

Working from Home with Young Children

April 2020



Families everywhere are trying to balance working full-time from home and caring for their young children, all while managing anxiety and fears about a worldwide pandemic. Here are a few strategies that might help create a balance between working and being with your children.

- Be kind to yourself: We are navigating uncharted territory daily. Some days will be easier than others. As you go through the day, ask yourself: “How am I doing?” “Can I take a moment for myself?” Airlines remind us to put on our own oxygen masks first for a reason.
- Establish a routine: Predictability helps us to feel safe, which we all need right now. You don’t need to be overly rigid with your schedule. It is important to establish a few consistent routines that happen daily as these are reassuring to children but flexibility is key to avoid power struggles. Whatever works to help you maintain a sense of routine and calm will flow to them.
- Preview your day with your children: There are lots of schedule cards out there to help you with this. Having a discussion at breakfast about the plan for the day can be helpful. For example, “Today we are going to have breakfast, then mommy will work for an hour while we play together, then we will all go outside.” Reminders, reminders, reminders: Young children need a lot of reminders about what is going to happen during the day.
- If you have two parents working from home, can you alternate work meetings? Young children require supervision even when they are playing independently. Children under 2 cannot go unsupervised, a 3-year-old can play independently for about 10-15 minutes, and 4 and 5-year olds can play independently for 20-30 minutes. It is helpful for everyone to have one parent “on” while the other parent is “off.” If that isn’t possible, can one parent be the assigned point person for the children? Let your child know who they can go to should they need something.

- Let your co-workers know that you are simultaneously caring for young children and working. Giving your co-workers a heads up that there might be some disruption can lower your own stress levels. Be forthcoming with your supervisor and set realistic expectations for yourself.
- Before you get to work, give your child your undivided attention. An article in Aha! Parenting refers to “filling your child’s cup”. This means spending time with your child, enjoying one another, connecting, and letting them lead the play activity. Even 15 minutes can “fill their cup” and fill yours, too. Dr. Stuart Shanker at the Mehrit Centre refers to “We Time.”
 - W: Work goes away
 - E: Electronics off
 - T: Together time
 - I: Use your Imagination
 - M: Mindful of your child and his/her needs
 - E: Everyday
- Support independent play with your child: Sensory materials encourage open-ended play and provide sensory input. Most children will find this soothing and will play for an extended period. You can make your own sensory bins at home. Children love to be busy scooping and dumping beans, rice, water, etc. Be mindful of the ages and personalities of your children. Beans and other small objects aren’t recommended for children under 3. Tip: Put a towel under the bin to help with cleaning up. For a little less mess, you can make Sensory Bags. Additionally, independent play can include Play-Doh, practical life, dramatic play, using loose parts, and drawing.
- Use screen time when necessary: Screen time is useful when parents need to work. Set your children up with a favorite movie or cartoon. Sesame Street can be relied on for good content. Be mindful of your choices and use sites without advertising or use an ad-blocker. Ending screen time is challenging. Try joining your child and watch with them for a few minutes and then steer them away from the device with an invitation to do something together. A little extra screen time now isn’t going to damage your child as long as you use it as one tool among many. As a great alternative to screen time, here are some child-friendly podcasts.
- Power struggles: Try not to get into a power struggle with your child. As you know, young children are very good at digging in their heels when it comes to something they want or something they don’t want. Remember that it takes two to have a power struggle. If your child is upset, offering empathy can go a long way. “I see you are really sad that I have to work right now, but I have to have this meeting. When it’s done, we will play together. What would you like to play?” Your children are learning from you how to manage stress, change, and challenges. Find some effective ways to calm yourself when you’re feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. Just as “We Time” is important, “You Time” is equally as important.

In this extremely challenging situation, you are not alone. So many parents are finding it challenging to find a balance between managing both the demands of their jobs and the demands of children. If you need more information, please reach out to EYP and we can provide information, support, and resources and referrals as needed.
- If you are experiencing stress that feels out of your control, please call the Parental Stress Line--a 24-hour hotline in Massachusetts or call 1-800-632-8188.

The Early Years Project is available for families of children five years old and under, living in Cambridge and Somerville, at no cost to you. During the Covid crisis, we are offering our services directly to parents rather than through childcare settings as we usually do. If you have concerns or questions about your child’s needs, development, emotions, or behavior, or are having difficulty managing the stress of being a parent during this demanding time, please contact us at eyp@riversidecc.org or leave a message at 781-686-0435 to arrange for one our consultants to contact you. Our experienced child development and parenting specialists are here to support you by phone, video, email and can provide resources and referrals as needed. Please spread the word to families that you know in Cambridge and Somerville. We are a program of Riverside Community Care and are funded by the cities of Cambridge and Somerville.