



Managing Mom's Online Time

By Judy Arnall

One of my worst parenting days was when I was still sitting at my computer in pajamas and my husband walked through the front door. I thought that he had forgotten his laptop at home again and returned to get it so that he could go back to work and get started on his day. When he didn't seem to want to leave again, I realized that it was supertime and that I had succumbed to spending the whole day in the black hole of the internet and social media. Where had the time gone? My kids had spent the day at home watching movies and eating sugar cereal for breakfast, snack, lunch and snack. I realized then that I needed to manage my online time better and not have it manage me so that I was missing out on the life I wanted.

The latest statistics are that one-third of self-employed Canadians are women and half of them work from home. (B.C. Women's Enterprise Centre) The internet and social media can be a huge distraction for women who work and parent at home. Here are some tips to manage your online life:

- Never check social networks in the morning – you can easily lose track of time catching up on what your friends had for breakfast.

- Do breastfeed and cuddle your infant in front of the computer. It's a great way to get some snuggle time in as well as some adult company on the screen.
- Don't ignore your toddler while you are in front of the computer. Toddlers are fast, unable to comprehend safety and need constant supervision. As toddlers need zero screen time, and constant five sense stimulation, take your toddler on playgroups and experiential field trips. Let them explore their environment, and unless you have a netbook to tote around while you're constantly supervising them, save your screen time for their naps and bedtimes.
- Check email twice a day: once in the morning (after breakfast and with coffee), and once at suppertime. 70% of adults now check email before breakfast – is that what we want to model to our kids? Most businesses expect a response within a day or two, so you still have four times to check and catch items in those 48 hours.
- Don't read email late at night. Upsetting news can keep your mind going at night before and while you are in bed, until you finally get up at 4 am with a perfectly crafted email response and then have to face the next day on three hours of sleep. Not worth it. Problem emails look much easier to respond to at 8 am with a full nights sleep.
- Limit the number of websites that you need to log into. I am forced to check several websites per day (like libraries, workplace, schools etc.), but I will not sign on to any that are not essential, or don't give me a link direct to my email inbox. Websites have to make it easy for me to access or I just won't visit them.
- Avoid getting on newsletter contact sheets. Don't fill out draws at trade shows or give your email to businesses. If you have to, omit a letter of your email address. Otherwise, you will have to spend your valuable time unsubscribing to unwanted inbox clutter.
- Get in the habit of cleaning (yes, another item in the house to clean!) out your recycle bin and email boxes at least twice a month. Even twice a year if you are not up to the task monthly.
- Buy an external hard drive and be sure to save precious video and photographs every month.
- Set a timer to alert yourself to the end of a gaming session. Establish good habits for yourself and your children will follow.
- Write everything online as if your mother will read it. It it's not appropriate for her to read, think twice about posting. Better yet, write it for the world to see it. Consider yourself and your reputation– emails can be entered as evidence in court. Even if you delete it immediately, it could have been easily copied by someone else. Consider your young child as a teenager, who will be very sensitive to what you write about them. Consider the photos you post now. Will your 17 year old son be happy to have his buddies see photos of himself breastfeeding at three years old?

- Once in a while, you absolutely need a whole day to get cyber-chores done. Enlist the help of a babysitting co-op, or a partner to take the kids out, or if you have older children, invite kids over for a play date. Surprisingly, having a houseful of kids keeps them busy and provides you with time to get things done, in between serving snacks and mediating fights. If you nix their access to the computer, it can leave you with a few hours to get your internet chores done. Use a crock pot to throw some meat and vegetables in for supper and you are set. If no one is around, take the kids out for a walk to the library or video store, load up on DVDs, and let them vegetate for a few hours in front of a book or DVD so you can catch up on cyber chores and feel halfway accomplished. Don't use that time for social media!
- Get to know your privacy settings and use them.
- Don't multitask during family time. If you are watching a movie with the kids, resist the temptation to check Facebook or email. Remember that only your laptop or a child can fit in your lap. Be truly present for them.
- On the same note, keep your laptop out of the bedroom. Electronics should not be in a space dedicated to rest, relaxation and love.
- Think twice before wading into hot topics on discussion groups. Often, after two days of intense flurry of emails, time is wasted arguing a point that eventually everyone will agree to disagree about. Meanwhile, it can be easy to snap at a needy child while in the middle of writing the stellar post, and it won't matter in 20 years what you said in the group, but your child will still remember those tense, anxiety filled moments that you lost it with her because you needed to respond to a flaming posting. Put the energy into positive venues and take your child to the park, meet another mom in person to vent, or channel your anger over someone's post into exercise or housecleaning. This is much more productive than posting a possible flame, or even mildly heated response that you will regret later. In time, you can develop the self control to let others respond. It's not your battle. Life is too short!
- If you really need to email a response to a heated issue, assume people's best intentions, and pick up the phone to talk in person. You both will feel much better and you can still attend to children while on the phone (sort of) much more than trying to concentrate on creating an email response.
- If you are a WAHM, get your computer work done, then check email and respond, and then treat yourself to Facebook. If it's the other way around, you will lose the day in the social media black hole.
- Use "message rules" for emails. It will sort your inbox into critical items and not so critical folders. Helps prioritize before you even start the day.

Remember that real life touch, smiles, stories, laughter and hugs are better than a Facebook poke! Online communication supplements your life; it isn't your life. Be sure you virtually live, not live virtually.

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