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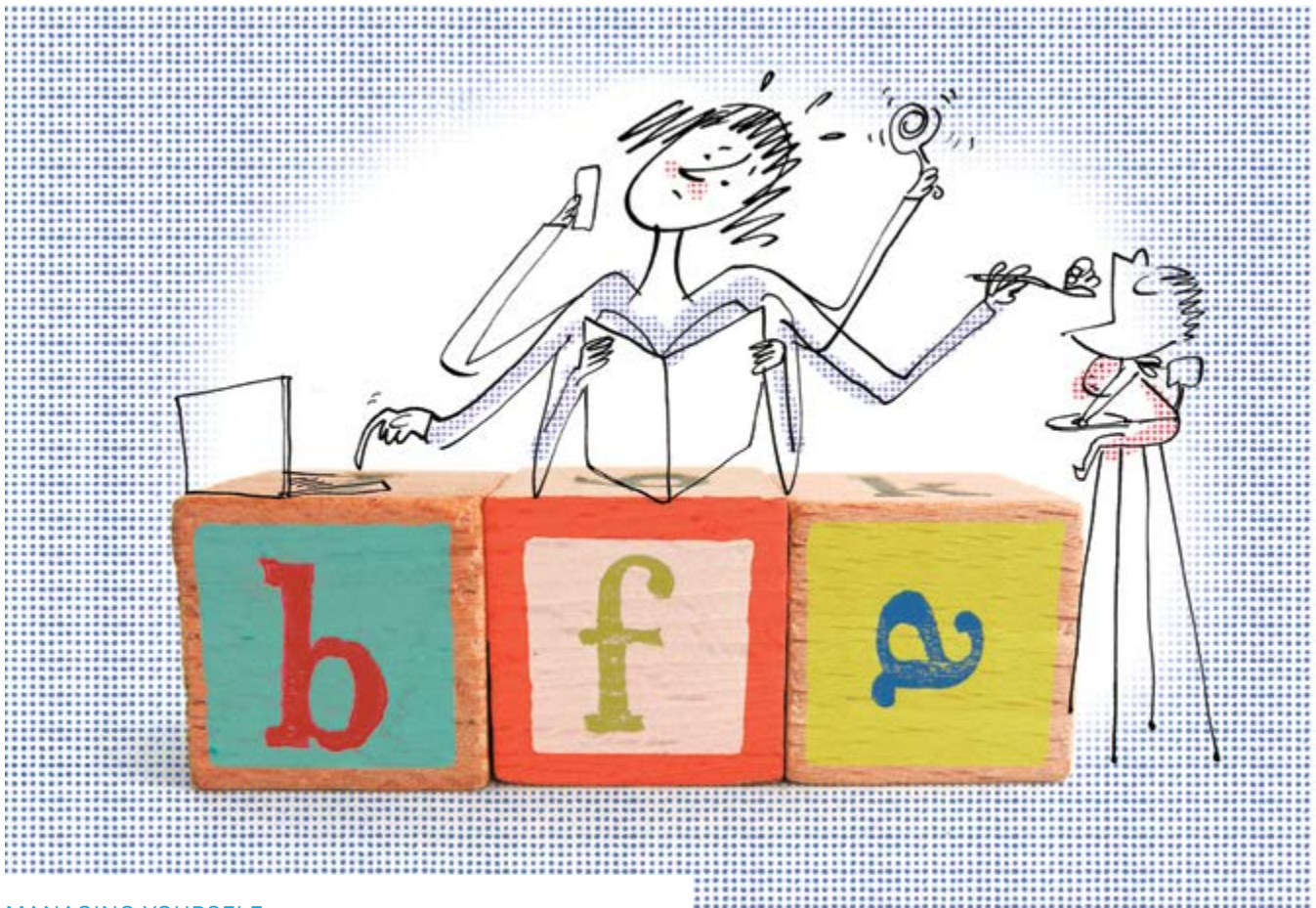
ARTICLE **MANAGING YOURSELF**

A Working Parent's Survival Guide

The five big challenges—and how to deal with them
by Daisy Wademan Dowling

Experience

Advice and Inspiration



MANAGING YOURSELF

A WORKING PARENT'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

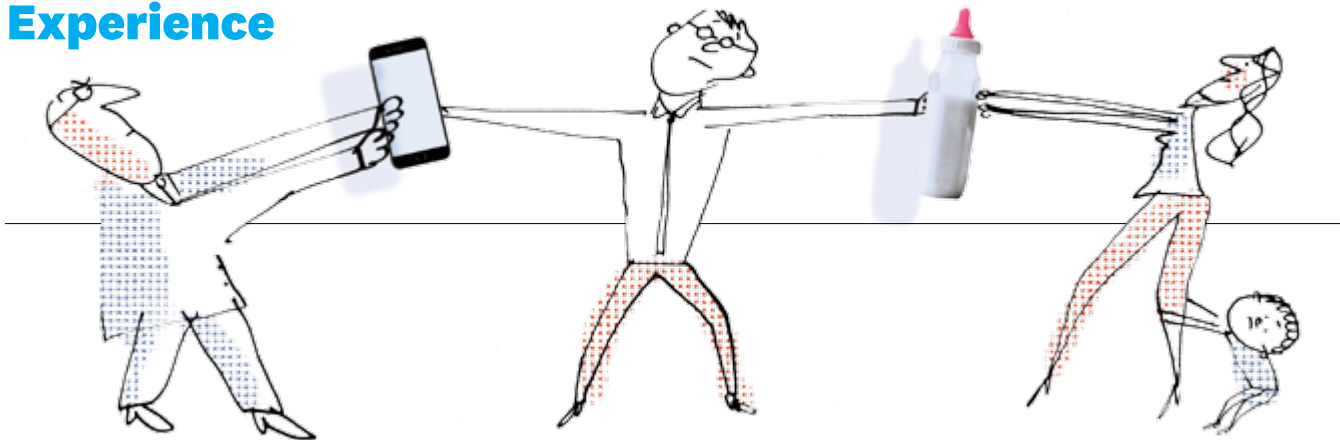
The five big challenges—
and how to deal with them

by Daisy Wademan Dowling

JACOB WAS A partner at a respected consulting firm and—to his delight—an expectant father. As the due date loomed, though, he became increasingly apprehensive. How would he and his wife, who worked long hours as a physician, find optimal childcare? Was it possible to use his firm's generous paternity leave without negative judgment from his colleagues and clients? And with his "road warrior" schedule, how could he be a present, loving father to his new daughter?

Gabriela, a venture-capital fundraiser, went to great lengths to balance the needs of sophisticated investors, her firm's partners, and her two small children. But she

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frequently felt overloaded and wondered if her managers looked askance at her trips to the pediatrician's office and preschool. She confessed to some nervousness about her typical 5:30 PM departure from the office ("I never used to leave so early"), and she worried that she wasn't being offered stretch assignments that would lead to promotion.

Connie was a senior IT manager at a consumer-products company and a single mother to a teenage son. She was having a tough time helping him navigate the complex college-admissions process while delivering against tight turnarounds at work. And each late night at the office was a stark reminder of how little time she had left with him at home. Under the strain, Connie found herself becoming snappish at work—which senior management had begun to notice.

Jacob, Gabriela, and Connie—I've changed their names and certain details about them here—are smart, hardworking professionals, deeply committed to their organizations. But they are just as committed to their children. So all three are grappling with what I call the working-parent problem: the enormous task, both logistical and emotional, of earning a living and building a career while being an engaged and loving mother or father.

They're not alone. More than 50 million Americans are juggling jobs and child-rearing—and finding that hard to do. In fact, according to a 2015 study

by Pew Research Center, 65% of working parents with college degrees—who have better career and earning prospects than less-educated parents—reported that it was "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" to meet the simultaneous demands of work and family. And the issue isn't limited to the United States; statistics are equally striking in other countries.

The problem is real and pervasive, and for moms and dads coping with it day to day, it can seem overwhelming. Working parenthood requires you to handle an endless stream of to-do's, problems, and awkward situations. There's no playbook or clear benchmarks for success, and candid discussion with managers can feel taboo; you might worry about being labeled as unfocused, whiny, or worse. Moreover, the problem persists for 18 years or more, without ever getting much easier. Years in, you may still feel as stressed as you did right after parental leave.

Under these conditions, it's normal to get tired, doubt your own choices and performance, and view your life as a constant, high-stakes improvisation. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can all gain more calm, confidence, and control, thereby strengthening our ability to succeed at—and even enjoy—working parenthood.

Over the past 15 years, first as in-house chief of leadership development at two *Fortune* 500 organizations and now as an independent

executive coach focused exclusively on working-parent concerns, I've taught and counseled hundreds of men and women, including the three described above, who are struggling to combine careers and children—and I've "been there" as a working mother myself. While the challenges we face are many and vary in detail, the majority fall into five core categories: transition, practicalities, communication, loss, and identity. When people I've worked with recognize this and learn to see patterns in the strains they're facing, they immediately feel more capable and in charge, which then opens the door to some concrete, feasible fixes.

In this article, we'll take a closer look at the core challenges, and then we'll cover a few effective ways to address them. We'll also see how Jacob, Gabriela, and Connie successfully put these ideas into practice—and how you can, too.

UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE CORE CHALLENGES

When facing the pressures of working parenthood, ask yourself: What kind of difficulty am I dealing with? Most likely, it's one or more of the following.

Transition. This challenge occurs when your status quo has been upended and you're scrambling to adapt. Going back to work after parental leave is the classic, visible example.

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But working-parent transitions occur regularly, in many different forms. The kids get out of school for the summer and their schedules shift; you hire a new sitter and have to integrate her into your family's routine; as you walk in the door after a business trip, you have to suddenly pivot from professional to caregiving mode.

Practicalities. This challenge consists of all the to-do's and logistical matters, large and small, that consume so much of your days—and nights. Searching for the right childcare, making it to the pediatrician's appointment on time (and then dashing to the pharmacy to pick up the antibiotics), getting the kids fed each evening, and taking an important conference call with a fussy toddler in the background all fall into this category.

Communication. You face this challenge when you've got working-parent matters to discuss and you find yourself at a loss for words or at risk of being misunderstood. Perhaps you are announcing a pregnancy, asking your boss for a flexible working arrangement, negotiating the daycare pickup schedule with your partner, or telling your five-year-old that you'll be traveling for work again. The stakes are high, and your intentions are good. But the honest, constructive conversation you want to have feels frustratingly out of reach.

Loss. This challenge involves a kind of mourning. Maybe the baby took her first steps while you were at work, or you weren't staffed to a career-making project because you made a deliberate decision to work fewer hours. Now you're worried that in trying to combine work and family, you've missed out on what's truly important.

Identity. You experience this challenge when grappling with the inevitable either/or thinking and personal conflict that comes with working parenthood. Will Thursday find you at your son's debate tournament or at the big sales meeting with the new client? Are you a hard charger or a nurturing, accessible parent? Which is right, and which is *you*? You wish you had clearer answers.

SOLUTIONS—AND PREVENTION

As every working parent knows, these challenges are never 100% resolved. They can, however, be preempted, mitigated, and managed. Five of the most powerful ways to do that are by *rehearsing* your transitions; *auditing* your commitments and *planning* your calendar; *framing* your working-parent messages; *using "today plus 20 years" thinking*; and *revisiting and recasting* your professional identity and brand. Let's explore each technique in turn.

Rehearsing. Transitions are inevitable, but they're made easier through practice. For example, if you're returning from parental leave, stage an "as if" morning a few days early: Get the baby ready, do the caregiving handover, and commute as though you're really going to work. If you're switching childcare providers, make the new sitter's first day a dry run while you work from home, available for questions. If you're coming home from a business trip or a long stint at work, take a moment while en route to plan how you'll pivot into parenting: how you'll greet the kids, how you'll spend the evening together.

Run-throughs like these reveal potential snags (drop-off takes longer than you

What Managers Can Do

The greatest force for retaining and engaging working parents? Managers on the front lines. Here are things leaders should know and do to support the mothers and fathers driving their teams' performance.

Understand the demographic. Working parents come in all packages: male and female; biological, adoptive, and foster; straight and LGBTQ; raising children of all ages. All need—and deserve—the same organizational and managerial support.

Demonstrate personal commitment. Keep pictures of your own family, including children if you have them, visible in your workspace. Allow access to your calendar so the team can see your personal obligations. Send a clear message that it's OK to be family-focused and that you yourself are.

Publicize company benefits. The emergency backup care your organization sponsors won't help keep people on the job unless they know about it and know how to use it. Stay current on available resources and make sure working parents in your group are informed, too.

Coach and mentor using open-ended questions. A simple "What do you think it will be like when you return from leave?" or "How are things going?" can launch a productive, solutions-focused conversation.

Minimize beginning- and end-of-day commitments. Schedule internal or elective meetings outside the hours in which parents need to handle caregiving transitions. (You're not lowering expectations for participation—just shifting them.)

Be an informal connector. Introduce the expectant father on your team to colleagues who have taken paternity leave. Host a lunch for parents in the department to swap tips about work travel. People will feel supported and gain practical "what works here" advice.

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expected; the sitter doesn't know where to find the extra diapers; you catch yourself mulling over your performance review while putting your first-grader to bed). More important, rehearsing gives you time to iron out the wrinkles. It gets you out of working-parent "improv mode" and provides a comforting sense of "I've got this; I know that what I'm doing works."

Auditing and planning. Like every busy working parent, you're doing more and have a broader range of commitments than ever before. That means that you need to become as mindful and deliberate as possible about where your time and sweat equity are going and why—or risk practical-challenge overload.

Try sitting down with your complete calendar, your to-do list(s), and a red pen. Highlight the commitments, tasks, and obligations you could have put off, handled more efficiently, delegated, automated, or said no to over the past week—and then do the same for the week ahead. If you don't *have* to be at an upcoming meeting, for example, bow out and free up the hour; if you're ordering the same household products each week, set up regular delivery. Be ruthless—and look for themes. Maybe you have a hard time declining volunteer requests from the kids' school, or you routinely run too many revisions on the quarterly budget numbers.

Practically, this exercise can create some much-needed slack in your calendar and shorten your to-do list. Emotionally, it gives you a sense of agency: You're being proactive and taking charge. And the personal insights that come out of it ("I say yes too often";

"I can be a perfectionist") help you make more-conscious judgments about your time and your commitments for the future.

Framing. To make any working-parent communication easier and more effective, think of yourself as putting it inside a frame, defined on four sides by your *priorities, next steps, commitment, and enthusiasm*.

Let's say it's a particularly hectic afternoon at work, but you need to duck out of the office for your daughter's ballet recital. Tell colleagues, "I'm leaving now for my daughter's recital, but I'll be back at 3:30. I'll tackle the marketing summary then, so we have a fresh version to review tomorrow. I'm looking forward to getting this in front of the client!" A statement like that will work much better than a sheepish "I'm headed out for a few hours," because it brings listeners into your full professional and personal plan, allays any concerns about progress on pressing work, and showcases your dedication to the team. You've taken control of your own narrative and kept it positive and authentic, while minimizing the chance of misunderstandings.

Using "today plus 20 years" thinking. As a professional, you probably have incentives to focus on the intermediate term: You're rewarded for completing that six-month project, meeting your annual revenue targets, and delivering a compelling three-year strategy plan. But as a working mother or father, that time horizon is emotionally treacherous; it's where much of the working-parent downside sits and where the potential sense of loss looms largest. If you're just back from parental leave, for example, sitting miserably at your desk and missing the baby, it can be crushing to think forward six months or a year.

So try this instead when you're feeling conflicted or confronting the loss challenge: Think very short term and very long term—at the same time. Yes, you do miss the baby terribly right now, but you'll be home to see her in a few hours—and years from now you know you'll have provided her with a superb example of tenacity, career commitment, and hard work. In other words, acknowledge the reality and depth of your current feelings, identify a point of imminent relief, and then project far forward, to ultimate, positive outcomes.

Revisiting and recasting. Most of us have deeply ingrained views of who we are as professionals and how we wish to be known. But it's important to revisit and update the details of those identities and brands after becoming parents. If responsiveness has always been a key part of your identity, for example, now during family dinner you're likely to feel torn: irresponsible if you ignore your smartphone and guilt-ridden as a parent if you check it. What used to be a positive career differentiator has become a classic no-win situation, and you've lost both pride in your professional self and the happy moment of being an engaged mom or dad, eating with the kids.

To be clear, recasting doesn't mean lowering your standards; it means defining important new ones. To help in the process, try completing the following sentences: "I am a working-parent professional who..."; "I prioritize work responsibilities when..."; and "My kids come before work when..." Through this exercise, you may decide that instead of putting so much weight on being responsive, you choose to think of yourself as an efficient, thoughtful, or articulate communicator—and you may vow that barring a work emergency, your kids take precedence during dinner.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Remember Jacob, the expectant father? Like most working parents, he was feeling the pressures of multiple core challenges, and he wanted to contain their impact on his upcoming parental leave and eventual return to work. He began by *framing* his conversations with clients: announcing his impending absence,

previewing his time out of the office, reiterating his dedication, and describing how his team would see critical advisory projects through. To Jacob's surprise, the message was warmly received; it even allowed him to deepen and personalize several relationships that had previously been all business. Next, after carefully *auditing* his post-leave calendar, Jacob determined that a number of his work meetings in faraway cities could be done remotely, freeing up additional precious time to spend with his little girl. (Later, when he *was* on the road, he reminded himself that the trip was short and the return home would be joyous—and that his career success would help ensure a stable financial future for the entire family.) During his month at home, he and his wife also anticipated and *rehearsed* their caregiving plans, deciding that they would ask for supplemental help from family members on the days she was on call. Several months into working fatherhood, Jacob reported being busier than ever but feeling in charge and on track.


As for Gabriela, she concluded that in trying to be all things to all people, she had taken on too much. *Recasting* her identity as "future partner in the firm and devoted mom" helped her identify commitments that didn't align with either role. She kept all her investor responsibilities, continued leaving the office at the same time, and went to the pediatrician's when needed. But she quietly began cutting back on internal work—such as organizing the firm's annual retreat—and she limited her volunteerism at the kids' school to one event per semester. The professional-recasting process also gave her the time, clarity, and confidence to prepare for effective conversations with

her managers, in which she better *framed* her ambitions and desired schedule.

Connie realized that the combination of job pressures and her son's impending departure for college had created new challenges in her working-parent life. Together, we came up with a plan to mitigate the effects on her personally and professionally. After *auditing* her calendar and her to-do's, she delegated several recurring tasks to more-junior members of her team and dedicated the hours saved to a weekly evening outing with her son. When college-application and work deadlines collided, she used *framing* techniques to calmly explain her time out of the office to her colleagues instead of snapping at them, and she used the "*today plus 20 years*" tool to put her situation into perspective. Additionally, when her son was away visiting colleges, Connie *rehearsed* her evenings and weekends as an empty nester. With new habits in place, her stress subsided.

WORKING PARENTHOOD ISN'T easy. It's a big, complex, emotional, chronic, and sometimes all-consuming struggle. But as with any challenge, the more you break it down, the less daunting it becomes. With a clearer view of the issues you're facing, and with specific strategies for managing them, you'll be better able to succeed at work—and be the mother or father you want to be at home. ☺

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 **DAISY WADEMAN DOWLING** is the founder and CEO of the training and consulting firm *Workparent* and the author of a guide to working parenthood, forthcoming from Harvard Business Review Press.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"How Working Parents Can Feel Less Overwhelmed and More in Control"
Daisy Wademan Dowling
HBR.org,
January 12, 2018

"Managing Parental Leave (Yours or Someone Else's)"
HBR's *Women at Work* podcast,
September 24, 2018

"Kids of Working Moms Grow into Happy Adults"
Dina Gerdeman
Harvard Business School's *Working Knowledge*,
July 16, 2018

"Working Mothers"
Dear HBR podcast,
February 7, 2019

"How Our Careers Affect Our Children"
Stewart D. Friedman
HBR.org,
November 14, 2018

"4 Ways Working Dads Can Make More Time for Family"
James Sudakow
HBR.org,
April 9, 2019