

# Split-shifting and other hacks for working from home while parenting

By **DAWN REISS**  
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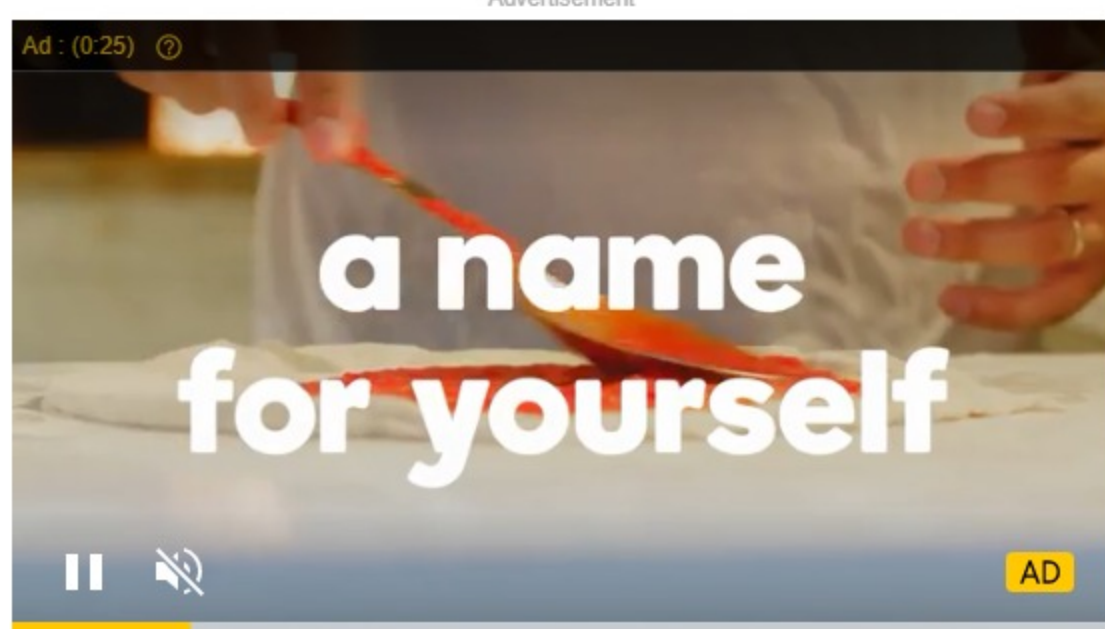


Vanessa Jackson, 38, of Maywood teaches her daughters Maricin, 9, and Cataleya, 7, at home during the coronavirus. To learn more about different paintings, they went to the Art Institute of Chicago's online gallery to study different types of portraits and then used their iPads to take pictures of each other in compositions similar to the paintings.(Calvin Jackson)

Laura Ott, 36, and her husband Greg Ott, 35, have three kids under age 4, including an 11-month-old baby and a bulldog named Kevin.

With the coronavirus spreading and their day care closed, the Mundelein family began self-isolating, working remotely from home by split-shifting hours to juggle Laura's job as a senior talent acquisition partner for Zebra Technologies, Greg's position as a senior sales executive at United Healthcare and child care.

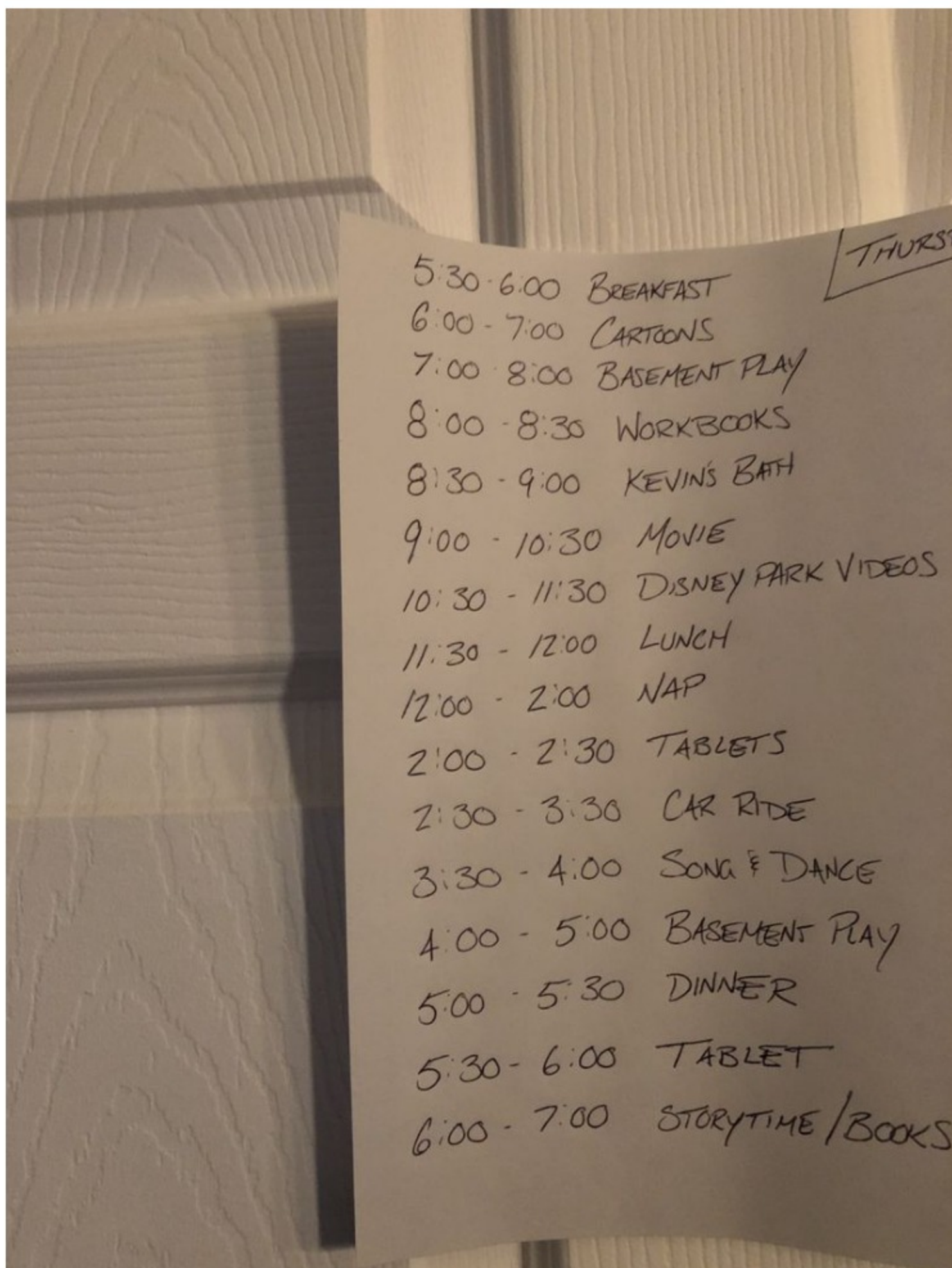
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"Our kids are too young to be left alone, so someone always has to be with them or they will destroy the house or themselves," Laura Ott says. "We take shifts throughout the day to get by. ... I am living by the Wilson Phillips song 'Hold On for One More Day.'"

Each day they compare their work schedules and build their kids' schedules, with TV and tablet time set up around conference calls to keep their little heads from bopping around in the background of Skype calls. With her husband working from their home office, Laura has "hunkered down" on the kitchen island. Like many other parents who are split-shifting, they've become multitasking machines.

Even though her husband created a daily schedule for their kids with dedicated activities ranging from singing and dancing to tablet time, it proved harder than either expected. "My laptop has seen parts of my house it's never seen before," Laura says. "I worked out of my daughter's playpen the other day. Today I took a Skype call from my walk-in closet. I reviewed emails from my laundry room since quiet parts of the house are not easy to come by."



Greg Ott wrote this schedule for his kids.(Laura Ott)

In the hope of setting expectations for her work calls, while getting people to laugh she added a line to her email signature.

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“Please note I am working remotely. Due to this if we connect via phone anticipate hearing a dog barking and/or children {crying, fighting, talking, laugh} in the background.”

The Otts are far from alone. It’s the new reality for many parents whose schools and companies have been shuttered and shifted to telecommuting arrangements since the COVID-19 pandemic.

“You’ve got stress, layered with stress with more stress on top of it,” says Colleen Curtis, 37, head of community for The Mom Project and mother of an 18-month-old and a 6-year-old; she is working from home in Logan Square with her husband, Nick Fallon, 42, the general manager for Michigan for Cresco Labs. “This is not anything anyone is an expert at because working from home with your kids, parenting through a pandemic is not something anybody is prepared for.”

Curtis suggests focusing on the “three C’s,” communication, collaboration and culture that create a more positive remote work experience. Look at how you’re communicating with your family, your team, your boss and yourself, Curtis says, while finding new ways to collaborate, including with your kids, and how culturally the coronavirus is a big shared experience that will shape the future of working and living together.

Map out the variables you know, including dishes, laundry and mealtime. “How are we going to make this the most positive experience, knowing what we know about how everyone lives in this house?”

Some parents use whiteboards, others have Google Docs or print daily schedules for themselves and their kids to see where there are gaps. Especially for parents of young children, a car can be a secondary office space because driving around the block can put the kids to sleep.

Calvin, 40, and Vanessa Jackson, 38, who live in Maywood with their daughters Maricin, 9, and Cataleya, 7, are used to taking work calls with their children in the background for The Lemon Ad Stand, a creative agency they run from their home office and a co-working space in Wicker Park.

To juggle work schedules, they’ve opted to not have client calls on Mondays and have extended conference calls into the evening to make business more manageable.

“We have one rule, ‘Don’t embarrass us,’” Calvin says. “And everyone knows that rule.”

Now that they are all working from home, Vanessa says she’s starting each day with a family meeting to go over the daily schedule and for a five-minute [guided meditation](#) she found on YouTube.

“I want everyone to mentally be in a place where we’re trying to do our best,” she says. “My kids did a terrible job with it, but I’m hoping, over the next couple of days, we’ll get into the habit of meditation, and maybe it will be more routine.”

While some parents are trying to clear their schedules, Martine Nilsen, the senior manager of community operations and growth at The Mom Project and a separated mother of twin 5-year-old boys who lives in Lakeview, says she’s trying to do the opposite since she’s parenting alone.

“Instead of hacking my way around my kids, I just completely folded them into my workday,” she says. “I’m calling it work-from-home with mom.”

During breakfast, they’ll discuss what’s on their daily schedules. Nilsen allows her sons to choose between two different tasks to give them ownership. “So when mommy’s working, they are working,” she says.

When Nilsen had to prepare for a work presentation, she asked her sons to pretend they were prepping for a conference call. She had them pick three books, paint their covers and then prepare to present the best one they liked on a conference call. “He ended up chatting with my boss and told her he was working from home too,” Nilsen says.

When Nilsen realized it was in the middle of the afternoon and she still hadn’t showered, she created an Oreo taste challenge by pulling out various versions of the cookie and having her sons arrange them by the versions they liked the most.

“It gave me 12 minutes to shower and get dressed,” Nilsen says.

Split-shifting on her own hasn’t been easy. Nilsen asked her boss if she could change her schedule to get two blocks of time in the morning and evening instead of haphazardly trying to fit in an hour here and there. It required moving two meetings to different days, but Nilsen says it’s made it more productive for everyone.

“I would rather do a bigger stretch in the morning after the boys just had good night’s sleep,” says Nilsen, who has her kids help with meal prep to keep them engaged. “For most parents, afternoons are terror until dinner is done.”

Another hack that’s helped Nilsen from previous experience in the restaurant industry: Regardless of where you are going, always take something with you; it’s why you’ll never see a waiter or waitress with empty hands.



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Nedaa Alwawi, 37, the founder and principal of Prairie Academy, an elementary school in Lakeview, says it’s the first time she’s ever tried to work from home with her husband, Mansoor Panawala, 40, the head of measurement and analytics for home and consumer services at Google, and home-school her daughter, Mariam, 8, a second-grader.



Mariam Panawala, 8, is the daughter of Nedaa Alwawi and Mansoor Panawala. They’re all working and studying from their home in Old Irving Park because of the coronavirus outbreak. Mariam turned her reading nook into a study space.(Nedaa Alwawi)

“Both my husband and I have very stressful jobs,” says Alwawi who lives in Old Irving. “We’re both pretty loud and in constant communication for work.”

To make their home- and work-life more effective, Alwawi and Panawala had a conversation about expectations. They discussed daily responsibilities and created a schedule to divided up ownership, coming together for a 20-minute lunch break. While Alwawi is managing their daughter’s home-schooling, Panawala is responsible for household and grocery shopping. They are sharing the cleaning chores and alternating days each person cooks.

During their first 24 hours, Alwawi says, it felt as if everyone was moving in together. To create dedicated workspaces, her husband set up a home office in the basement, Mariam turned her reading nook into a study space and Alwawi felt like a floor trader on the stock exchange, roving around her home and porch, carrying her phone and laptop.

“Find your new norm,” Alwawi says, based on the assumption this will be a long-term situation.

*Dawn Reiss is a freelance writer.*