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## WORKING WITH A CHILD AT HOME

July 22, 2016 • MARGARET NICKLAS ♦ FREELANCE TIPS 0

It's summer time, and the living is easy, right? But if you work from home, you may find yourself struggling to get your work done, with a kid or kiddos who are out of school and daycare around to distract you.

If you are like me, your work—and therefore income—is unpredictable, which sometimes makes it difficult to plan and pay upfront for summer activities. Or maybe you have just had your first child and are wondering how to swing your freelance gigs as a new mom.



Whether it's a seasonal event, an occasional arrangement, or your new reality—working while minding your little ones at home can actually be a great way to balance your work and family life. But you do need strategies to keep everyone happy.

Here are some that have proved essential for me when working at home with my son on the loose. And although I only had one child to worry about, the same principles and strategies can apply to two or more kids with a little adjustment and imagination.

### Have a plan.

Though plans will go astray, it helps to lay out a roadmap of how you'll get things done, especially as your child grows more mobile and independent. Think ahead about the blocks of time you expect to work, what you'll do in that time, and how likely it is that things will go as planned.

Some advance planning makes it easier to switch things around or come up with contingencies if needed. Depending on the type of work you do, you may want to plan by the hour, as well as by the day and week, to be sure all bases are covered.

When your child is very young, your plan will consist mostly of knowing when he or she will

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sleep. Babies sleep a lot, but their naps gradually taper off as they grow into toddlers and preschoolers.

Check out this sleep guide on [Parents.com](#) for a better idea of what to expect. When my son was still napping, I tagged this time to do research, write, and analyze, or perform other tasks that required a lot of concentration. With a little effort, I was able to keep him on a schedule and could predict pretty well when he would fall asleep. And though I was able to get certain things done outside of naptime using other strategies, especially as he grew older (see below), tasks that did not get done during naps often had to wait until he was down for the night.

I did my brainstorming and conceptualizing when pushing a stroller, in the shower or when driving, so that when I did sit down to work at my computer, I could get right to brass tacks. Simple phone calls could be done almost anytime as long as I could keep eyes on my son, but complex phone calls (i.e. interviews and conference calls) had to be planned so interruptions could be minimized. (I learned this the hard way, after having to reschedule a few calls with a screaming child in the background.)

I found creative ways to multitask. I would print out a draft of my work to look over at the park while my child climbed on the playscape or check emails while he browsed at the library. In fact, getting out of the house was often a key part of "working at home."

Luckily, Austin is full of places that feature free and low cost activities for kids—from public libraries and bookstores to parks and movie theaters. Austinites are also fortunate that most of these settings include tables, chairs and wi-fi. So, if you can do some of your work on a laptop or cell phone, you can work while your child plays and learns.

## Make time with your child a priority.

As parents all know, a child's need for attention *will* be met—one way or another. To increase chances that those needs are met in a positive way, plan to alternate work tasks with activities that provide your child with some undivided attention. That may mean you only work four or five hours during your child's day, with several interruptions. Think ahead about how you can segment your tasks so that you can be productive in short bursts, and be prepared with kid-friendly activities you can readily do in between.

As your child matures, you can begin to negotiate with him or her regarding your time. Once my son was pretty verbal, I made a practice of explaining to him what I needed to do on a given day and how I envisioned things unfolding. I would map out my activities, and build in time to do things he chose—like take him out or play a game with him—so that he had something to look forward to and knew that mom being in "work mode" was not interminable. It's true that sometimes I was not able to do all we had planned. But as long as I made a good faith effort to give him some of the time and attention I had promised, he was pretty forgiving, and we lived to work and play another day!

## Save electronics for when you really need them.

Like many modern mothers, I worried about having my child hooked on screens from a young age. Everything from obesity to ADHD has been blamed on a lifestyle involving too much television, video-gaming and "computer time." But as every modern mother also knows, nothing rivets your child's attention like electronic entertainment.

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By keeping to strict limits for my son, I achieved my goals with respect to parenting, while leveraging his guaranteed interest in a scarce commodity when my work required it. If I had a phone interview or a conference call whose time I could choose, I scheduled it to coincide with a favorite TV show. In later years, I saved his "computer time" for those periods when I needed to be sure my work would not be interrupted.

All told, balancing freelance work with childcare in the summers isn't easy, but it's doable and can even be rewarding. At its best, it allows you the flexibility to enjoy the sweetness of summer with your kids and still make a living. Savor your time at the neighborhood pool and those random trips to the ice cream shop. But even at its worst, even when you feel completely overwhelmed by the work you have committed to and the deadlines staring you in the face as your child tugs at your sleeve or wails in a heap on the floor—take a moment to remind yourself of why it is that you do what you do. Take a deep breath. Hug your child tight. Sing her a song or read him a favorite story. Then get back to work



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Margaret Nicklas is a freelance writer and journalist with a special interest in covering public health issues, parenting and child welfare. She is also a skilled researcher and analyst who can support non-profits and other mission-driven organizations with their research and communication needs. Margaret has more than 20 years of experience in the public sector and holds master's degrees in both public affairs and journalism.

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