

T·h·e Stay-at-Home Parent Survival Guide

*Real-Life Advice from
Moms, Dads, and Other Experts*



Activities for Indoors and Out



Budgeting Basics



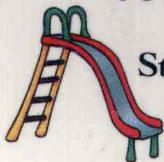
Childproofing Your Home ■ Diet and Exercise—Yours and

Theirs ■ Discipline

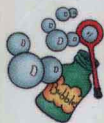


Field Trips ■ Homeschooling

Playgroups and Preschool ■ Simplifying Your Schedule



Stress Reduction Ideas



TV or Not TV

Time Management ■ Working at Home



and More!

Christina Baglivi Tinglof

T · h · e
**Stay-at-Home
Parent
Survival Guide**

*Real-Life Advice from
Moms, Dads, and Other Experts*

Christina Baglivi Tinglof

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To Kevin, for his love, wisdom, and enormous support

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Introduction

Although the decision for me to stay home with our three young boys was an easy one, my husband, Kevin, and I knew that we would both have to make some sacrifices. He would have to become the sole breadwinner of the family and with it accept an increased sense of responsibility. I, on the other hand, would have to temporarily give up a career and part of my sanity.

I loved my job as an editorial assistant, but it didn't make sense to continue working outside the home. First, we considered the cost of day care and the extra taxes we were paying to Uncle Sam each week. (A second paycheck is often eaten up by a disproportionate amount of taxes because the wages usually push a two-income family into a higher tax bracket.) After those two large bites, my salary seemed more like a morsel than a meal. Score one for pulling the professional plug.

Next, neither one of us was comfortable leaving our kids at day care. Shortly after the birth of my twin sons, Joseph

and Michael, I investigated several facilities close to my job, thinking I could rush over and nurse the twins during my lunch hour. What I found was discouraging, to say the least. Although most of the day-care providers seemed like warm, caring people, the facilities left me cold. Furthermore, I thought, I can hardly give my twins the individual attention that they crave and deserve, so how can another woman with several other children to contend with give my kids equal time? She couldn't.

Yet the most compelling reason for my staying home was rather a simplistic one—I'm their mother, and no one in this world (with the exception of their father) could care for them and love them the way I do. From recent research we now know how important the first three years of a child's life truly are, and I want to be the one who makes a positive impact. Childhood is so fleeting, such a small blip of time, and I want to play an active part. I want to be there. I want to see it all, not hear about it from someone else. My kids are funny, personable little people, and I feel so lucky (most of the time) to be able to spend my days with them.

When my kids look back on their childhoods, I want them to remember the fun they had with their mom—the trips to the zoo, planting a spring garden, baking muffins on rainy afternoons—not the day little Johnny bit them in day care. Granted, many of their memories will also include the day Mom lost it in the supermarket and gave them a time-out in the bread aisle or the night when their father walked through the door and found Mom locked in the bathroom crying, "I can't take it anymore!" as they jumped from a table onto the couch in the living room; but, hopefully, even those fiascoes will become cherished memories, or at least humorous ones.

Financially, it's been a stretch but not much. Once we did the calculations (my salary minus job-related expenses) we realized that it would be easy to make up the financial shortfall by cutting back. We can't go out to eat as often, or buy

the latest computer software and CDs, but the kids don't notice. And frankly, we don't mind either. The joy of being together far outweighs a house full of stuff.

The Survival Guide

With three boys under the age of four, and all within two and a half years of each other, I know a thing or two about surviving at home full-time. I know the rewards as well as the stress. Over the years, however, I've learned to minimize the loneliness and chaos and capitalize on the freedom and sheer fun of being with my kids and watching them grow. I gather support wherever I can find it, I keep the day going with scheduled events, and I have reinvented myself more times than Madonna.

Whoever said that being a full-time parent is easier than working outside the home has obviously never done it. Yet each year thousands of parents, yearning for more time with their kids, put away their briefcases in favor of staying home. Moms and dads of the '90s are quickly learning that they can't do it all—raise a family and pursue a profession—and still truly enjoy their lives. Each is a full-time job, and there simply aren't enough hours in the day to do both equally well. Something's got to give. Like you, more and more parents are choosing to temporarily give up their careers to stay home with their kids.

Geared toward parents with toddlers and preschool children, the time when most choose to remain home (but full-time parents of older children can also pick up a tip or two on what to do with the kids after school, or how to better manage their busy lives), *The Stay-at-Home Parent Survival Guide* helps these former career go-getters successfully transition from full-time employees to full-time parents.

When they've spent the last decade or so building a successful profession, it's difficult for some to give it up and stay

home, no matter how strong the desire. It is an emotional sacrifice that few realize when they're saying good-bye to their office cohorts but quickly figure out once they're in the midst of a domestic free-for-all. Their once-structured lives have now become unstructured play time without direction. Most quickly take control of their new vocations and reinvent themselves by focusing on enriching their children's lives and in the process enhancing their own, but others have difficulty, feeling a loss of identity and isolation. They need support, advice, and organization. Whether you're a new full-time parent who needs assistance in making the transition a success or a seasoned veteran just looking to pick up a tip or two, this book can help.

Advice from the Trenches

The Survival Guide offers practical tips and plenty of concrete suggestions to get you through the tough days and ways to enhance the fun ones—from quiet indoor activities to set up on a rainy day to how to make it on just one salary. Written in a practical A-to-Z format, the book's chapters address specific issues on at-home parenting and most contain advice from an expert on the subject. Keep *The Survival Guide* nearby and refer to it again and again when new questions and concerns arise. Look to the field trip chapter for suggestions on places to take the kids and ways to make the journey fun and stress free; or turn to the television chapter when you feel guilty for leaving the set on a bit too long and want to know if you'll ruin the kids for life. *The Survival Guide* offers advice on disciplining the kids; how to exercise, make dinner, or clean the house *with* the kids; tips on keeping the marriage on track now that you and your spouse have new roles; ways to manage your family's time; ideas to beat the stay-at-home blues and gain support through parenting organizations; how to start an at-home business; and, when

the time is right, how to successfully return to your career—thirty-two topics in all.

Although the book is written from the female perspective, the more than two million at-home fathers will benefit from *The Survival Guide*, too. And though it is my belief that full-time parenting is a better lifestyle choice than putting the kids in day care, the purpose of this book is not to judge or condemn working parents but rather to encourage those considering leaving the workforce to believe that they can in fact do it.

Throughout the book I refer to moms and dads who have left the workforce (or who have never entered it) to care solely for their children as full-time or at-home parents. Neither term is precise enough, and both may offend some readers. Although *full-time parent* best describes the job (Question: “What do you do?” Answer: “I care for the kids full time.”), isn’t every parent a full-time parent? Can you be a part-time parent? And what about the “full-time parent” who sends her kids off to school every morning? Isn’t she really a full-time parent working part-time hours? The term *at-home parent* isn’t much better because most moms and dads who care for their kids all day rarely stay home, and the phrase connotes (to me, anyway) an image of a mom or dad in sweats lounging on the couch watching television. Nothing could be further from the truth. Conversely, *working parent* is a bit of a misnomer, too. After all, I “work” pretty darn hard from the moment my kids get up (6 A.M. these days, thank you very much) to the time they finally go to sleep (8 P.M.). I just don’t get paid or promoted for my efforts. Still, full-time and at-home parent are the best the dictionary has to offer. But, hey, I’m open to suggestions.

The Art of Staying Home

The next time you find yourself questioning your decision to stay home, as most of us at some time do, remember three

things: (1) look for the humor even during the worst tantrums; (2) childhood goes by quickly, so cherish the little moments; (3) pick up this book.

The sacrifice in full-time parenting can be great but so are the rewards and the profound sense of satisfaction in nurturing your own children.

Activities

Indoor

In my house territorial toy wars break out between my boys usually once a day. My job is to bring both warring factions to the table in hopes of bringing about a peaceful solution. Fortunately, we live in Southern California; and on most days all I need to do is open the back door, escort them outside, and the war is over. But on rainy days, I need to be quick on my feet with lots of indoor, creative play.

You don't have to be Merlin to whip up fun stuff for kids to do. In fact, the simplest activities are often the most exciting. The key to a good time is to offer direction and know when to step out of their way. When the kids get bored with one activity, move on to the next. And don't forget to mix up your playtime repertoire. Try some group reading, coloring, block building, educational TV show or video, cooking or craft project, and quiet-time activity. Kids don't need to be entertained by adults all the time; in fact, given the opportunity, they'll create elaborate games all on their own.

I look at rainy days as nice downtime. I don't feel like it has to have the same kind of energy as a sunny day. I think giving the kids a break and letting them enjoy the quiet time with movies and TV is fine because we don't do that on nice days.

The Basics: Coloring, Painting, and Block Building

I try to be judicious about what I do with them. I find that if I'm the one who's directing all the play, then they rely on me the whole day. I love to do things with them, but I also want to encourage them to do things on their own so they'll be more creative and come up with their own ideas; and, frankly, sometimes I just want them to leave me alone.

I keep paints, markers, and modeling clay in a kitchen cabinet. When I'm trying to get something done in the kitchen, I just pull them out, and the kids sit at the table and do a craft project.

You can never have too many crayons, colored pencils, markers, or pastels around the house. Children as young as eighteen months can learn to scribble. In fact, you should encourage your young Picasso to master the art of holding a crayon. Coloring not only helps in developing a child's fine motor skills, but builds his concentration and creativity, too. Painting, whether it's watercolor or finger paint, is another artistic medium to add to your artist's palate, although most children won't be able to hold a paintbrush until two years.

Use your imagination when choosing the medium on which to let the kids express themselves. Spread butcher paper across the entire length of your kitchen table, or tape a sheet on the hallway wall or floor and let the kids go. Have everyone hop into the bathtub and do some body painting, or let them paint the windows with holiday scenes. Don't worry about creating a mess or staining the furniture—most paints and crayons are washable, but check the labels just in case.

Broken Crayon Blues

Ever wonder what to do with all those broken crayons? Create crayon muffins, a fun rainy-day project that not only creates new crayons, but also teaches kids about recycling and classifying. Here's what you'll need:

Muffin tins
Foil muffin holders
Broken crayons

1. Preheat oven to 275°.
2. Place foil muffin holders in muffin tins.
3. Remove crayon wrappers from all broken crayons. Break crayons into one-inch pieces.

4. Have the kids divide the crayons according to color—all green crayons in one pile, red in another. Fill muffin holders halfway with broken crayons of the same color. Use extra or odd crayons to make one colorful, abstract muffin.
5. Place muffin tins in preheated oven for 3 to 5 minutes until crayons melt.
6. Cool completely; then remove from holders.

A toy-box staple for generations, blocks are not only fun, but experts say block building is an important educational tool second only to reading. Kids cultivate their social skills as they trade shapes and sizes and learn cooperation when building a tower with other kids. Physically, block building helps form fine muscle control in fingers and establishes hand-eye coordination. It teaches balance, symmetry, gravity, and other abstract principles, the cornerstones in understanding math and science. Most importantly, block building encourages creative play. Blocks act as symbols for kids' ideas as simple forms suddenly become castles or cities.

BUILDING TIPS

- **Use age-appropriate blocks.** Large blocks in simple geometric shapes work best for toddlers; smaller blocks in a wide range of shapes and sizes are great for preschoolers.
- **Encourage children to describe their designs.** “What kind of tower are you building?” “Where is the kitchen? Is that a window?”
- **Let your children knock down their creations.** Ignore the noise and let them knock away. It gives them a sense of control and power.
- **Leave ribbon and other craft materials near blocks.** Decorating their block projects inspires kids further.

For a set of truly original building blocks, collect empty cereal and pasta boxes, oatmeal and cracker containers, and even milk cartons. The kids will have a ball constructing all kinds of forts and towers. The best part is, these blocks don't make noise when they come crashing down!

In the Kitchen

Want a little exercise but it's too cold to go outside? Try a game of balloon volleyball. Simply inflate a balloon and hit it back and forth. Don't let it touch the ground or your opponent gets the point.

Olivia and Catherine do a lot of water play inside. One of their favorites is when I give them squirt bottles filled with water and old rags, and they clean the windows. They don't do a fabulous job, but they love it and it gets the fingerprints off.

I have vivid memories of growing up and spending lots of time by my mother's side in the kitchen as she baked some sweet delicacy or an elaborate Italian dinner for our family. Those one-on-one cooking lessons brought me closer to my mom and gave me a deep appreciation for good food and cooking. Elaine Magee, mother of two and author of *Someone's in the Kitchen with Mommy* and *Alphabet Cooking*, encourages parents to use cooking as a daily project with kids. "One of the benefits of doing a cooking activity is instant gratification," she says. "When you make something, you see it, you eat it. You don't have to figure out where to store it." (To read more on cooking with kids, see the chapter entitled "Mealtime.")

Peruse your cookbooks for some simple recipes that can withstand some abuse just in case you all don't follow them exactly. I try to choose something with a sweet payoff—cookies or fruit-filled muffins are always winners with my boys. Here are three of their favorites.

Chocolate-Chip Peanut-Butter Cookies

½ cup butter, softened
1½ cups flour
½ cup sugar
1 tsp. baking soda
¼ tsp. salt
½ cup firmly packed brown sugar
¾ cup crunchy peanut butter
2 tbsp. milk
1 egg
1 12-oz. package semisweet chocolate chips

1. Preheat oven to 375°.
2. In mixer, cream butter until smooth, then add flour, sugar, baking soda, salt, brown sugar, and peanut butter. Mix well.
3. Add milk and egg. Blend until smooth.