bedtime stories.** Evenings are a time when kids are more ready to let down their guard, so put some extra effort into making them comfortable. I know one family ritual in which the children invent the first line of a bedtime story about a cow, a pig and a chicken, and their mother has to finish the tale.

The kids all look forward to figuring out ways to stump Mom and seeing how outlandish the story becomes.

- **Wake them up with a song.** Instead of yelling from the bottom of the stairs, some parents sing gentle songs or recite nursery rhymes to their still-sleeping kids. One father, for instance, would play "This little piggy went to market" with his daughter's toes, and she'd wake up with a giggle.
- **Make weekend breakfasts special.** One tradition that has survived in my own household is baking Sunday morning biscuits. We've been making them with our two kids — now 25 and 30 — since they were preschoolers, and we still make them when everyone's home. They roll out the dough and shape the biscuits — hearts for Valentine's Day, turkeys for Thanksgiving and circles for ordinary days. The ritual gives everybody something to look forward to on weekends.
- **Retell your family stories.** Recounting the time your son said "hang-a-burger" when he meant "hamburger" or when you all thought the dog ran away (but later found him hiding in the closet) will bring you closer. Kids love to hear stories about themselves and to laugh at private jokes. So make the effort. They won't forget it.

April 27, 2000

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The Balancing Act:

How to Escape From Your Work When You Work at Home



The Balancing Act: How to Escape From Your Work When You Work at Home By Ellen Galinsky

When your bedroom or kitchen is also your office, freeing yourself from job stress can be tougher than usual. Here, seven ways to make a quick escape.

Your hellish commute is a thing of the past and you get to greet your kids at the bus stop every afternoon. Such is the idyllic life of the telecommuter — or is it?

With 7% of parents now working from home on a regular basis, and another 14% doing it occasionally, more of us are coping with murky work issues, including how to meet a deadline when your child is fussing with a fever? Or how is it possible to spend time with your little one after dinner when there's a pile of unfinished work on the dining room table, demanding your attention?

The truth is, while working from home is convenient in many ways, it comes with its own set of challenges — namely, setting some boundaries between your family and career obligations. Here are some suggestions for navigating both:

- **Line up childcare.** Trying to squeeze in work when the children are napping or in front of the TV isn't going to make anyone — your boss, your kids or yourself — happy. Arrange for some form of childcare during working hours.
- **Create a get-to-work ritual** — even if your "office" is just up the stairs. Simply getting dressed in the morning and commuting is usually enough to get most of us from home mode into work mode. But for women who telecommute, it's crucial that they find a way to shift gears. One mother I know walks out the front door every morning, takes a stroll around the neighborhood, then re-

enters her home via the back door. It's her way of letting herself know that it's time to work.

- **Create a private space that's just for business.** If your kitchen table doubles as your office, it's hard for the kids (and your spouse) to understand that you're "at work" and shouldn't be interrupted. Make it easier for everyone to respect your space by establishing an office with a door (or at least a partition) that you can close when you're working.
- **Keep your work time sacred.** While some women may be able to juggle a conference call and sort laundry at the same time, for most of us, this kind of multitasking can hamper the quality of our work. So block off some time for when you only do work — no distractions allowed. If a friend calls, tell her you'll call back later. If your child demands help with homework, tell her you'll be there at 6 p.m., when you've finished your projects for the day. If you respect your work time, your family will too.
- **Take a "kid" break.** I have a friend whose father played in the local symphony orchestra. She clearly remembers bursting in the front door after school, eager to tell him about her day, and having him ignore her and continue to practice his music. "To be invisible," she told me, "was terrible." Focusing on work doesn't mean you can't greet your children warmly when they get home from school, or acknowledge their presence. Schedule your coffee or lunch breaks around your kids, so you can spend some time with them during the day.
- **If your child is ill, forget "business as usual."** Unless you have a regular baby-sitter who your child adores, sick kids will want (and need) your attention. If you can't take the entire day off, simply take a more relaxed approach to your workday.
- **When you're "off" work, act that way.** It may be tempting to answer your business line or run to your fax machine whenever you hear a ring, but if you do, colleagues will assume they can reach you 24/7. Turn off the ringer on your phone when you leave your desk at the end of your workday.

May 25, 2000

A Note from the Families and Work Institute:

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The Balancing Act:

How to Take a Hiatus From Work — Without Killing Your Career



The Balancing Act: How to Take a Hiatus From Work — Without Killing Your Career By Ellen Galinsky

Worried that you'll be out of the loop permanently when you take a leave of absence? Here are some tips from Lifetime's work and family expert on keeping your professional edge when you're AWOL.

Thinking of taking some time off? You're not alone. Even the most career-driven woman is likely to take a break from her job — to care for a new baby, to spend time with an ailing parent or because burnout has set in. Yet despite the fact that we all know someone who has done it, research shows that going on a hiatus (however brief)

can derail even an established career. A 1997 survey of men and women with business degrees revealed that those who took time off early in their careers earned 18% less than those who didn't; midcareer breaks led to a 14% drop in income. Another study found that when women returned to the workforce, their starting salaries averaged 30% lower than when they had left — a wage gap that they were never able to close completely, even after 20 years of continuous employment.

So, should women stick it out at the office, regardless of what's going on in their lives? I don't think so. I know many women who've taken extended time off, and most have managed to keep their careers intact. Plenty have benefited from the break, too, either by changing directions slightly or pursuing completely different, more satisfying professions. The question, then, is not *whether* to take time off, but how to do it without damaging your career. Here are some pointers:

- **Stay in touch with former colleagues.** Don't let your world shrink to such a degree that you exclude work — and your old colleagues — completely. Drop by your former office for lunch. Call to see what your ex-colleagues are up to. Ask them what they're reading and which conferences they're attending, and do your best to mirror their activities so you stay in the loop. Even though keeping up these contacts can be tough, especially if you have a new family to worry about, the effort will be worth it. Not only will you stay current in your field, you'll stay on colleagues' minds. When you're ready to return, they'll undoubtedly tell you about job openings.
- **Find a mentor.** These days, technology is changing so rapidly that even people in the thick of things sometimes struggle to keep up with the latest trends. So before you leave your job, ask a supervisor or someone else you trust and respect to help you stay plugged in on technological advances. You might say, "I plan to come back, and so I want to stay up-to-date." Then ask if you could e-mail or call her on occasion to pick her brain about how to keep your skills current.
- **Fill in for vacationing colleagues.** Look into whether you might be able to sub for workers who go on vacation or take short leaves of absence. This will help you to brush up your skills and keep your "career edge." Just don't agree to work more days than you're prepared for. After all, you left the job for a reason.
- **Expand your horizons.** Many people take time off not only because they want to spend more time with their families, but also because they're frustrated. If you fall into the latter category, use your hiatus to discover what you'd *really* like to be doing. If you've spent your career as an administrative assistant in a law firm but think you would rather be working for an arts organization, consider volunteering for one; even the most prestigious organizations tend to welcome free help. And try enrolling in adult education courses to broaden your skills and knowledge.
- **Savor your time away from work.** Most important, don't worry about what you may be missing at the office. Instead, do all you can to enjoy your time at

home. That way, when you decide to return to the 9-to-5 routine, you'll be energized and ready to jump-start your career — or even find a new one.

July 6, 2000

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The Balancing Act:

**How to Take Care of Yourself —
When Everyone Else's Needs Come First**

The Balancing Act: How to Take Care of Yourself —When Everyone Else's Needs Come First By Ellen Galinsky

The Balancing Act: How to Take Care of Yourself — When Everyone Else's Needs Come First

By Ellen Galinsky

Think you don't have the time (or luxury) to pamper yourself? Here's why it's essential — for you and for your family — to look out for number one.

Contrary to popular belief, time-crunched parents aren't spending less time with their children these days. They're spending less time with themselves. During the week, working women spend an average of 42 minutes a day less on personal matters than their counterparts did 20 years ago.

But if you think all that extra devotion adds up to better parenting, you're wrong. Research suggests that moms and dads who parcel out regular time for themselves are more confident about their parenting skills than those who don't. Think about how energized you feel when you return from a jog, a good movie or dinner out with friends. Don't you have a renewed appreciation for your family? And don't you think they can sense the difference in your attitude?

Before you can take some downtime, however, it's crucial to dispel all those assumptions that keep moms (and some dads) from focusing on themselves. Here are four guilt-inducing myths to banish once and for all:

1. **"I should be able to do it all."** If you're doing it all, you can't have it all. And you won't have much left emotionally for anyone else, either. Learn to delegate.
2. **"Work time — or family time — is my time for myself."** Nonsense! Work and family may give you joy, but you're still serving others' needs. Just-for-you time means you're just focusing on yourself.
3. **"It's selfish to do something just for myself."** Let's retire the notion that mothers should be self-sacrificing saints. Being a mom doesn't mean you should stop taking care of your own needs.
4. **"My husband — or kids — should notice that I need time off and offer to give me a break."** This attitude will only breed resentment. Your family can't read your mind. If you need time off, tell them now. Don't wait till next Mother's Day.

Once you've stopped feeling guilty, the second challenge is to actually carve out time for yourself. Here are some suggestions for finding the extra hours:

- **Schedule just-for-you time.** Sign up for a regular kickboxing class (that you pay for in advance, so you won't be tempted to skip the sessions) or plan a once-a-month dinner with friends — no canceling allowed. Think of these outings as a reward for all your hard work the rest of the time.

- **Trade time-off opportunities with your spouse.** He needs a respite, just like you do. If you don't begrudge him his breaks, he'll be more likely to support you when you take yours.

- **Take advantage of "found" moments.** Try to do something small for yourself — something you enjoy — every single day. Keep a good book by your bed to read at night. Take your kids on outings you'll enjoy too, like an outdoor concert in a beautiful setting.

- **Be in the moment.** One mother I interviewed put it best: "If I'm sitting by the sandbox with my kids, I could feel resentful and think about all the other things I wish I was doing. Or, I can treasure that moment."

- **Don't give in to your family's complaints.** If you're suddenly asking for "alone" time, don't be surprised if you encounter some resentment from your kids and your husband. Let them know what you're feeling. Let them air their fears. Together, come up with a plan so that everyone feels attended to.

June 1, 2000

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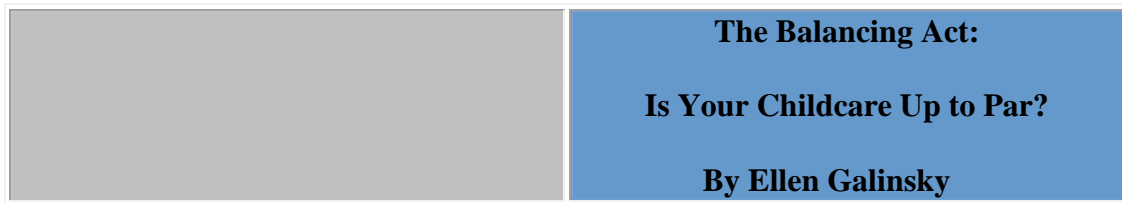
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The Balancing Act:

Is Your Childcare Up to Par?



The Balancing Act: Is Your Childcare Up to Par? By Ellen Galinsky

When your child is too young to speak up for himself (or herself), you may need to do some sleuthing on your own. Here are eight clues to look for.

You've just dropped your child off at day care or preschool, and suddenly you're hit by a wave of anxiety: Will your youngster be safe, secure and happy while you're at work? According to the last U.S. census (taken in 1990), more than 2.2 million children of working parents are in day care, and 801,000 attend nursery school or preschool. No doubt their mothers and fathers ask themselves the very same questions; after all, it's impossible to keep tabs on our brood when we're at an office from 9 to 5...or longer. But even if your little one can't tell you about the quality of his or her childcare experience, you can still assess what's going on. Start by asking yourself the following questions:

1. **How does your day-care provider greet your child in the morning?** Does she seem genuinely happy to see him? Or does she give a curt "Hello" while she busies herself with other things? Studies show that the warmth of the relationship between children and their providers is key to quality care. If children don't feel safe and loved, they will have difficulties learning and growing.

2. **Is your caregiver tuned in to your child?** Pay close attention to how she relates to your little one. Does she squat down and talk to little Tommy eye to eye? Does she coo back at your baby, or ignore her attempts to communicate? When your three-year-old talks excitedly about a fire engine he saw, does she listen and ask questions, or look disinterested and change the subject? Quality caregivers are responsive and able to read a child's cues — these characteristics are essential for promoting emotional and intellectual development.
3. **What do you see at the end of the day?** Is your child busy at play, engaged in art projects, reading books and interacting with other children? Or does she rush up and cling to you when you arrive? If it's the latter, she may be bored and starved for attention — and in need of a new daytime environment.
4. **What is the adult-to-child ratio?** Each state has different regulations for how many children a provider can care for at once. Still, being in compliance with such laws doesn't necessarily mean that a center is a quality operation. Often, official standards are lower than what childcare experts recommend. In my experience, a group size of six to eight infants for every two adults, and six to 12 one- and two-year-olds per three adults, is ideal. For preschoolers, look for 14 to 20 children for every two teachers.
5. **Do the teachers stick around?** Constant turnover can be disruptive and potentially disturbing for children. If you're hiring a nanny, look for one who doesn't have a history of job-hopping — one who can commit for at least a year or more. If you're investigating a childcare center, find out how well it retains workers. Good centers, which pay their workers reasonably well and treat them with respect, should have a turnover rate of less than 25%.
6. **Is the environment safe, clean and inviting?** At a minimum, providers should follow basic health and safety measures, such as washing hands after changing diapers and keeping a list of emergency numbers so you or a doctor can be quickly contacted if necessary. Check to see that a variety of interesting and age-appropriate activities and toys are within easy reach. Finally, look for more subtle signs that all is well — say, displays of children's work on the walls. This simple action shows that the kids' efforts and creations are praised and appreciated, just as they would be in your home.
7. **Do you feel supported as a working parent?** The best childcare providers should seem like part of your extended family. Does she help you to be a better parent? Or do her comments and actions make you worry and feel guilty about leaving your child all day? If she's doing her job well, a provider should help you feel confident in your decision to work or have time alone while your child stays with her.
8. **Would you want to stay there all day?** If the answer is no, then look for another arrangement. Your child shouldn't have to tolerate a situation that you would find unpleasant. After all, with the right provider, your child will thrive — and, in turn, so will you.

April 6, 2000

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The Balancing Act:

Moms at War



The Balancing Act: Moms at War By Ellen Galinsky

When working and stay-at-home mothers meet, clashes often occur. Lifetime's parenting expert explains how to ease the tension with other women — and do the right thing for your family.

For years, I argued that "mommy wars" — the supposed clashes between working moms and stay-at-home moms — were a media invention. After all, statistics show that many of us move in and out of the job force while we're raising kids — staying at

home for a few years, then working part-time, then staying home again — which blurs the lines between who does what. But the more I talked to women, the more I realized that the "mommy wars" are alive and well. Most stay-at-home moms told me they feel unappreciated. While they arrange play dates, run the PTA and pick up other parents' sick kids from school, they're accused by "friends" of being subordinate to their husbands and committing "economic suicide." And when they're at a party, for instance, and tell someone what they do, the response is often a glazed look that implies, "Next, please — I want to talk to someone more interesting."

Similarly, working moms feel criticized for "sacrificing" their children's happiness and not being involved enough in their kids' important life events. Some report other women saying outright, "Why did you have children if you weren't going to stay home with them?"

Why are women battling one another — instead of offering support? Being a parent is tough; you can never be sure that what you do will help your kids grow into healthy adults. That's why it's easy to feel threatened when we see another mother parenting differently. Our culture is also to blame: After decades of defining motherhood as being at home all the time, it's no surprise that many of us remain rather unsure about how OK it is for moms to devote a big chunk of their days to doing something else. But 40 years of research has consistently shown that whether or not a woman works has no bearing on how her kids turn out. The real issue is whether parents make their kids a priority, teach them solid values and make the effort to connect — things that are in every parent's power. Which means that it's time for a truce in the mommy wars. Here's how to turn down the heat — whether you head to an office every day or mother your kids full-time.

- **Put yourself in the other mother's shoes.** From talking to women across the country, I've learned that both working and at-home moms feel judged. Once women realize this, they almost always stop viewing one another as enemies and come to the realization that the problem is actually a society that doesn't support mothers in general.
- **Join forces to advocate good parenting.** Instead of arguing about whether being at home is better for kids, we should focus on developing programs and support for those parents who aren't parenting well — or at all.
- **Surround yourself with friends who endorse your choices.** I always say, "Find a Jeannie or a Nancy" — the women who supported me most when my kids were little. No matter what happened (such as when one of my children covered our new beige carpeting with red finger paint), my two friends made me laugh, emphasized how wonderful my children were and helped me to constructively handle the everyday issues of parenthood. On the flip side, avoid people who make you feel bad, those who always seem to have a story about how they're managing better. Have friendly, light conversations with these people — if you choose to talk with them at all — and don't give them the opportunity to judge you.
- **Follow your own convictions.** Research shows that when mothers feel that they are making the right choice — whether that's to work or stay at home — their

kids are more likely to thrive. If the way you're living doesn't feel right to you, make a change. You'll be happier, and so will your family.

May 11, 2000

A Note from the Families and Work Institute:

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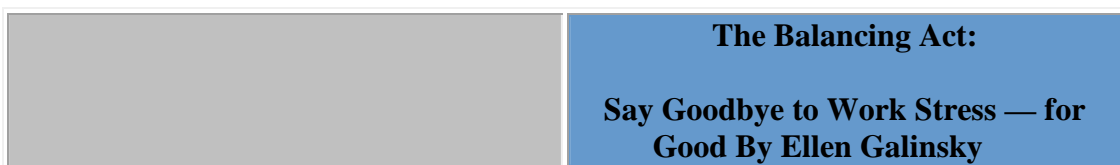
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The Balancing Act:

Say Goodbye to Work Stress — for Good



The Balancing Act: Say Goodbye to Work Stress — for Good

by Ellen Galinsky

Lifetime's parenting expert offers tips for keeping on-the-job jitters where they belong — at the office.

Remember when the experts predicted that e-technology — not to mention beepers, cell phones and Palm Pilots — would free us up to spend more time with our families? Instead, work has morphed from something we do at a desk from 9-ish to 5-ish to something we can — and worse, feel we should — do anytime, anywhere.

Adding to the problem, employers are becoming ever-more demanding. In a 1997 study by the Families and Work Institute, 65% of people said their jobs required them to work "very fast" — a 10% increase from two decades earlier. More striking: The number of people who said they didn't have enough time during the day to finish all their projects grew to 65% — up from 21% in 1977. The bad news for working parents is that on-the-job stress is all the more likely to follow you home. Here, I've pinpointed four ways to help keep family time tension-free:

1. **Make a to-do list at the end of each work day.** If you dash out of the office with lots of projects dangling, you'll have a tougher time clearing your mind for your kids (and your partner). So before you head home, write down everything you need to do the next day and boldly circle your top three priorities — tasks you should be able to complete in one day. If you believe you can accomplish at least some of what you need to do the next day, it will help you to feel like work is under control and will enable you to put it out of your mind for the night.
2. **Get a grip on office politics.** Maybe your boss excluded you from a meeting, or a co-worker corrected you in front of a client; before you leave, pause for a few minutes to consider how you'll respond tomorrow. If you're pondering sending your colleague an e-mail, jot down what you'll say before you go home. Or, if you choose to do nothing, figure out how you'll react if the situation occurs again. Our research shows that it's these kinds of sticky interpersonal issues that cause the most stress — and are most likely to carry over to home.
3. **Switch yourself out of work mode.** Meditate at your desk for a few minutes or listen to relaxing music during your commute. My son once made me a tape of Brazilian songs, dubbed the "Happy Driving Tape." No matter how tense I've been all day at work, I find myself automatically relaxing when I pop this upbeat, rhythmic compilation of samba tunes into my tape deck.
4. **Create boundaries around family time.** Safeguard your sanity by setting up rules, such as no work phone calls until after the kids are tucked in. If you feel you must check and respond to your e-mail or voice mail from home, establish a set time to do it every night, and make sure it's convenient for you and your

family. If you know for sure that you'll be at your computer or on the phone from 10 to 11 each evening, you'll be less likely to stress about work you need to do while you're with your kids.

May 4, 2000

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The Balancing Act:

How to Mesh Your Work Life and Home Life



The Balancing Act: How to Mesh Your Work Life and Home Life

By Ellen Galinsky

*Do your kids know what you do all day?
Here's what to tell them.*

You're probably used to trading office horror stories with your friends or your partner. But surprisingly few moms and dads talk directly about what they do at work with their kids. That doesn't mean your children are totally in the dark about what you do. Even young children glean information from overheard conversations, observations and offhand remarks. The trouble is, these snippets can lead to misperceptions: My research has shown that only two out of five kids think their parents truly love what they do, when three out of five parents actually say they like their work a lot.

"I realize that I've been coming home and spouting off about what's wrong at work," one mother told me. "I almost never talk about what's going well." Another admitted that even though she loved her job, she told her kids that she wished she didn't have to go to the office every day, "mostly out of guilt."

But by focusing only on your frustrations and never talking about the good things, you shortchange your kids. Parents can use their on-the-job experiences to give children a positive introduction to the world of work. Here are some ways to share your away-from-home life with them:

- **Arrange for them to visit you at the office.** Introduce them to co-workers and, if they have time, ask your colleagues to explain what they do. Perhaps you could even have your son or daughter help you photocopy papers or stuff envelopes. If your children can't visit, take a snapshot of your workplace so they have a visual image of where you spend your days.
- **Tell them why you work.** Sure, most of us work for money, but there's usually more to it than that. So let kids know the full array of reasons you do what you do. Even if you are truly working for the paycheck, you can explain why you're in that situation and what you hope for them in the future. One mom who worked in a fast-food restaurant, for instance, told her kids that there were "a lot more things for them to do than work at a fast-food chain. I tell them they can be anything they want to be, as long as they keep focused on it."
- **Talk about your bad days and your good days.** Explain what you find interesting about your work, and what lessons you've learned. If you've had a bad day, talk about it directly and honestly with your children — in terms they can understand — stressing that it isn't their fault you're upset. This will help them see that there are positive ways of handling stress.
- **Take advantage of life lessons.** Some parents like to use their work stories to teach kids how important it is to be able to get along with a wide variety of

people. Another parent I spoke with stressed how important it is to not just complain about problems, but to try to fix them. The key: Always be conscious of the message you're sending.

- **Pretend to switch roles.** A doctor can let her daughter play with her stethoscope; a secretary can help her kids set up an office, complete with a phone, a headset and an old computer. Kids learn through play, and when you watch them pretend to do what you do, you'll get a good picture of how they view your work.
- **Know when to leave your work at the office.** For some of us, it's hard not to go on and on about our jobs — if only because we spend so much time and effort on them. But our kids need us to focus on them sometimes. One child I spoke to put it best: "I want my mom to like her work," she said, "but not more than she loves me."

March 23, 2000

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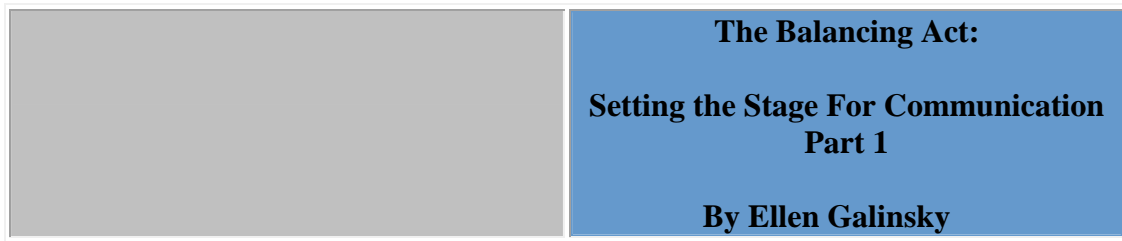
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The Balancing Act:

Setting the Stage For Communication Part 1



The Balancing Act: Setting the Stage For Communication By Ellen Galinsky

Part One: What to Do When Your Kid Clams Up

Do you have any idea what's going on in your child's head? Here, five surefire conversation starters:

For weeks, you've been immersed in a stressful project at work. Now that you've finally come up for air, you notice that your 11-year-old barely speaks at the dinner table. Or maybe you're worried about your daughter's cigarette-smoking new boyfriend, but she gives you the deep freeze every time you bring him up. Don't beat up on yourself. Even parents who have always been close with their kids go through periods when communication stalls. Below are some suggestions for getting the talk flowing again:

- **Find a relaxing place and time to chat.** If you want to have a heart-to-heart, you need to find the right setting for both of you. One mother I interviewed treated her daughter to dinner at a favorite Chinese restaurant every other week. Another took advantage of driving time to initiate conversation, noting that her teenage son would talk more freely when he didn't have to make eye contact with her. Still another woman took after-dinner strolls with her normally tight-lipped son — who'd open up once the sun went down. "He'd tell me almost anything in the dark," she said. Once you find a good spot, return to it frequently, so that your child comes to identify the setting with intimate talk.
- **Learn to read your child's signals.** Often, kids (even teenagers!) want to talk to their parents, but they don't know where to begin. In the course of doing research for my most recent book, for instance, I found that seventh through 12th graders were more likely than younger kids to want more time with their parents. But as many kids admitted during our conversations, they'd been so busy pushing their parents away that it was hard for them to ask for guidance when they needed it.

The good news is that even normally reticent kids give clues that they're ripe for opening up. For instance, if your teen starts hanging around for no apparent reason — I call this being a "hovercraft" — you can bet that there's something on his mind. When my own kids start exhibiting hovercraft behavior, I try to put aside my book — or whatever it is I'm doing — and start a conversation about anything. Sure enough, my kids will eventually end up telling me what's on their minds.

- **Focus on the moment at hand.** As women, we're so used to multitasking — paying bills while talking on the phone and cooking dinner — that it may take a special effort to focus on a conversation. But this concentration is what children need most.

When I sit down with groups of kids and ask them to define what makes a good parent, most say it's someone who is "there for me," who pays close attention and really listens. Many kids are fully aware of their parents' failure to do just that. One mother told me that her two teenagers used to joke with her at dinner and say, "Earth to Mom! Mom to Earth!" They realized that she was "physically sitting there, but [that] mentally I was somewhere else." This flightiness can leave kids feeling as if they can't count on you to be there. So next time you sit down to talk with your child, clear your mind, put all your other worries on pause and focus on her alone.

- **Take an indirect approach to sensitive topics.** If there's a particularly touchy issue you want to discuss, such as premarital sex, open the door by talking about other people who've dealt with a similar situation. You might say, for instance, that you recently read an article about middle school kids feeling pressure to have sex, then ask your child what she thinks about it. With younger kids, you can broach sensitive topics by reading a book about a certain issue, then discussing it.
- **Don't give up if your child keeps mum at first.** The most important part of getting your kids to open up is persistence. If your child snaps or brushes you off, try again another time in some other way. Just remember: Our kids need us and want us to talk to them — even when they act like they don't.

April 13, 2000

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The Balancing Act:

Setting the Stage For Communication Part 2



The Balancing Act: Setting the Stage for Communication By Ellen Galinsky

Part Two: Have the Best Conversation Ever With Your Kid

You're sitting at the dinner table with your son or daughter — and silence descends. Here's how to turn those tense moments into talking points...

"How was school today?"
"Fine."

Sound familiar? It's the stock kid-answer to just about every question — and one that you're likely to find incredibly frustrating. After all, you know your kids can talk — you hear them gabbing for hours on the phone with their friends. They're just not talking to *you*.

Many parents have trouble making meaningful conversation with their children. In last week's column, I wrote about ways to set the stage for a satisfying talk — specifically, how to find and create the right moment for sharing. But what you say and do once you have your child's attention is equally important. Here, a few suggestions:

- **Don't play 50 questions.** It's easy to fall into the trap of firing off query after query. But just as you may dread being accosted with the inevitable "What's for dinner?" when you walk in the door, kids also need to unwind after a busy day at school. So ease them into the conversation; there's nothing wrong with some meandering small talk before you really get down to business.
- **Keep your questions specific.** "How was school today?" is not going to yield as much information as "How did that science project go? Were you nervous during the presentation?" Children under age eight, especially, find it easier to respond to precise questions than to vague, open-ended ones.
- **Don't limit your queries to the topics of school and homework.** For children, the school bus ride, recess, lunch and after-school activities are just as important as what goes on in the classroom. You might also try the old psychological trick of asking leading questions, like "What do you think will happen tomorrow?" and "How do you feel about such and such?"
- **Learn to listen actively.** Good listening always leads to more talking and sharing — especially with children. Think about the people you avoid like the plague: those who butt in, give unwanted advice, change the subject or don't pay attention. So treat your kids respectfully and show them that you're listening. Stay focused on the conversation at hand (i.e., don't pick up the phone in the middle of your son's sentence).
- **Be your child's advocate.** When your daughter gripes that her teacher unfairly reprimanded her, or says she's upset because she wasn't invited to a party, squelch your impulse to blame or be negative. We often inadvertently push our children away by rushing to judgment or belittling their feelings. ("You must have done something to provoke the teacher!" or "Of course you have friends!") Unless your children trust you to understand how they feel, they're not going to want to share their feelings. So try to remember what you felt like when you were their age. If you express genuine empathy — "That must have made you sad." — they'll open up more.
- **Help your kid come up with solutions.** As adults, with an adult's perspective, we can help direct the conversation so our kids learn from their unhappy experiences and gain the necessary skills to solve problems. So when your daughter complains about her teacher, ask her: "Why do you think the teacher reacted that way?" And when she tells you about being left off the party guest

list, tell her you know how bad she must feel and brainstorm with her about an outing she could arrange with other friends.

- **Give your child permission to vent.** No one likes to hear kids complain — especially after we've had a long day at work. But it's important that we give kids permission to talk about what is or isn't working at school and at home. They need to be able to vent and have their feelings taken seriously. One young child I interviewed put it best: "The most important thing about being a good parent is making sure everything's OK with your child," she said, noting that every day her parents ask her "if they're doing things that aren't working" or if there are improvements they could make. "I think if everybody's parents did that," she wisely notes, "there would be a lot more happy children."

April 20, 2000

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ABC Lateline Interview with Ellen Galinsky:

Back to Leading Issues Journal July
Issue

Impact of work on Family Life

ABC LATELINE 3/5/01

This is a transcript of an interview with Ellen Galinsky on ABC Lateline on 3 May 01. The Compere and Reporter is Tony Jones asking Ms Galinsky about the results of her recent study with Children. Ellen Galinsky is President of the Families and Work Institute based in Manhattan, USA.

Impact of work on Family Life

If you have a job, you're no doubt working harder and longer. If you have children and work, you worry about the lack of time spent with them. But what do children think about their parents' work and its impact on family life? Well, researcher Ellen Galinsky decided to stop talking with parents and start talking to their offspring. In a survey of 1,000 children, she had some surprising results. First, children don't necessarily mind us being away, but they do get upset when we come home stressed and grumpy. The notion of quality time took a battering too, with most kids having their fondest memories of simply goofing around with their mums and dads.

Compere: Tony Jones

Reporter: Tony Jones

TONY JONES: Ellen Galinsky, why talk to these children?

Were you trying to prove a point here?

ELLEN GALINSKY, FAMILIES & WORK INSTITUTE PRESIDENT: Nobody had talked to children before.

And we debate about children, we wonder what the impact of working is on children.

We study children but no-one had talked to them and heard from them.

So I wanted to do that.

TONY JONES: What did they tell you?

Are there any overall conclusions that you drew from the study?

ELLEN GALINSKY: We think that children think and what children actually think can be quite different.

There are a number of examples of that.

I asked children if they had one wish that could change the way their mothers or their fathers work affects their life, what would that wish be.

I ask parents to guess what they thought their child might wish.

TONY JONES: And what was it?

ELLEN GALINSKY: The majority of parents -- 56 per cent -- thought that their children would wish for more time together in one way or another.

Time is important to children, but if they only had one wish, they would wish in my study that their parents were less stressed and less tired.

TONY JONES: I'm struck by the idea that comes through in your study that children are actually very anxious about how their parents feel about work.

Are we sending the wrong messages to our children when we, for example, say, " I'm sorry, I have to go to work.

I'd really rather stay at home."

ELLEN GALINSKY: Well, when children say, "Please don't go," we often say, "No, I wish I didn't have to leave," and that makes children think that we don't really like our jobs.

I found that three in five parents like their work a lot but only two in five children thought that their parents liked their work a lot.

So we're sending inadvertent messages.

We are a living laboratory about the world of work, that is the adults are, and we're not thinking about how we're communicating that to children.

TONY JONES: But were you actually finding from what the children were saying they didn't mind their parents being at work?

Is that what you're saying in the end?

ELLEN GALINSKY: There's a lot of research that's been done in the United States and in other countries that shows that you can't tell very much about how a child is going to turn out simply because that child's mother works.

Other things make a difference, but not the simple fact of employment.

Some kids obviously like it, some kids don't.

But, by and large, kids accept the fact that their parents are working.

That is not a big debate for them, although at the moment they might want their mother or their father to stay home.

So much about this study was about men too.

We tend to think of this in terms of women.

When you talk to children, you hear how often they yearn for more time with their fathers.

TONY JONES: Fair enough, but does this suggest that children are only worried about how much time you spend at work, how many days, how many hours?

ELLEN GALINSKY: No, not at all.

In the debates that we have, here, in the United States, elsewhere, we have a series of either/or debates.

We think of quality time or quantity time for example.

What I found is that the amount of time we spend with children does matter.

But so does what happens in that time.

I mean, you can be in a rotten mood all day and your kids might not want you around for example.

What was important to children was having some time that was downtime or hanging around time or calm time, not rush time, not scheduled time, just time to be together.

And then they wanted time when you were what they called there for me but time when you were really focused on them.

Here's another discrepancy between adults and kids.

I asked children what they would remember most from this period in their life.

I asked the adults to guess.

Adults think of the biggest extravaganzas, the wonderful vacations, the special event, you know, trip.

That sort of thing.

And kids remember the small, everyday moments.

The song that their mother sings when their mother wakes them up in the morning.

The dad who says, "Go tiger, you go get 'em," when the child goes to school.

It's these small rituals, these small traditions that children cherish so much.

TONY JONES: I suppose what working parents really want to know, though, out of this study and what, for example, single mothers will really want to know is whether they can stop feeling guilty about going to work.

ELLEN GALINSKY: I think guilt is a useful emotion.

It's like having a fever.

It tells you that there is an expectation you have that is out of sync with reality, and it gives you a chance to say, "Is it a realistic expectation?"

What happens with guilt now is that we let it fester, it eats us up.

So, if you feel guilty, stop, ask yourself -- is it really true what I'm worrying about?

Most of the time it isn't necessarily.

And then, I don't know, either change yourself or change your expectation and move on with it.

Don't let it fester.

Yes, I think that most kids are doing fine.

Working per se is not what affects them.

What really affects them is how we parent.

TONY JONES: Ellen Galinsky, thanks very much for joining us tonight on Lateline.

ELLEN GALINSKY: Thanks for having me.

Ellen Galinsky is Director of Families and Work Institute

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