

Tips for Working from Home with an Infant during COVID-19

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The struggle is real. Parenting is, and always has been, a 24/7 job. Working parents have always struggled to integrate and blend parenting demands with job responsibilities in a way that makes it look seamless—each set of duties separate and contained. Note that I am using “integrate” and “blend” purposefully here. It’s not about balancing the two—job duties on one side and parenting on the other—with a give-and-take pull requiring us to direct and redirect our attention to avoid wobbling or falling out of equilibrium.

But, let’s acknowledge that things are different right now as we weather this coronavirus pandemic. Because of Stay-at-Home orders, there has never been a clearer example of how working parents must *blend* the responsibilities of both roles. Parents of children of all ages are still *integrating* the demands of being a parent with those of their jobs, while now also trying to fill the roles of daycare, school, and friends.

As such, we’ve seen tips for parenting school-aged children and preschoolers during COVID-19. However, guidance for parents of infants is nearly non-existent. Maybe people think that it should be easy to simultaneously manage work while caring for an infant since they are not mobile and typically take naps during the day. Well, as someone experienced in working remotely during all developmental stages of childhood, with and without childcare arrangements, I’m here to say that it is not as easy as one might think.

Whereas it was my choice to work from home, many parents have no choice but to engage in this type of work arrangement during this pandemic. Those of you who were recently out on parental leave were likely banking on transitioning back to work with your infant in a safe, loving childcare environment during work hours, but are now facing an already stressful transition with your infant at home with you. I want to provide empowerment for those of you out there, many of which are integrating parenthood with work for the first time. Here are some strategies to help you carve out some time to work from home while caring for an infant too.

1. Take notice of your baby’s natural routine for sleeping, eating, and needing extra care or soothing. Do your best to plan your work around your baby’s routine. For example, if your baby typically takes a 2-hour morning nap and a 2-hour afternoon nap, then leverage those times for meetings or completing tasks requiring concentration.
2. If your partner is working remotely too, then develop a plan to share in the baby’s care during the day. Although there will be times that the baby prefers one parent over another, especially around feeding or nap times, try to resist the urge of coming to the rescue. Allow your partner and baby to work through it—and they will—so you both can share in the caregiving each day.
3. Don’t shy away from working while your baby is awake. Use the baby swing, the bouncy seat, the crib, bassinet, or play yard to safely secure the baby near your workstation. Create a standing desk that allows you to work while keeping your baby close with a baby carrier or wrap (double bonus - swaying back and forth while typing will soothe

your baby and burn extra calories). Rotate through these different options to keep it fresh and figure out which is preferred by your baby.

4. If feasible, participate in a phone meeting while taking a neighborhood walk with your baby in the stroller.
5. Take a drive to soothe a crying baby and once asleep you can make a phone call (using a hands-free device of course), or park and work on your laptop or take a power nap.
6. Give in to the “witching hour” (i.e., your baby’s naturally occurring fussy time). This is when your baby really needs you for comforting. Use this time to cuddle, close your eyes and recharge, and recognize the blessing that you are home and have extra bonding time with your baby. Or, use the time to give your baby a bath—babies typically are soothed by a bath, it relaxes them enough to take a nap, and you are accomplishing something you would likely be doing later in the evening.
7. Set up a mobile that plays music over your baby’s crib or bassinet. It will help you squeeze in a little more work time while your baby self-soothes.
8. Join a parenting group for support—one that gathers and shares ideas using social media. And, it will also be good for the soul to engage with friends who are dealing with the same challenges and blessings as you. If you already have a network of friends who are also parenting while working from home, then set up a videoconference (Zoom is offering free accounts right now) so you can compare notes on what is and isn’t working during this time of trial and error.

And, given some infants may be emerging into **toddlers**, I’m sharing some of the most creative integration ideas that go beyond waking up early to get a jump start on your work day, making the best use of screen time (i.e., save a new movie for that important meeting with your boss or client), and taking your work into the child’s play area. Some of my favorites are:

- Add an unplugged keyboard and phone in your office to entertain your child while you work (they can play “work” while you get things done),
- Take a drive at naptime to increase the odds that your preschooler takes one, which allows you to think and make phone calls (using a hands-free device or while parked, of course),
- Group toys for each day of the week that you hide and introduce daily, so your child doesn’t get overwhelmed or bored with options, and
- Assign your child an “important” task with the challenge of completing it independently while you are in a meeting (e.g., draw pictures to be mailed to relatives or friends, set up the “restaurant” for lunch together, plan game night).

Finally, take time to discuss your situation with your manager and coworkers in a videoconference or phone call (preferably avoid sending an email). It is important to be honest about the complexities you are dealing with, reminding them that going back to work with an infant is already a tough transition and it is even more challenging without daycare. You are not alone, and you shouldn’t hide the struggles you are facing during this global health crisis. Share your strategy for integrating work with parenting demands. And, express what support you need from them—at a minimum, understanding and flexibility. Confirm that you are committed every day to doing your best for the team and your family.

And, most importantly, know that whatever strategies work for you today will likely need to be tweaked or replaced as we continue to comply with Stay-At-Home orders to avoid contracting and spreading COVID-19. Babies are growing and learning, so their needs will change. Be ready to adapt and look for other creative ideas to help you blend caring for your infant into your workday.

These are challenging times to say the least. Everyone is struggling in some way—some are integrating caring for their child(ren) and performing job duties, some need to leave their children and the safety of home to go to work, some are working and caring for aging parents, some are worried about loved ones that they can't visit, and some live alone and feel isolated.

Of course, I understand that parents, in particular, are suffering the guilt and worry that comes with blending job and home responsibilities—not having enough time to help their children adapt, while at the same time feeling less productive and effective at work. No strategy for integrating these demands will address those feelings. But, hopefully, these tips will make it a little easier to integrate your different responsibilities so that they coexist in as much harmony as possible. And, a little harmony may help support a healthy mindset in which you feel encouraged and positive about how the large-scale awareness will create a new conversation about work-home integration. Afterall, we are all in this together!

More about the author:

I am an Industrial and Organizational Psychologist, a certified coach, and mother of four—two who are adults now, one in high school, and one in middle school. I have worked remotely for a total of 15 years so far—both part-time and full-time, with and without childcare or preschool arrangements, through all stages of childhood development. My former coworkers will attest that things didn't always go as planned. One time I was literally running throughout my house to flee my trailing preschooler so I could un-mute the phone and speak for two minutes without her crying in the background. By the time I had escaped to the master bathroom behind three locked doors, I was so winded I could barely speak.

I recently started my own company, LeadPath Solutions, LLC, to support the transformation and growth of exceptional leaders. Working with leaders, I focus on their acquisition of competencies and insights needed to navigate and overcome challenges encountered along the journey. Coaching leaders at all levels of the organization will create a new generation of leaders—enlightened leaders who approach the work environment with a full sense of awareness of themselves and of those they inspire. Website (www.leadpathsolutions.com) is under construction, but check out my LinkedIn profile at www.linkedin.com/in/kimberly-acree-adams.