



Being a mother



Mothers need lots of energy. From birth to adolescence children keep you laughing, running around and dare you to keep up.

Every day overflows with activity from the excitement of children's games, sport and their constant curiosity, to the chores needed to keep a family going.

A mother's role includes being a teacher, cook, partner, cleaner, playmate, taxi driver, counsellor, doctor and career adviser among other things.

Balancing act!

Being a mother is the biggest balancing act of all.

To stay well and happy you need to find a balance between meeting your family's needs and your own.

Finding a good balance will help you feel more satisfied as a parent and as a person. It is also important for your own wellbeing and increases your reserves of energy and patience.

Here are a few tips to help you find a balance.

Tip 1—Find time for yourself

Make a list of things which make you feel good.

What makes you contented, excited, interested, energetic or relaxed?

To jog your memory remember what treats you were given last Mother's Day which made you feel special or gave you a break from the routine. Was it 10 minutes extra sleep in the morning while your partner got the children up, time alone with your partner, quiet in the house (no loud music) or simply time on your own?

Include everyday pleasures on your list such as reading a magazine, exercising, listening to the radio or enjoying a favourite snack.

Plan how you can achieve some or all of your wishes.

Share the list with a partner, relative or friend—they may be interested to know how they can help you.

MY WISH LIST TO LOOK AFTER MYSELF

I would like to:	I will do this by:	Who will I ask to help?
Have a half hour sleep in once a fortnight.	Having someone get breakfast for the children.	My partner—and he can have a sleep in on the other weekend.
Go for a walk with my husband once a week.	Having a trusted person look after the children.	I will ask my friend Kirsty to baby sit and I'll return the favour when she wants to go out.

Try to carry out at least one item a day from your list.

Keep in mind looking after yourself doesn't mean you love your children any less. In fact you'll have extra energy and patience for them when you are more refreshed.

When people carry out five minutes brisk exercise every day or have three sessions of 30 minutes exercise each week their mood is known to improve measurably.



Tip 2—Boost your confidence

Tending to the needs of children is a loving and rewarding task but often mothers lose confidence in their other abilities when they are raising children at home.

Give your confidence a boost by writing down all the things that you are good at on top of being a mother.

You may be good at cooking, sport, craft, helping others, working outside the home, tending the garden or building things. What is your special interest? What would your friends, relatives or partner say you were good at if you asked them?

Do something that gives you a sense of achievement outside of parenting. For example, return to a hobby you enjoy such as growing your own vegetables, home decorating, volunteering or going back to work.

Or learn something new.

There are training schemes and education opportunities especially for people who have been out of the workforce for a while. For example, you can find out about New Opportunities for Women (NOW) and other TAFE courses by contacting the Western Australian Training Information Centre on telephone (08) 9325 9322.

Having a balanced idea of who you are builds self esteem. Being a mother is one of many roles you may take over a lifetime.

Confidence is affected by the way you think. Thinking “I’m only a mother”, “I can’t do that” or “I’m no good at this” lowers your confidence and holds you back from trying new things.

Try some confidence boosting talk. When faced with a new task say to yourself “I’ll give it a go”, “I’m up to this” or “What a good idea”. Think about how you encourage your children to have a go and do the same for yourself.

It may take a while to get used to encouraging yourself. It may feel artificial at first but soon it will become easier and your confidence will grow.

When things go well people often put it down to luck not their own effort. When things go badly they blame themselves. Break the trend—give yourself credit when you succeed!

Tip 3—Be realistic

What were your expectations before you became a parent? What sort of mother did you think you would be? Many of your predictions will have come true. Mostly you’ll be a great mother. There will be a lot of love, joy and excitement as your child grows, learns and eventually reaches independence.

There will also be surprises about being a mother. It is the hardest thing you will do—physically and emotionally. You may not always be as good at parenting as you had hoped. It may even be boring and frustrating at times.

There are no perfect mothers.

Mothers do not ‘automatically’ know how to look after children. Everyone is a learner, making mistakes and correcting them as they go along.

Feeling good about yourself is easiest when you have a supportive group of friends or family to share your ups and downs. Search out people who have children of a similar age to your own. You will be surprised how helpful it is to share successes and challenges.

If you make a mistake don’t be too hard on yourself. Apologise and work out how to do things better next time. Being able to apologise will make you feel better and is a good skill to teach your children.

Research suggests mothers who attended supportive parenting groups before and after their child is born have fewer emotional problems in their child’s first year.*

Tip 4—Change with the times

As your children grow their needs and wants change. Just when you thought you had parenting all sorted out a new challenge presents itself.

These changes are most dramatic when your child wants independence during the teenage years. Teenagers often see their mother as embarrassing and need to oppose her ideas, attitudes and values. This is a normal part of their development but can feel very hurtful to parents.

Here are some tips to ease you through their teenage years:

- Enter into healthy discussions with your teenagers—expect them to disagree but enjoy the debate anyway.
- Remember when you were a teenager and had similar feelings.
- Talk to other adults who agree with your values.
- Remind yourself not to take disagreements personally.

* Promoting mental health after childbirth: a controlled trial of primary prevention of postnatal depression, by Sandra A Elliott, Teresa J Leverton and Diane Bushell, in *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol 39 (2) 2000, pp223–241.

First time mothers

The birth of a baby and the following months are a time of joy but also huge adjustment, particularly with a first child.

You may feel as though nothing about your life is the same as it was before. It can be hard to adjust from being in the workforce to being at home. You will find your normal routine is disrupted and the way you spend your time is dictated by the needs of your baby.

Many couples find their relationship changes after their first baby is born. A baby often brings new responsibilities and direction for parents. Even though you may have less time to devote to each other it is vital you make an effort to strengthen your relationship.

Talk to your partner or a trusted friend about how you are feeling. Putting into practice some of the tips on this sheet will also help you enjoy the wonders and challenges of being a first time mum.

If you experience feelings or thoughts at this time which disturb you, speak to others who you know will listen. Many mothers experience changes, including mood changes, which can be difficult to manage alone.



Mothers' thoughts on being a mum

"Being a mum is exciting, watching the babies grow, and exhausting running around with them and after them."

"Looking after children is being there when they want you and feeling needed."

"Mothering is loving and bonding and providing for my child plus being up all night and missing out on luxuries."

Fathers' thoughts on motherhood

"Mothering is a 24 hour a day job."

"The mother child relationship will always be the most intimate bond two people can share."

"The mother has a 9 month head start on the father in the privilege and joy of parenting."

Quotes from mothers about going to work:

"I had more patience and appreciated the time with my son after I went back to work."

"Time with the children became more precious."

"I enjoyed the chance to be going at my own pace for part of the day."

"My daughter got a lot out of playing with other children while I was at work."

"Work improves my confidence which is great as my teenagers are masters of the put down."

Working once your child is born often raises mixed feelings. Wanting to be with your child can clash with meeting other needs such as those for money, a wish for adult company, or to use skills other than parenting. You may also feel that others disapprove of you working outside the home.

Some mothers describe leaving their child to go to work as a terrible wrench—some breathe a sigh of relief. Both of these reactions are normal.



Tips to help you settle into paid work:

- Starting work will be much easier if you are confident your child is settled in a caring environment. Well before your start date look into different child care options and think about which would suit you and your child best. For ideas on how to find the right place see the magazine *Choosing Quality Care for Your Children* from Family and Children's Services. If your child is older talk to them about any changes to routine or after school arrangements.
- Ease your way into the job. If you are returning to your old job visit the workplace in advance or meet workmates for lunch to catch up. If this is a new job, read up about what you will be doing and go in for an informal visit.
- Start back at work part time then build up your hours gradually if possible. This way you and your child will get used to a new routine.
- Ask for help when you need it. Employers, work colleagues and your partner usually react well if you explain your difficulty and give them ideas to solve the problem.
- You can still breastfeed if you choose to go back to work. Contact the Nursing Mothers' Association on telephone (08) 9309 5393 for support and advice.



Work and the single parent

Single parents starting paid work face some extra challenges. Good organisation and a strong network of family and friends will make the difference.

Being able to rely on friends and relatives is especially important when problems arise such as illness, child care difficulties or unpredictable changes to routine. Ask in advance if friends could step in to collect children or look after them in an emergency.

School holidays need careful planning. Vacation care services provide care for groups of school aged children during holidays with trained and/or experienced staff. Or you could try alternating care with a trusted friend. For example, for one week you look after your own and your friend's children, the next week they care for yours while you go to work. Relatives may also play their part in looking after children during the long breaks.

Up to 43 percent of mothers with children less than five years old go out to work.

My Mum

"is pretty" girl aged 2

"has lovely manners" boy aged 7

"works hard" girl aged 5

"is nice, kind and annoying when she doesn't let me have lollies when I want them" boy aged 8

"is embarrassing" girl aged 15

"is okay and gives me lifts and advice sometimes" boy aged 16

For more information

The magazines *Living with Babies*, *Living with Toddlers*, *Living with Children*, *Living with Teenagers*, *Living with Stepfamilies* and *Choosing Quality Care for Your Children* are available free of charge from parenting information centres or by telephoning the Parenting Line on (08) 9272 1466 or 1800 654 432 (freecall STD).

The videos *Living with Babies*, *Living with Toddlers*, *Living with Children*, *Living with Teenagers* and *Living with Stepfamilies* can be borrowed by calling the Parenting Line and from all public libraries and parenting information centres.

Further reading

Baby Daze: Becoming a Mother and Staying You by Erina Reddan, Rydalmere, NSW: Hodder Headline Australia, 2000.

The Girlfriends' Guide to Surviving the First Year of Motherhood by Vicki Iovine, London: Bloomsbury, 1999.

Life After Birth by Kate Figs, London: Penguin Books, 1998.

A Mother's Little Instruction Book by Jasmine Birtles, London: Boxtree, 1997.

Woman, Work, Child: Women Talk About Balancing Work and Family by Jodie R Benveniste, East Roseville, NSW: Simon & Schuster, 1998.