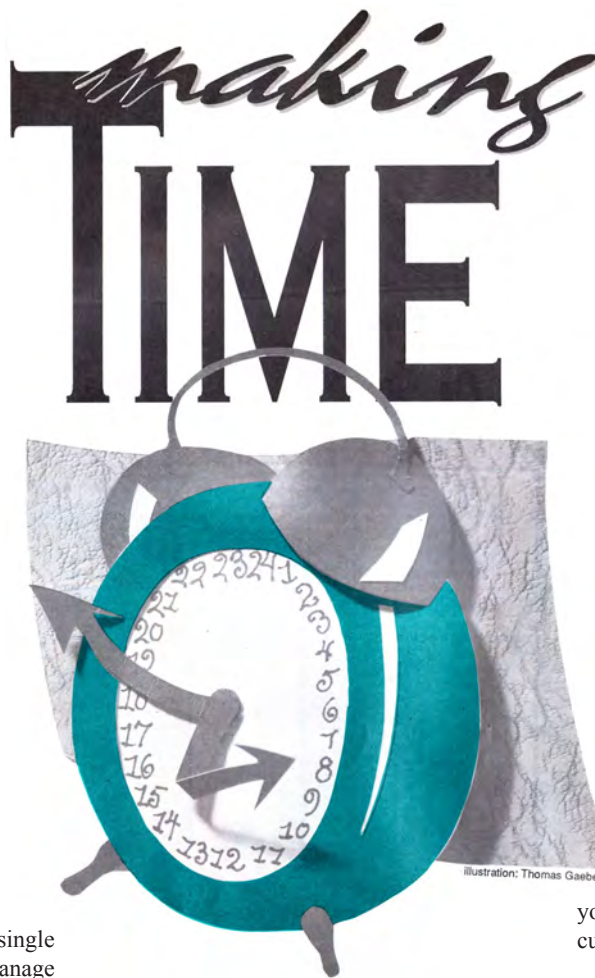


Run  
your  
household  
like an  
organization  
and your  
household  
will stop  
running  
you



By Vivien Santana Hughes

Donna Johnson, a 44-year-old single mother, says she could easily manage it all—working full time, keeping house, caring for her two small children and enjoying an active social life—if only she had about 12 more hours in the day. How does she manage her time? Donna (not her real name), remarks simply, “Time? What time?”

Hers is a familiar refrain, echoed by many of the more than 10 million single mothers in this country (almost 2 million in California alone) whose job it is to singlehandedly play breadwinner, nurturer, housekeeper, chief bottle washer and chauffeur. All the more reason why single moms stand to benefit from time management skills, say experts.

Research shows that single mothers who effectively manage their time are happier, have more energy and ultimately spend more time with their children.

To be an effective time manager, however, demands that women “think of their households and their lives as organizations, which, in order to operate, must run efficiently,” says Dr. Tchia Litman, a Westwood psychologist specializing in time management. Litman advises mothers to “first analyze your organization [household] in terms of the goals you have for it.”

That may be difficult for some women. Donna Kater, a counselor and time management researcher in Wichita, Kansas, says many women are “people pleasers,” who put the needs of others before themselves.

“It’s harder for such women to even discover what it is they want,” says Kater. “Most of their life has been focused on what other people want of them.”

### Set realistic goals

Yet, most experts agree that goal setting is the first step in time management. “Once you know what your goals are, you can relax in the fact that you will one day achieve them and, in the meantime, be comfortable with what you are doing today,” says Kater, who suggests that women establish both long- and short-term goals. They can then analyze their time in terms of whether they are meeting those goals.

One researcher suggests dividing tasks into the following categories: important and urgent (a diaper change), important but not urgent (medical check-up), urgent but not important (attending a lecture), busywork (reorganizing a bookshelf) and wasted time. He then suggests that mothers set their priorities by importance rather than urgency.

Veronica Getskow, Coordinator of Early Childhood Education at UCLA Extension, suggests that parents view the “bigger picture” when establishing priorities. “Ask yourself what five characteristics you want your child to have when he or she is 21, and then ask yourself, ‘How am I going to achieve that?’” Whatever trait you value—such as responsibility—change your focus to behaviors that will foster that quality in your child. In this case, you could be aware of giving her regular chores around the house and an allowance to manage.

Once you know your priorities, you can begin to make some changes. If, for example, your priority is having more time with your children,

your task is to determine how to free up time currently spent on other responsibilities.

To do so, Dr. Litman suggests first making an assessment of household tasks and then finding more “efficient” ways of accomplishing them “in the least amount of time and with the least amount of energy, effort and expenditure.” You may discover, for example, that you are making frequent and needless trips to the market each week or are doing several small loads of wash that could easily be consolidated into one. “The problem is that most women don’t do this kind of analysis,” says Dr. Litman.

To better help in that process, we have listed the following helpful hints offered by time management experts:

**Minimize time spent on low-priority tasks and obligations.** Learning to say “no” may be one of the hardest but most essential elements of good time management. Joan Anderson, author of *The Single Mother’s Book: A Guide to Managing Your Children, Finances and Everything Else*, offers the following rule of thumb: If, when confronted with a request (to assist a Brownie troop or canvass for a charitable cause, for example), “you find yourself asking the knee-jerk question, ‘How will I find time?’” always say no, says Anderson. There will be plenty of time in your life for extraneous activities. Unless the activity is a labor of love, now is not the time.

**When in doubt, make a list.** To-do lists are a helpful, if not necessary, aide. Kathy Amos, publisher of *Mother-To-Mother: Another View*, prides herself on an excellent memory. However, when she feels overwhelmed by deadlines and housework, she resorts to lists. “The feeling

of overwhelm comes when I'm trying to do too many things at one time and I'm afraid that one of them won't get done," says Amos. "So when my memory bank is full, I start making lists."

Some mothers find it helpful to outline their goals for the day, the month or even the year. Experts recommend that if parents do so, they limit their lists to what can reasonably be done and then reward themselves for having succeeded. In this way, they will achieve a sense of accomplishment rather than a feeling of overwhelm.

**Become a systems analyst when it comes to housework.** Because we create most of the mess we end up cleaning, points out Dr. Litman, we should be more mindful to minimize the mess in the first place. For example, instead of leaving newspapers around waiting to be collected at the end of the week, assign a specific place for them, thus eliminating the chore of collecting them later. That philosophy can also be applied to laundry and shopping. Needless time is wasted on errands, says Dr. Litman, who recommends mapping out routes to and from work to include laundry drop-offs, shopping, banking and other daily and weekly errands. The key is to eliminate unnecessary steps.

Others suggest buying clothes requiring the least amount of care, buying them and food in larger quantities, and simplifying home decor. One mom purchases several of the same items for birthday gifts so she always has one on hand when her child is invited to a party. Another woman saves time by doing dishes or laundry while she is talking on the telephone.

**Delegate early and often.** The sooner you begin assigning jobs to your children, the sooner you will free up time to spend with them.

"A toddler can put a toy on a shelf. A 5 year old can take the dishes out of the dishwasher,

and an 8 year old can wash the dishes," claims Joan Anderson.

Some experts advise making cleanup a condition of time spent together. For example, the parent might say, "After you clean up, we'll play a game or read a story." You might even explain to your child that "when I spend less time cleaning up after you, I have more time to spend playing."

While it may be easier in the short run to tidy up yourself, you will find it harder as time goes on and messes mount.

**Head off crises before they begin.** As one single mother explains, "Things can be going along smoothly, and then something like my kids getting sick will make me feel that I just can't handle it." Having a back-up plan in place can help. While alternate childcare is difficult to arrange, other crises can easily be averted. Getskew advises mothers to start with crisis prevention on a smaller scale. For example, every night she lays out the clothes her son will need in the morning. Items to take to school are placed by the front door, thus preventing a morning panic for missing homework and such.

"The best thing to do is assess, what is your morning crisis? That's the best place to begin time management," Getskew advises, "because if you're talking about time management, you're also talking about stress management."

**Make the most of the time you do have.** Beverly Sparks, an advertising executive, spends "a lot of time" in her car. She has an hour-and-a-half commute to and from work. But, instead of that being idle time in traffic, Sparks turns it into quality time with her daughter. "That's our time together," says Sparks. "the radio is turned off, and I'm tuned into her. We talk about her day or play little road games we've made up."

For others, the weekend may be the only time

some parents have to spend with their kids. The important thing is that your child knows there is a specific time set aside when he or she will have your undivided attention.

**Find a family.** A support system is not merely necessary, but vital, for single mothers. Not only do they lack back-up when there is an emergency, but they shoulder the responsibilities of both mother and father. Anderson advises women to find at least five friends on whom they can depend for physical and emotional support. Included should be at least one male and one other single mother.

Dr. Litman suggests that single mothers develop "reciprocal" relationships, whereby they share some of the childcare and household responsibilities. "One mother may take the kids one day a week, while the other takes them another day, or one mother does the shopping for both families one week, and they trade off the next," says Dr. Litman.

Finding moms with mutual needs may be difficult; Dr. Litman recommends contacting your church, synagogue or child's school for referrals to other single moms. Ads in parenting magazines are also helpful.

**Let go of perfectionism.** The single mother, more than any other parent, must accept that she simply can't do it all. If that means the house is less than immaculate and the meals are less than nutritious, so be it. As Anderson explains, "Somewhere between total chaos and total perfection lies a place of peaceful compromise where all the parties can agree, 'Well, this will do for now.'"

In the meantime, the single mom should frequently pat herself on the back for having managed her time and her life as well as she has.

## ORGANIZE THYSELF

**Y**ou've set your goals and set your priorities, but you can't remember where you set that important phone number you need right now. "I know it's here somewhere" is a phrase even the most organized among us mumble every so often," says Paulette Ensign, president of Organizing Solutions, Inc. The author of two booklets on the subject, Ensign offers the following tips for organizing your household (and preserving your sanity).

- Use a spiral notebook—instead of scraps of paper—for "to do" lists, messages and random thoughts. This method provides you with a consistent place for storing information. Keep the notebook near the telephone you use most often, and near the other phones place a pad of large sticky notes. Later, affix these messages in your spiral notebook.

- Carry a folder of articles to read or bills to pay when you're waiting through your child's music lessons or other appointments. What would otherwise be downtime can be turned into something useful if you focus on what you want to accomplish.

- Always sort in measurable, non-overwhelming units for greatest success. When you and your child are attempting to clean out her disastrous closet, for example, break the task down into units

of one: the floor, for starters. Don't forget that instant results can inspire further sorting, so take out the bulky items first.

- Encourage participation in household organizing—let your child pick out his own storage containers and bins. He's more likely to actually use them if he's involved in the selection process.

- Use hanging plastic pockets by your desk or even on the refrigerator for school paperwork, things to file, recipes, current projects, coupons—whatever is sitting on your desk or counters. Storing papers in divided, upright piles makes them more approachable and controllable.

- Color code your calendar by assigning each family member a different color. You can see at a glance who's involved in each activity that month while teaching even non-readers about time responsibilities.

- Vivien Santana Hughes

