

SAHM I Am

For the past six months, due to a corporate merger and a minor surgery, I've been a Stay-At-Home Mom (SAHM). Prior to this hiatus, I'd worked 30+ hours a week for nearly all twelve years of my children's lives. It's been quite a memorable time for both me and my family, and as a new job looms in January, I've begun to reflect on the lessons of my unexpected time at home.

Men's brains and women's brains operate differently. Now, maybe this is only in my household, but I'll share the observation anyhow. My husband and I are a pretty solid parenting team, and we'll often arrange parenting swaps, as in "I'll let you sleep in today and get the kids on the bus." Sounds good, right? The problem is that when I let him sleep in, he rolls over and is snoring before I head downstairs. He'll reappear in the late morning, refreshed as can be. When it's my turn, I lay in wait like a detective, listening to the snooze alarms going off, wondering if the kids remembered to brush their teeth and to pack their clothes for gym. Then I begin to mentally review my plans for the day. I might as well be downstairs, since clearly I'm not getting the full benefits of sleeping in. I'm not sure if that's a personality flaw of mine (translation: I'm a control freak), or if my husband just has a superior ability to shut off the multi-tasking part of his brain. But I think I'm jealous.

The more "free time" you have, the more you procrastinate. This may sound counterintuitive, but I've asked many women friends (employed and not), and the consensus is that we are all more productive when we are busier. I'm not sure if it's because our tendency is to fill up our time with activities no matter what, but I'm astonished at how fast the days have flown when I've not been in the workplace. I've noticed that I am catching up on the always-put-off tasks around the house, such as organizing paperwork, shopping early for holiday gifts, and clearing out closets and cluttered drawers. These areas were clearly suffering while I was working. Instead, I'm putting off other things now, such as calling prospective clients, networking with colleagues and preparing to teach in January. But whether I'm behind in family tasks (because I'm focused on work) or I'm behind on work tasks, (because the family takes precedence), there's one thing I'm never on top of. Laundry.

When you're home all the time, the family takes advantage of you. Why? Just because you're there. It's been subtle, but since I've been home, much more of the burden of day-to-day stuff has landed in my lap. Some of it is expected. Certainly, I'm grocery shopping more, cooking more, and handling more of the appointments for the kids. But there's been another consequence, a bit of a slippery slope that I'm eager to stop. My kids are assuming that I have time to do whatever they need, whenever they need it. I've heard sentences like, "Well, I'm at school all day and you're just home." Or "You've got the time during the day, and I don't." It really grates on my nerves, because while I'm "just" home, I'm doing all of the unappreciated tasks and behind-the-scenes errands that make the family's life easier. I've even considered setting up a home videocamera to show that I don't spend the day watching soaps and having my nails done. (OK, once in a while I do.) The point is, when I was at the office, I never got this kind of attitude from my kids. It's opened my eyes to the kind of dismissiveness that I know many stay-at-home moms and dads feel. Their daily job just isn't valued as much as paying jobs are.

So, what's my take-home message from these months "off"? First of all, they're most definitely not a va-

cation. Instead, there's a reassessment of priorities and a reassignment of tasks that happens. For instance, I'm still multitasking on daily basis. But I do find that I'm consciously making more of an effort to do things for myself. Whether it takes the form of meeting friends for lunch, exercising, or reading a novel, I'm capitalizing on "downtime" that I didn't have when working. So from the standpoint of feeling time-squeezed, it's been an improvement, and I'm sleeping better. (That's not just good for me, that's good for the whole family.)

Looking ahead, though, I have a sneaking suspicion that there'll be lots of little hurdles to deal with in January, since everyone's gotten just a little too used to me being at home. Hmm...Laundry, anyone?

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