

HOW I COPE WITH THE DEMANDS OF MODERN LIVING

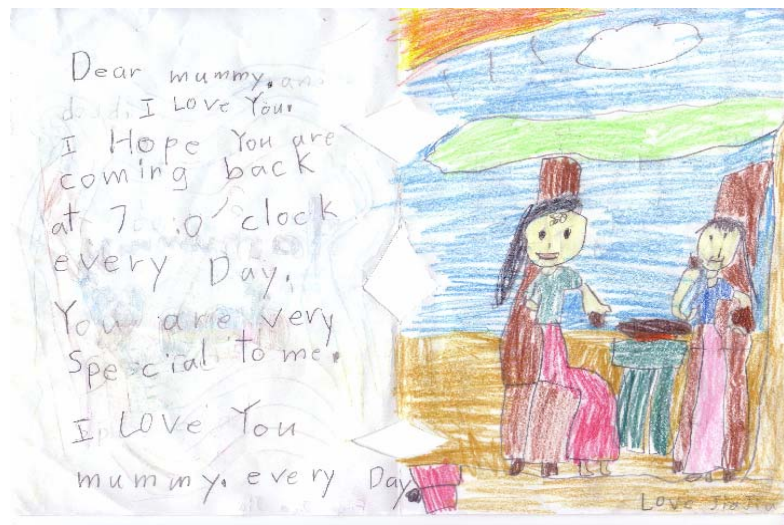
By Helen Lim-Yang

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Knowing Your Calling

It was seven o'clock in the evening. I looked up from my lap top to read a home-made card on the wall that read "Mummy, I love you. I hope you are coming back at 7 o'clock everyday. You are very special to me. I



love you mummy everyday." Heavy hearted and rushing against time to finish more work, I looked at the child-like drawing and handwriting again. This time, with a mother's determination, I packed up and left my office. That day, I reached home at seven forty-five, to join my children as they finished up dinner. That special card is still on my wall today. It is strategically placed to remind me to go home early.

The ambivalence of working mom and multiple role obligations is real to me and can create mounting tension if not checked regularly. At one point, I pondered much over my life priorities and career choices - to stop working altogether, to work part-time or to take on a less demanding job. As I seek the meaning of work-life balance, I realize that work is meaningful if it supports my vision of myself. I see myself contributing economically and enjoying parenthood jointly with my husband. My challenge is not about being the best full time mom and homemaker, or being the supermom working outside the home. It is about how well I know and understand my family needs, and how I can best meet those needs.

The Parenting Imperative

When I interviewed my children on what is most important in their lives, they placed love in the family, above all else. My seven year-old drew a heart and five of us plus our pet dog to illustrate her point. As the most powerful and elementary way of expressing love is through physical affection, my husband and I encourage free flow of hugs and kisses (and we know our children would welcome free flow of soft drinks and chips as well!)

Like most parents, I certainly don't want to miss out on the unique joys of watching my children grow up. I am grateful for Eric Erickson's work on eight stages of personality development. Since my early years of parenthood, the model has provided me with a knowledge base on how my three children will progress at each stage of personality and emotional development, and how I can meet their psychological and spiritual needs.

Parenting Smart with Little Time

My children, aged seven to ten, are at Eric Erickson's Latency Stage. This stage is characterized by industry and activity, resulting from motivation for learning and an inborn drive for increasing independence. My borrowed credo from "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" can actually be understood as "Adapt the training of your child so that it is in keeping with his natural design; when he comes to maturity, he will not depart from that pattern of life". This means, for me, a conscious effort to understand and adapt to each of my daughters' learning and behavioural styles to nurture them according to their natural tendencies.

On several occasions, a suddenly lit light bulb would send my eight year-old running to me with a spelling list to learn just before bedtime. Don't ask why the delay...you know the reasons! Consciously turning away from irritation, I've had to engage my daughter to learn quickly through "spelling treasure hunt" or card game to suit her concrete experience learner-style that needs much flexibility. Those learning experiences were delightful and fruitful, and became quality time just before bedtime! I am not encouraging last minute work, but if it happens, be creative and flex your own style to suit your child's learning.

My pre-teen, experiencing growing independence and a developing sense of identity, has many 'what" and why" questions on responsibilities and boundaries. Her need is to have some room and independence to set goals, explore logic and resolve perplexing situations with some guidance. As she is candid and chatty when comfortable, I have to work hard at making time to talk and to listen to her empathetically, with unconditional acceptance and love to nurture positive self-concept and confidence. With a behavioural style that is task focused and results driven, she appreciates being given choices and the space to structure her day. Never mind how she gets her work done, she gets it done!

Applying Business Principles

At the work place, we talk about business and product life cycles. We establish business goals and needs, we analyze the gaps, adopt strategic interventions to close gaps. We read our bosses' and colleagues' temperaments and respond according to their behavioural styles. At home, we can apply the same approach. Our children go through developmental stages. It pays to be attentive and proactive in supporting their growing needs. Our children have unique behavioural patterns. We need to understand how they recharge their batteries and make adjustments to treat them differently. Let's not leave parenting to chance to find that you've missed out on critical success factors!

Managing Stress, Managing Life

The juggling act goes beyond managing children. Each of us has stressors that fall into four main categories: family, couple, work and personal. Whilst it is not easy to control the stressful circumstances, it is important to discover and deal with the root cause of stress in our lives by changing our own perceptions and reactions to circumstances. Be renewed in the spirit of the mind. As for practical coping strategies, tap on your communication and problem solving skills, flexibility and relationships.

Coping with stress through communication means expressing your thoughts, feelings, wants and needs. When I experience emotional spill over from work or have to work all through the weekend, I communicate to my family my frustration and needs, and "problem solve" the situation. The stress from conflicting demands of family time and work is eased as my husband takes full charge over the weekend and my children manage their time and homework independently, cooperate better and bicker less. I get to enjoy

massages from little fingers too. Never underestimate the ability of your children to empathize and understand.

Working Flexibly

I am on a telecommuting program that allows me to work at home or anywhere part of the day as long as I meet business goals and achieve results. This started 2 years ago when I approached my CEO with the business case for this flexible work arrangement.

My workday is hectic, characterized by business development activities, client and internal meetings, proposal writing and design work. I plan my work schedule in advance to maximize client and staff contact times when I am in the office. Proposals, design and development work are done at home. This calls for effective time management to structure how I supervise my children's homework and complete my own. There are days or weeks where there is little opportunity to work from home. This calls for flexibility on my part to accept business needs and to reject unrealistic expectations of my flexible work arrangement to avoid feeling stressed.

Building a Team

Building a high performance team is on my priority list. I look for partners and winners to build a team that shares a common vision, which is diligent and able to withstand adversity. Team players take responsibility for success and adopt a "never say die" attitude. They are empowered to make decisions, manage their projects and accomplish results. At the same time, I protect and support their work-life balance as much as I can and ensure that they are recognized for their contributions. I am also learning to encourage closeness in the team to foster a greater sense of camaraderie and mutual support for each other. Closeness in relationships is therapeutic and can alleviate work-life stress.

Living by Values

Managing work-life challenges requires our personal awareness of what we value in life. Most of us value our families. We work to provide for our families and to keep ourselves significantly challenged and relevant. We experience work-life conflict or disequilibrium when work becomes overwhelming, leaving little time for the family and ourselves. When

that happens, we either continue spinning until something breaks down or we stop to re-assess priorities and life choices. We have choices - choices to reduce commitments, to set limits, to say no, to leverage on our strengths, to protect our time by timetabling and so forth. For myself, it's continuous learning to assess the needs of my family and my work, and to keep in perspective what I value most to achieve work-life effectiveness rather than work-life balance.