

## **BALANCING YOUR MANY LIVES**

by Deb Maes, Extension Educator, Family & Consumer Resources

Your twelve year old needs a costume for the school play. The second grader needs cookies for the class birthday party. Your boss expects the annual report to be done this week. Your partner wants to spend an evening dining out without children and your favorite author has just released a new book.

Sound familiar? It does for me. Working full time, raising three children, and maintaining a relationship with my partner took most of my time. Time for myself? Forget it.

According to the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, my situation was not unusual. Today, nearly 50 percent of American families have two wage earners. When my children were in school my husband and I had to constantly juggle work responsibilities, our roles as parents, as well as find time for family activities. The part that often got left out was the “me” time that is so important; time for hobbies, exercise, friends, volunteering and relaxing.

Our three kids have now finished college and fled the nest, but there are many young families that continue to juggle all of their responsibilities. At any point in the day you might be acting as a daughter, wife, husband, grandchild, father, uncle, neighbor, employee or volunteer.

Everyone’s situation is certainly unique, but there are several principles that can help you evaluate your life and identify ways to make it a little easier.

**Clarify your values.** Identify what is important to you. Do you expect beds to be made and dishes to be cleared out of the kitchen sink? How do you get the kids to school on time and arrive at work ready to punch the time clock? During a group session one member complained about the lack of help, but then told us she insisted that the bathroom towels be folded a certain way. When others suggested that she should change her standards, she couldn’t accept that having someone help fold the towels was more important than having it done “her” way. With this in mind, make sure that your values help balance your life, not make it more difficult.

**Set realistic goals and expectations.** If your goal is to raise responsible children, you have to spend some time teaching them about responsibilities. The more realistic your goals are the more likely you are to achieve them. As you review your goals be prepared to modify them some, put other goals on hold and perhaps even let go of a few. Remember that goals should be those you set for yourself, not what someone else thinks you should be doing.

People who are successful at balancing their many lives are often very good at **setting priorities and managing their time**. Set up a master calendar for all household members and post it where everyone can see it. If you commute to work consider recorded books if you want to keep up with your

reading. Prepare meals on weekends that can be frozen and cooked during the week. Establish a bill paying system and keep a space for all the materials you will need to do the job. Schedule time for family talks. Don't forget to make time for friends, hobbies and fun. I, personally, am much happier when I can spend some time each day reading a book. For someone else it might be taking time to exercise or listen to music.

Here are four questions that can help you identify and achieve your goals. How do my expectations help or interfere with reaching my goals? Am I balancing my concrete goals with my relationship goals? How will I know when I have reached my goals? What steps do I need to take today that will help me reach my goals tomorrow? Learn to manage your time by setting priorities that move you toward your goals.

Finally, **think about control**. Learn to delegate. Teach your children how to set the table. Show them how to load the dishwasher or wash the dishes. If making the bed is difficult, buy comforters that can be pulled up over the sheets. Train your children to bring their clothes to the laundry area, sort darks and whites, and put their clothes away when they are clean. Find simple recipes and teach your children how to prepare them. One young mother has a great bean soup recipe that her three year old loves to make. They put everything in the slow cooker in the morning before they leave the house. When the child gets home she is ready to eat "her soup."

Don't forget to check out family friendly policies for employees. Can you schedule flex time that would allow you to attend an afternoon school concert, chaperone a class field trip or care for a sick parent? If your child is home sick, can you do your work from home? Check with your employer's human resource department about other family friendly benefits available to you.

Finally consider the following ideas. Hold regular meetings to keep everyone aware of the schedules and family issues. Be flexible. Accept that plans change and learn to adapt. Keep a sense of humor, and share it with each family member.

Managing a busy household is a constantly changing process. Enjoy the ride.