

Maximizing Time, Impact, and Motivation While Working at Home

During this extended time of social isolation, organizing your time, managing interruptions from family members, and staying motivated can be a challenge. If you have never worked from home, it can be anxiety producing and even annoying to feel stuck while managing professional obligations. To create a thriving home base for work, you'll need explicit planning to make the most of your unique situation.

Our team of quality assessor and training specialists at the McCormick Center works remotely to bring professional evaluation to early childhood programs. They have many proven methods to achieve needed goals with a high level of impact while working at home. If you are working from home for the first time or simply need fresh inspiration, the following tips will help you be more effective:

WORKING EFFICIENTLY

- Set your alarm for the same time each morning. Get started early.
- Follow a morning routine. Get dressed, make your bed, and prepare for a regular work day. A steady routine reduces stress and increases focus and energy.
- Share your daily schedule with others in your home, giving specific times for virtual meetings and phone calls. If young children are near, use a red light/green light sign to let them know when you need a few minutes (for example, when on the phone). For teens and others, use a sign that says, "I can talk at 10:00."
- Begin work in a prepared space at a specific time.
- Keep a daily schedule and utilize your Outlook or Google calendar. Assign time blocks for tasks. A planned day yields a productive day with fewer surprises.
- Organize each day with written goals and a "to-do" list. Be realistic and prioritize time-sensitive tasks. Check off completed items.
- Be prepared for technology issues ahead of time. Post phone numbers for IT support. Learn how to manage your home internet and router and troubleshoot connectivity issues before you have a problem.
- Situate your workspace near a window to get natural light. Connection to the outdoors reduces isolation and provides perspective. Open curtains, blinds, or windows for fresh air and connection with nature. Try a full spectrum light.
- If you do not have a separate office, set boundaries for your work space. Keep office items, supplies, and resources in a portable, organized container for easy access and storage.
- Schedule time to organize papers, digital files, and e-mail documents.

- Practice intentional eating. Set a specific time to eat lunch away from your workspace. If children are home with you, enjoy this time with them. Pre-plan and portion snacks for the day (for them and for you) and drink plenty of water.
- Set a definitive time at the end of the work day to turn off your computer and separate from work tasks. Take a walk, play a game with your children, work out, or cook dinner with your family.
- Charge up. Take time each night to charge your computer and phone. This gives you more flexibility in the morning. When the weather permits, you can start your day outside with a fully charged laptop to work on a patio, porch, or balcony.

COMMUNICATING WITH COLLEAGUES

- Send encouraging messages to team members by e-mail, phone, or text. Positive quotes and notes of affirmation can overcome disconnection and isolation.
- Connect with colleagues to motivate each other, share goals, and ask for feedback.
- Talk with an accountability partner to brainstorm problems and ideas, as well as to discuss planning strategies and accomplishments.
- Respond to work e-mails, calls, and texts promptly.
- Connect with supervisors to communicate questions, concerns, updates, clarifications about projects, or schedule changes.
- When using e-mail, keep it professional. Use a conventional greeting and sign off. If you need to discuss more complicated matters, schedule a phone or video conference. This will help you clarify issues and get feedback without misunderstandings. Follow up phone calls with an e-mail to review follow-up items.
- If you are responsible for supervising or supporting others, connect individually with a video call at a set time each week. Review work goals, discuss how things are going, identify challenges and successes, and reflect on overall perceptions about progress. Keep notes so that you can revisit action steps next time.

STAYING CALM AND HEALTHY

- Remain sensitive to your physical comfort. Refocus away from the screen to rest your eyes. Elevate your laptop and use an external keyboard. Keep balanced posture while sitting to protect your neck and hand joints from strain.
- Plan activity breaks to walk through your home or run up and down the stairs. Rev up your heart beat at least once an hour. Use simple stretching exercises or hand weights. Use break time to unload dishes, switch laundry, or reengage children. Refresh and revive with fresh tea, water, or coffee.
- When feeling stressed or overwhelmed, take a mental break. Meditate or breathe deeply. Try a diffuser or ionizer with essential oils or light a candle. Warm a light-weight, heated neck pack.
- Listen to ambient music (without words) or other calming or energizing music to help you focus.
- Plan weekly dinners to include comfort foods in addition to healthy choices. Eat meals at the same time daily.

- Schedule a walk daily and maintain your regular exercise schedule. Regular activity will yield better sleep and balanced emotions.
- Bring your pet to work! The purring on your lap or happy paw on your foot can lower your blood pressure and increase your well-being.

Even without a commute, it may seem your work time passes quickly and the workload has multiplied. Tasks that were taken care of with a quick drop-in to a colleague's office can now seem complex and unwieldy. It's important to keep things in perspective and take things a day at a time.

Be patient with yourself and with others in your home. Extended physical closeness during uncertain times can place a strain on relationships. Take ownership for your needs and boundaries. Don't expect others to guess your expectations. Don't wait until you are frustrated to ask for what you need.

If you share a home office with a partner, roommate, or family member, touch base with each other at the start of the week. Talk about your expectations, ask for support you may need, and clarify understandings.

Make communication specific. "I need time with my office door closed. Then I'll take a break at 11:00." "I don't mind some noise, but between 11:00 and noon, I need quiet to make phone calls."

The more others know, the more they can support you. They will appreciate knowing your needs up front when you are cheerful and calm, rather than learning after the fact – when you feel discouraged or stressed. Clear communication will help minimize potential conflicts.

Finally, remember that you are not in this alone. The tendency to isolate when you are already isolated is a pattern you may need to counteract. Instead, call a friend and connect virtually with family members. Drop off food at a community food bank. Offer to pick up a dozen eggs for someone else while you are getting groceries. Check on at-risk neighbors. Lifting others' spirits in practical ways puts compassion into action. Celebrate special moments and lessons learned. Stay anchored in the values and people you treasure most.

This is a perfect time for personal and professional growth. Keep a journal and write goals, ideas, and plans. Check out the extensive practical resource, [Building on Whole Leadership: Energizing and Strengthening Your Early Childhood Program](#). You'll find tips for personal and professional growth that will jumpstart your thinking and motivate your work. Review ideas to manage social isolation while [caring for children](#). We also invite you to explore the [McCormick Center Leadership Academies](#) and other helpful professional resources. Reach out to connect and let us know how we can support you.

Marie Masterson, Ph.D. is director of quality assessment at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and author of books and articles related to high-quality teaching, parenting, and leadership. The following McCormick Center staff contributed to the tips: Esmeralda Arroyo, Pam Costakis, Wendy Connell, Celeste DeGuzman, Angela Hendricks, Jo Ann Hermanek, Sharon Lewis, Phillis Mills, Cara Murdoch, Nasser Nabhan, Catherine Rader, Sherry Rocha, Paula Steffen, Katherine Schmidt, Susan Schulhof, Migdalia Young, and Yvonne Williams.