

How to be a happy housewife (when you're hardly ever home)

Like most moms who work outside of the home, I lead a complicated life. I teach high school during the day and college at night. Both jobs require a great deal of take-home work. Somehow, I find time to write. Housework slips away and dirty clothes pile up, but I prepare most of our meals at home. No matter how busy I am, I always have time for my family.

Sound familiar? It should. According to a report published by the US Department of Labor this past April, 70 percent of mothers whose children are under the age of 18 are working outside of the home or looking for a job. Rather than having time to relax and recover at the end of the day, most mothers return home to a “second shift,” as discussed in depth by Arlie Russell Hochschild in a book of the same name.

Other than paying for a daycare provider, most working families cannot afford to hire full-time domestic help to handle daily cleaning, laundry, and cooking. A survey conducted by “Working Mother” magazine reported that 75 percent of working moms consider themselves to be the ones responsible for the upkeep of the house, with 60 percent of women feeling embarrassed about the condition of their house.

So, where do working moms catch a break? What can we do to balance the demands of our work lives with our home lives to the point where we are satisfied with the state of both, and more importantly, with ourselves? The answers are right before us:

Graciously Accept Help from Household Members without Complaint or Criticism

An obvious solution is to recruit other household members to help. Mothers with young children have it especially tough because little kids make big messes, but are too young to do much more than pick up a few toys.

When my boys get older, I will expect them to partake in housework. For now, it's just my husband and me. I'm lucky to have a husband who is willing to wash dishes and do laundry, even after a long day working on the farm. But there's a catch ...

One of the main reasons my husband pitches in is because I don't complain or criticize the way he does things. If my measuring spoons are mixed in with toddler spoons, I just put them back with the baking tools, without saying a word. If my T-shirt isn't folded the way I like, I silently put it in the drawer, glad that it's made its way out of the hamper, through the rinse and dry cycles, and is ready to be worn again. I always say thank you when my husband does something to help ... and nothing else.

He once asked me for a "Honey-do List." I told him that no one makes a list of things I need to do; I see that something needs to be done and take care of it. Now we're on the same page ... or lack thereof.

Adjust Your Standards

Some women claim that men and children don't notice messes or complain when household chores aren't done up to their specifications. That's the root of our problem: we set impossibly high standards for ourselves. We need to let go.

The days of polishing silver in pearls are gone. You don't have to lower your standards to the point of living in squalor, but consider ignoring a little bit of clutter every now and then.

It's hard not to feel as though you're being judged when people come by to visit, particularly if they have an immaculate home due to: a. the luxury of having someone clean their house, b. more time at home to devote to chores, or c. a home without children or pets. Anyone who knows how busy you are will understand if your house looks "lived-in."

If not, consider hiring someone to clean for you, even if it's just once (best Mother's Day present I ever received!). You can also meet people somewhere else ... or not at all if they're the judgmental type. You don't have time in your hectic life for people who make you feel inadequate. Besides, there are other people who are more

deserving of your time.

Not Dawn. Not Mr. Clean. Your kids. If you've been away from your children at work all day, why spend your time at home cleaning? While you're dusting in one room, they're creating dust in another. Save it for another day.

Do only the chores that are absolutely necessary for allowing your family to function in a healthy manner on a daily basis. Take no more than an hour each night. Max. Rotate the "vanity" chores every week or every other week.

Your kids don't care what your house looks like. And the sad part is, they won't be living in it for very long. You might as well enjoy them while they're there.

Given the choice between scrubbing floors and playing with trucks, I'd rather have creaky knees from having fun with my kids.

Multitask, multitask, multitask!

Multitask When Your Day Job Comes Home with You

Depending on her job, a mom may bring home work on top of what's already there waiting for her. As a teacher, planning and grading are seldom finished when the school day ends. Before I had children, I'd stay after work for several hours, but that's no longer an option. Work comes home with me, cutting into playtime.

When I bring home essays or college research papers to grade, sometimes I will read them aloud to the boys. Not only does it make grading easier, but research shows that children under the age of 3 benefit from having anything read aloud, whether they understand it or not. Collin, my toddler, could learn new vocabulary and more complex sentence structure, while Frank, my newborn, could take in human speech patterns just by hearing my voice as he sits on my lap. Rest assured, after reading a paper or two aloud, a book with pictures and a simple plot is in order ... for all of us.

If you don't have much time to spend with your children between "Mommy's home!" and bedtime, read to them. It takes only a few minutes, but the benefits will last a lifetime. When your kids get a little older, have them read to you, even while you

wash dishes or fold clothes.

Multitask While Shopping

Collin is at the difficult age where he doesn't want to ride in the cart. He wants to explore the entire store on his own. My husband said we have to decide whether to be the parents with the screaming, but contained child or the parents with the out-of-control child who is getting into everything. I discovered a third type of parent at WalMart one afternoon.

As Frank, in his car seat in the front of the cart, and I, bearing a list of toiletries, made our way down the aisle, I saw two elementary school- aged children huddled next to a cart examining a box of toothpaste. Thinking at first that I was witnessing a scene out of Home Alone, I then saw their mother on the floor, pointing out price differences per volume. This mom was using shopping as an opportunity to teach her kids math.

Being horrendous with numbers, I should have stuck around, but instead, I began talking to Frank about what I was buying. "This is mouthwash," I told him. "It helps prevent cavities. But don't drink it! It's not juice. Not that Mommy would ever let you drink blue juice ..." If Collin was with us, I would have felt slightly less crazy, but I realized that I should take every opportunity - even shopping- to teach my kids and, above all, to enjoy being with them.

Multitask While Taking Care of Yourself

Moms get so caught up taking care of everyone else, that they forget to take care of themselves. We're always running kids to sports practices and doctors' appointments, but when do we look after our own fitness and health?

Chasing after a toddler is one form of exercise, but most moms need a little more than that. Exercising will allow you to have more energy and live a longer, healthier life.

I'm fortunate enough to have a membership to a gym with a daycare and a pool. I like to go right after work to decompress and transition from "teacher-mode" to "mom-mode." After dropping Collin off to play for half an hour, I do cardio or

weights, then pick him up and swim with him for half an hour.

But you don't need a gym membership to stay fit. Throw on a workout DVD, or find a program on On Demand or Netflix streaming and have the kids join you. Take a family walk after dinner. Find a sport that you all enjoy and play.

We all know that frequent exercise and a healthy diet will keep the doctor away, but checkups are inevitable. But, more moms are better about remembering to take their kids to the doctors than they are themselves.

I made an appointment for my dental cleaning before Frank was born, without knowing he'd be a day too young for daycare and sitterless. Knowing it would be October before I could get another appointment, I brought him with me.

The office assistants cooed over my baby as he slept peacefully in his car seat next to my chair. My hygienist spoke to him, and occasionally me, though neither of us could reply. As she polished my teeth, Frank began to cry. So, I fed him his bottle with one hand and held on to the suction straw with the other.

At one point, the straw detached from its hose. "Oh, look at you." the hygienist said. "Doing everything one-handed."

"We moms are used to it," I said.

She smiled, fixed the straw, and handed it back.

Above All, Pray

Though our lives are a never-ending stream of tasks, interruptions, and crises, working moms often feel we only have one hand to take care of everything. As I've written this piece, I've changed six diapers, prepared four meals, and washed two loads of laundry. Yes, at times I had to even type one-handed.

The truth is that we're never without another set of hands that can work miracles. A set of hands that we can summon with our own.

Whether our stresses are major or minor, God is a prayer away. When a toddler who's trying to "help" creates a mess the Hazmat team wouldn't want to clean up,

don't lose your cool. Take a deep breath, and ask God for patience. When you're rushing your child to the pediatric ER in the middle of the night, trust that God will bring her home safe. God doesn't always give us the answers we want to hear or solve our problems as we'd like them to be solved, but He's always there and always knows what we need.

When you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed, follow the advice my father gave my husband and me at our wedding reception, "Leave the rest to God."

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