

THE TIME BIND

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"I just need two more hours in my day. Then everything would be alright."

This declaration came from my youngest daughter, as we worked through an overwrought discussion on how to manage her very complicated life. After six moves in five years, she was trying to create a home in a new city - again.

Time is truly the enemy of every parent who dares to think there is a way to "have it all." Even families, who appear to have everything, are anxious about the time they spend with their children versus their work; not to mention the time they give to their adult relationships. As one father, co-owner of a fast growing media company told me, "I do the work to feed the monster called "our life" and I don't get to enjoy a lot of time with my baby or my wife. It's a Catch-22."

The issue of time can be boiled down to five common but interdependent complaints.

1. "I just need more time."

The birth of your first child probably added a whole new dimension to the purpose and value of time in your life. Your time deficit isn't an illusion. As Julie Morgenstern, the reigning queen of personal organization says, *"there is no such thing as spare time."*

Twelve hours of your day are gone just for the basics - sleeping, eating, and getting yourself and the children presentable for the day. Work (including direct supervision of your own children, if you are "at home") and drive time, take up most of the rest of your day. If you didn't multi-task and bunch family chores for the weekend, life would be impossible.

Your challenge is to cut back, delegate, or share your responsibilities to create some time for yourself and your relationships. Managing a family is at least a two-person job, with backup systems in place for specific tasks. Your goal is to get adequate help or to manage fewer specific responsibilities, so the time shortage begins to shrink and stress is reduced.

2. "Where does the day go?"

Whether you're employed full-time or part-time, or you work at home and directly care for the children and manage the household, you don't have a lot of "thinking" time to figure out where your time is used inefficiently. Every task transitions into the next task and all the tasks are repetitive, so it's hard to lay claim to singular achievements.



Lots of us parents have a hard time showing “proof” of a day well-spent. Just as many of us don’t know exactly how we gained those last five pounds; a food diary reveals the culprit is that four o’clock candy bar. Keeping a time diary would prove, once and for all, that you don’t spend the day watching soap operas or walking around in circles at the office. It’s worth your while to try to document a day, and then a week to see where the time goes. That will become your starting point for becoming more efficient and dealing with the third complaint.

3. “There’s so much to do, I don’t know where to begin.”



The issue of priorities is very hard, because most parents are completely occupied dealing with the basics. Everything seems equally important. Just the same, mothers in particular, have a hard time separating the essentials from the highly valued.

For example, is it essential that you pick your kids up from school every afternoon or could they participate in a carpool or join an after-school program? Neither a carpool nor an after-school program is going to harm or stigmatize your child; in fact each provides clear benefits. So, if either provides you with an hour to go the gym, skip the daily pick-ups at 2:30 p.m. and do something for yourself.

The same logic could be applied to weekend sports. Who really needs it? You or the kids? And for how many weekends of the year? If Saturday sports are a must-have, get out the soccer ball and lunch coolers. But, don’t lament about not being able to make a trip to the local Farmer’s Market on Saturday morning to shop for next week’s organic groceries.

Here’s the bottom line. Is it more important to your children that they participate in certain activities or is it more important to you? If it’s your ego making the decision, let it go, give the kids a break, and give yourself a gift of time.

4. “How can I be sure my children are getting enough quality time?”

The notion that there is a meaningful difference between quantity versus quality time has created confusion in the minds of many parents. It either induces guilt in some parents for not having a lot of one-on-one time, or it gives permission to others to excuse themselves from the day-to-day grind and then show up for the fun stuff.

Keep this concept at the top of your mind. From a child development perspective, it’s *all* quality time. Whether or not you feel you are teaching your children, or if you question whether the day-to-day time is special, remember that your children are watching and learning from your example.



Take care to recognize that you have the opportunity to convert any amount of time to its best advantage. Drive time can be quite amazing. Performing daily routines together will help build lifetime habits. You will improve your self-defined ratio of quality to quantity time very quickly; just by paying attention to what you used to think was unimportant.

5. "I don't feel like I'm doing anything well."

Not feeling successful at any of your jobs is usually the result of unrealistic expectations colliding with reality. Parents tend to over-commit their children and themselves, chasing achievement and the opportunity for their children to be "the best."

You may know people who tell you they've got parenting and time management all figured out. Their children are perfect, and their mate truly gives 50% or more to the task of family management. These people make you feel diminished. But, they are either delusional or they're lying. Plain and simple.

We are human beings, imperfect at best. And, if you wait long enough, those other people's children will grow up and show you just how imperfect they really are.

Do for yourself what you would do for your children. Take things in small increments, give praise for each success, and grow in sequences. Initiate building a support system among your friends, so all of you can have reliable back-up child care or a car-pool for play-group. Give yourself a week to get one long-standing repair actually fixed, so you can praise yourself for tying up loose ends. Check off your small accomplishments and they will form a big pile of success by the end of a week.

WHAT WE ALL CAN DO

Collective action around time usage and time creation is very hard to accomplish. The time bind appears to be personal. But, initiatives for paid parental leave, or a Part-Time Career Act, where job evaluations and advancement are based on productivity relative to time worked, not full-time employment, are possibilities. States are creating Universal Preschool Systems, which will benefit children and parents too. Maybe one day, if parents become politically active, the standard work week will be 32, not 55, hours a week.

But on a personal level, it's time to say *no* to being committed to an ideal of ourselves that is unrealistic. Your children and mate are more stressed by you running ragged, trying to do too much, than they would be if you did just a little less, and enjoyed your relationships. Sometimes it takes a child to lead the way. A client of mine had a daughter who told her: "When I have children they're not going to have to change clothes in the car and go to lots of lessons every week. They're gonna relax and have a little fun." Starting today, you can do this too.

