

Juggling school, work and family

Getting a degree while meeting family and work obligations may seem to be almost impossible – but with a little planning, plus the flexibility of online education, you can have it all.

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College or graduate school helps you advance your career – whether in a current profession or to enter a new one. But, as an adult, returning to school has its challenges, especially if you're a working parent or a caregiver for elderly family members. The prospect of taking on school, on top of your personal and professional responsibilities, can be rather daunting.

But it is possible – even manageable. These tips can help you tip the scales in your favor, allowing you to balance the needs of others with your own. With a plan of attack, your goal of a degree will be in easy reach.

Keep your boss in the loop

Most managers, in general, encourage employees to earn higher degrees and are glad to accommodate your school schedule. Be open and honest with your boss about the time it will take to work on your studies and, most importantly, assure them you are able to meet your job's duties. As soon as you know your class schedule, share it with your manager. Plus, by making your manager aware of your intent to go back to school, you may get a pleasant surprise – many employers offer tuition reimbursement, scholarships, or loans for employees.

Find a fit for your schedule

In an effort to attract students, many schools are finding creative ways to meet today's professionals' schedules. Flexible options are being offered, including online programs which allow students to choose when and where they study – and don't waste gas and time driving back and forth to a classroom.

Use your network

Take advantage that a support network of family and friends offers. One of the most important things they offer is helping you maintain a positive attitude when you get discouraged or feel overwhelmed. A neighbor could help out by picking up your kids from school once in awhile. A friend could pick up a gallon of milk for you while they're at the store. These small acts can save you a lot of time – and let you know you're not alone in your efforts to further your education.

Keep your eyes on the prize

Stay focused on your goal. A critical step is to create a schedule for each class as well as for completing your degree – even if it's long-term. It may seem like it's going to take forever but, by creating a schedule, you can identify milestones to celebrate.

Always keep in mind that what you're doing will open doors for you. Though you have a destination, you can also enjoy the journey of learning.

Weigh your sacrifices

You will have to make some sacrifices. You may have to up some time you devoted to hobbies. But be careful not to replace all your extra-curricular interests with school. While some short-term sacrifices are needed, you shouldn't give up all your free time to school. Schedule some personal time so you can take your kids to the park or read that novel on your nightstand without feeling guilty.

Manage your time

It's today's mantra – manage your time. Your education is no exception. Taking the time to set priorities and make lists is an investment. Ten minutes spent thinking now about what you have to accomplish can save you hours later. Plan your week rather than just a day so you can get the big picture. Make sure your priorities are, indeed, a priority. Include time for errands, household chores and, most importantly, some time for yourself on your schedule. Having even a few minutes where you're not having to work or study really does reduce stress.

Take it on the run

You can sneak in studying almost anywhere. Keep your books or tapes with you and find creative ways to fit in studying during times you are usually idle. Study during your lunch hour or when you're waiting in a doctor's office. Tape lectures and review them on your commute. Take advantage of podcasts and listen to them while you take a walk.

Technological advantages

Technology can help even if you aren't enrolled in an online learning program or attend classes via teleconference. You can communicate with professors via e-mail and do research and discuss projects with other students online. Your computer doesn't have office hours so make use it whenever you have a spare minute.