

Balance Your Job and Your Kids' Education

by Peter Vogt - MonsterTRAK Career Coach

Each morning, Leslie Youngstrom is up before 5 and out the door by 6 so she can get to her executive-level job by 6:30. She leaves work at 3:30 p.m., but her breakneck day isn't over. Youngstrom and her husband will spend the next few hours hauling their kids to one after-school activity or another. So it's hard to blame her for trying to single-handedly manage not only her own hectic schedule but those of daughter Emily, 12, and son Will, 8.

There's just one problem: Being the Time-Manager-in-Chief backfires. "I'm a very organized person, and a few years ago I found myself organizing everything for the kids, too," says Youngstrom, a vice president at InsWeb, an online insurance clearinghouse based in suburban Sacramento.

The unintended result: One overcooked career mom and two less-than-self-sufficient kids. "They just relied on me," Youngstrom says. So these days, Youngstrom and husband Rob, a high school government instructor in Sacramento, are teaching Emily and Will how to manage their own schedules, particularly during the school year with all its academic assignments and extracurricular activities.

The Youngstroms' efforts illustrate a critical lesson: You can indeed balance your own job with helping your kids thrive in theirs: School. Here's how.

Get Your Kids Involved in Scheduling

Parenting expert Joe Bruzzese and his wife, Kimberly, an elementary school principal, hold weekly meetings with their two school-aged children so that everyone can put their activities and responsibilities on a master calendar.

"With a clear picture in place of the week's events, we can begin to talk about any potential conflicts and, as a family, brainstorm solutions," says Joe, author of the forthcoming book *A Parent's Guide to the Middle School Years*.

And when your kids participate in scheduling and organizing activities, Youngstrom stresses, they're much less likely to forget what is happening when, both in their lives or yours.

Build Relationships with Your Kids' Teachers

Christina Shaw runs her own marketing firm in Wilmington, North Carolina, leaving her little time to volunteer in her second-grade son's classroom or participate in field trips. So she insists on regular meetings with his teachers, "even if they don't ask for them, and even if they think we don't need them."

"It helps me get a better understanding of what's going on in the classroom, how my son is behaving and getting along with the other kids and how he stacks up against the other kids," says Shaw, who with her husband Ron, is also the parent of a 3-year-old.

If in-person or phone conversations with your children's teachers aren't feasible, try weekly email exchanges, suggests Susan Stiffelman, a marriage and family therapist in Malibu, California.

"[Emailing] allows you a predictable way to stay attuned to what's really happening in the classroom, even if you work and therefore can't volunteer or participate in person," Stiffelman says.

Give Your Kids (and Yourselves) Space

Just as you need the right physical space to do your best work at the office, your child requires an inviting place at home to complete school assignments and projects, particularly if you end up doing a lot of after-hours work on the kitchen table or in the living room.

So make sure your kids have a "designated study area," says Stephanie Calahan, a Bloomington, Illinois-based productivity consultant and mother of a second-grader. Make sure it's well-stocked with necessary supplies, adequately lit and relatively quiet.

Be Strategic About Your Extra Involvements

Much as she'd like to, Potomac, Maryland-based freelance writer Erin Mantz just doesn't have the time to be a "room mom" volunteer in her 7-year-old son's classroom. So she picks one activity during the school year -- Read Across America Day -- and chairs the committee that puts on the event. This strategy allows Mantz to be actively engaged in her son's educational pursuits, but in a way that fits her own deadline-driven writing life.

"My [son] is thrilled and proud I'm involved in the school, and I feel like I've made a contribution that counts -- without stressing out monthly!" Mantz says.