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A BALANCED LIFE? NO, IT'S SIMPLY A JUGGLING ACT

By BETTYJO BOUCHEY

I recently saw an advertisement for a "20/20" special hosted by Elizabeth Vargas on whether working mothers can really "have it all."

I decided not to watch.

For those of us attempting to balance a family, a career, community involvement and other personal interests, we can certainly surmise what the conclusions were. (Using the word balance here is probably inappropriate, at least in my own case.)

An old friend once told me she admired my apparent adeptness at balancing everything. Truth be told, I'm usually off-balance at any given moment, buffeted by life's daily challenges. Yet I suppose my illusory juggling act could appear quite plausible to the onlooker.

This is because my forte is making sure that each ball is caught about an inch off the ground, but not a moment sooner - and never dropped.

So how does what I perceive to be controlled chaos come out looking like balance to others? Here are some practical things I've learned over the years that have served me well:

Errands: Do several at once. If you need to go to the grocery store on Saturday, plan to pick up your dry cleaning and deposit a check on the way. When you are there, buy frozen entrees so you can use your normal lunch breaks for other odds and ends.

Cleaning: Hire a housekeeper; if you can't, clean as you walk in and out of your house every day. By doing two things each day over the course of the workweek, you should be done by Friday evening.

Logistics: Designate a defined space for things that are frequently or periodically needed, like keys and bills, and never put them anywhere else.

Cooking: Well, I've abandoned cooking altogether; I'm no good at it and it takes too long. My husband occasionally cooks dinner, but otherwise a nice sandwich or frozen entree will work here, too.

Phone calls: Things like scheduling appointments and returning voice mails can be done in the car on your way to work. For efficient scheduling, make sure you know which dates and times you are available. (Just don't get into an automobile accident while checking your PDA.)



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Gifts and cards: Why not use the Internet to order, gift wrap and send these items?

Baby supplies: The minute you use the next to the last one (package of diapers, wipes, etc.), buy another.

Laptop: I have one with a long battery life, so I can catch up on community work after my son is asleep. However, if there is any work that I didn't finish during the day, it takes priority.

Personal care: Washing my hair the night before is one less thing I have to do in the morning.

Personal e-mails: Think about answering them in the car wash, grocery line, dentist's office or wherever the mundane allows you the time to do so.

Planning: The most important thing I do by far is to take 15 minutes every Monday to look at my calendar for the next two weeks.

There is nothing in the world that cannot be well planned in less than two weeks (except a wedding perhaps, but I'm all set there). All that I plan to do is scheduled in my calendar and its accompanying task list. This includes everything from going to the gym, completing an assignment by its deadline, buying baby supplies or ascertaining which calls to make on Wednesday.

If all else fails, my faithful Blackberry also chimes when something is due or I need to leave for an appointment. (I set appointments based upon when I need to leave; then put the actual time in the note section so I can avoid being chronically late.)

As you've already guessed, I'm an ultra-organized mother and administrator - probably to the point of near madness. Nonetheless, careful planning enables me to timely complete what needs to be done each week.

I should add here that I'm also grateful for the assistance my colleagues and acquaintances afford me and wouldn't be able to do as much as I do without the kindness of my family and friends.

So if you're looking for a foolproof method to avoid running out of diapers at 7:30 p.m., try my planning strategy. Of course, it always helps to have a fail-safe backup when there's a planning malfunction - in my case, it's my husband. But you'll have to find your own.

NextGen Workbytes is written locally by and for Gen Xers learning the realities of the workplace. Bettyjo H. **Bouchey** is the dean of ITT Technical Institute in Colonie and is involved with a local young professionals' group. The views expressed in this article are her own and not those of ITT Technical Institute or any of its subsidiaries.

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