



By Karen Stephens

# Tips for Keeping Family Life Balanced

In today's whirlwind world, it's really hard to maintain balance in family life. So many outside forces make demands on our time and energy—work, children's schooling and more out-of-home entertainment opportunities than any other time in history.

No parent says that his or her goal in life is to feel *burned out*. No one sets out to allow the pace of family life to spin out of control. No parent likes feeling overwhelmed and pushed to the breaking point day in and day out. And parents don't like knowing their kids feel that way, either. But it happens, even without our permission, home life gets out of whack.

The parents I know hope to create a balanced home life. They want a home atmosphere that allows family members to feel relaxed, content and as stress-free as possible, especially the kids.

To a person, they hope family members can float through life on an even keel; each feeling safe, appreciated, engaged and fulfilled. But hoping for such a home life doesn't make it come true. Hoping alone is never enough to achieve any worthy goal. We parents must put action behind our hopes and dreams if they are to come true.

Parents trying to keep family life smooth sailing have quite a challenge before them. So today I share specific ways to bring balance into your life. Trust me, you'll forget to apply the tips from time to time. Life just works that way. It becomes a flurry of activity, and before you know it, you lose your grip on your time and schedules.

But when you begin to feel too stressed out, too tired or too overwhelmed, refer back to the tips. It takes practice and persistence to maintain calm and balance. But it can be done. Your kids are counting on you to lead the way.

## Tips for Maintaining Balance

1. Take time to reflect on the type of person you want to be—the kind of parent you want to be. Reflect on what you really want to give to life as well as what you want to get out of it.
2. Determine what you want your life to stand for. Identify your core values and beliefs. Then plan specific ways your life can mirror these beliefs.
3. If you have trouble deciding what you want your life to stand for, or if you have trouble planning how you want to spend your time in life, try this mental exercise. Upon your death, what you would want your own parents, your spouse or partner or children to be able to **truthfully** say about you? Let that lead you.
4. Once you have an idea of what you want your life to be like, write down specific goals. Then prioritize your goals, ranging from short to intermediate to long term.
5. Set lofty goals and believe you can do it all. Life really should be a grand adventure. However, for your own sanity and energy level, remember, ***you can do it all, but not all at once***. Your fundamental beliefs and values identified in # 3 will help you prioritize your goals. Some goals can be achieved even when actively parenting, others need to wait until the kids are older. Others may need to wait for retirement. *Have patience*. Have *trust* that your dreams will come true in their own good time.

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6. Learn to say “no” to requests for your time and energy that don't fit into your most precious priority—your family life. Avoid becoming over-committed. Don't become so busy that you neglect your own family. And don't spread yourself so thin that you do no one any good.
7. Prepare yourself for saying “no”. If it's hard to say no, make this rule and follow it. Decide to serve on only 2 service organizations at one time. Insist on a term limit for each. If a 3rd group asks for your help, politely say you'd love to consider it once one of your current obligations ends. If a new opportunity comes your way and you really want to take it, make yourself step down from something else before taking it on.
8. Schedule family time and keep that appointment as you would a business appointment. Set aside specific times for family fun, too, not just for shopping or cleaning.
9. Schedule time to connect with universal good, whether for you it is through prayer, worship, contemplation or meditation.
10. Manage your time well. There are good time management books to help you. (That means you have to make time to read them!) Your company's Human Resource Office or Wellness Program can help you, too.
11. Eat nutritiously, limit alcohol use, dump the smelly cigarettes and cigars in the trash can, and exercise daily at something you enjoy. Do it now so you are *healthy* enough to enjoy all the goals you'll pursue in retirement! (And yes, running after the kids qualifies as exercise to me.)
12. Delegate some household chores to each family member so everyone gets a chance to have some free time. Even two year olds can help out.

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13. Pursue a relaxing hobby that totally engages your focus. It's a wonderful way to lift the weight of work or family worries off your shoulders. Take up photography or gardening, play an instrument, read books, watch birds, ski, collect baseball cards. Whatever feeds a personal, non-work passion can help you maintain balance and zest for life. Schedule time for that relaxation and keep it as you would an appointment with the Queen of England herself!
14. Lighten up. Keep a sense of humor about life, yourself and others.
15. Do whatever you can to support your family well. Find the best child care possible. Be involved in your child's education. Help your spouse or partner find time to relax. Maintain good relations with neighbors and extended family. All together, these things wrap your child in a safety net of protection, physically as well as emotionally.
16. If you become overwhelmed by life and it lasts for weeks or even months, seek help. If a sunset isn't beautiful to you anymore, reach out. Visit a doctor or counselor. You don't have to surrender to depression. Treatment for chemical imbalance or overwhelming life circumstance helps everyone in the family; denial and wallowing in quiet desperation does not.
18. Choose to be happy. It's a choice for life—a choice for your kids.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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