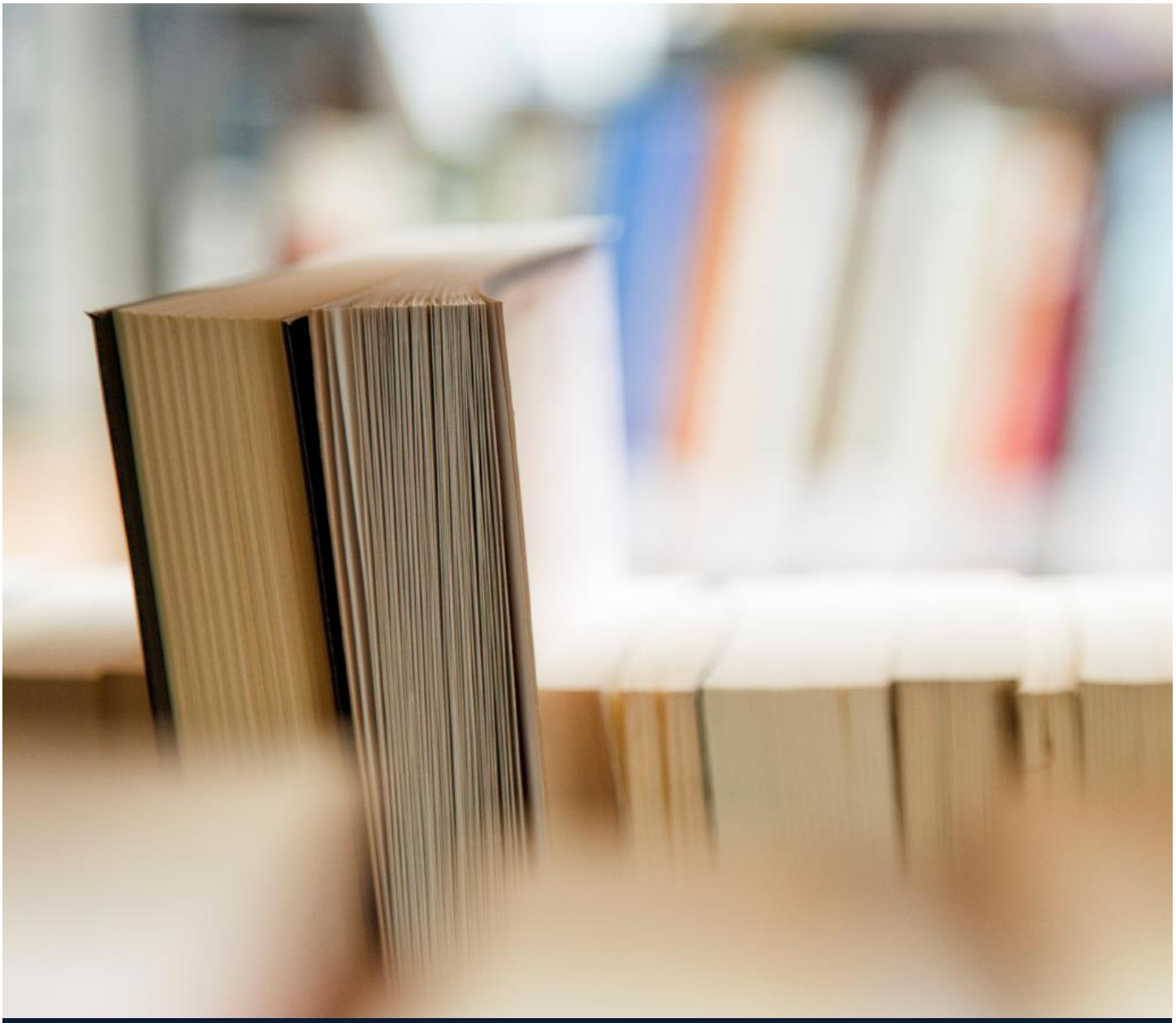

SLCC

SOUTH LOUISIANA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

GUIDE TO TELECOMMUTING

Center for Professional Development

March 2020

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Section I: Introduction

For many, working from home or telecommuting once in a while is a bonus. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) has required employees at SLCC to work from home until the virus can be slowed and maintained. But working remotely can be a double-edged sword. Yes, you get to work from home, but it can be harder to focus on actually working. If you are new to working remotely, you may need to change some of your habits and routines to make the new SLCC work-from-home normal a success.

We all face unique challenges, not only because we have different personalities, but also due to our various lifestyles and the type of work we do for SLCC. However, many of the core issues we face as telecommuting employees are the same. Every employee that works remotely has to figure out where to work, and how to create boundaries between work and personal life. Working remotely means figuring out these issues and others. This guide will provide tips to follow that can help you stay productive and maintain balance.

Section II: PROs and CONs of Telecommuting

PROS

- There are fewer interruptions from meetings and chitchat
  It is easier to get into a flow of deep work when you're working from home without colleagues stopping at your desk for impromptu conversations and interruptions. This is one reason telecommuting employees are more productive. While there are distractions at home, you can control them much easier than you can control distractions in the office-based setting.

- There is no commute time or expense
  Working from home can save employees time and money. Saving 30-minutes to an hour of commute time allows you to rededicate that time to more productive projects, as well as fuel cost savings.

- You are truly independent
  Working remotely means you will learn to rely on time-management, self-motivation, self-discipline, focus and concentration. All of these are skills you will need as your career progresses.

- You will become a communications expert
  Quick meetings in the breakroom, lunch-time or at the desk of colleagues are no longer an option. Out of necessity, you will need to become savvy in available communication tools, which in turn enhances your skillset.

- There is greater flexibility
  Working from home allows you to work during your most productive times and create a workflow that suits you.

- Your day is often less stressful
  When you telecommute, you have more control over your stress level and can more easily walk away or take a break when work gets particularly crazy.

- You can improve your work/life balance
  Many professionals struggle with finding a balance between work and their personal lives. Working from home can make this balance a little bit easier to find and maintain.

CONS

- It is easy to misread cues via electronic communication
  It can be easy to misinterpret tonality of messages. We are blind without cues from body language and facial expressions. Telecommuting removes the opportunity of walking down the hall to a coworker's office to seek clarity.
  **See page 9 for helpful tips in this area*.

- You need a lot of self-discipline and motivation
  Getting up and focusing on work every day when you are in your home environment takes a great deal of self-discipline and motivation. It's all too easy to take a break that lasts for hours.
  **See page 9 for helpful tips in this area*

- It can be harder to shut down
  There can be less distinction between work and personal life when you work from home, making it harder to shut down and more likely that you will overwork.
  **See page 6 for helpful tips in this area*

- There's less ad hoc learning

  The office-based environment allows peers to learn from peers through face-to-face interaction. When you work from home, you will need to make an extra effort to seek and/or initiate networking and learning opportunities on your own.

  **See page 10 for helpful tips in this area*

- It is isolating and lonely

  Working all day without access to coworkers and colleagues can be very isolating and lonely. You will be surprised at how much you may miss the workplace camaraderie, interpersonal drama and office politics.

  **See page 11 for helpful tips in this area*

- There are distractions

  Your home circumstances might have built-in distractions. These might include family, spouses and children. Potential distractions are everywhere when working from home, such as laundry and housework.

  **See page 11 for helpful tips in this area*

- There is no physical separation between work and leisure time

  Many who work from home find themselves working more than usual since hours tend to become more fluid when telecommuting. As a result, workers sometimes feel like they are literally always at work, making it difficult to shift to post-work relaxation. Setting boundaries is important since a computer is always on and available. When you do not have the separation of going to and from the office, your workday blurs and blends into your homelife.

  **See page 6 for helpful tips in this area*

Section III: Tips for Telecommuting

Working from home takes discipline. If you're just starting out, it may take you a little time to find your pace, but if you follow the tips below, you'll find it a lot easier. The key is to keep a good work-life balance, establish boundaries, and take care of yourself.

Maintain Your Routine

For many of us, the morning commute to work helps us feel ready for the day by the time we reach our desk. At home, however, the transition from our pillow to computer or conference call can be much more jarring. Now that the morning drive to the office has been eliminated, you may sleep a little later than before, also eliminating the time between waking up and starting the workday.

Believe it or not, many who work from home state productivity increases by diving into your to-do list soon after waking up. Simply getting a project *started* first thing in the morning can be the key to making progress on it gradually throughout the day. Otherwise, you may prolong breakfast and let the morning sluggishness wear away your motivation.

Deciding you'll sit down at your desk and start work at a certain time is one thing. Creating a routine that guides you into the chair is another. What in your morning routine indicates you're about to start work? It might be making a cup of coffee. It might be returning home after a jog. It might be getting dressed. A routine can be more powerful than a clock at helping you get started each day.

Just as you should start your day with a routine, create a habit that signals the close of the workday. In a relaxing environment, you can get so absorbed in an activity that you lose complete track of time. In the office setting, we have coworkers packing up and leaving the office to remind us the day is coming to a close. Your end of day signal might be creating an out of office email response, setting an alarm on your phone, or tuning into the evening news. Something as simple as shutting down your computer will do. Whatever you choose, do it consistently to mark the end of working hours. Knowing the work day is technically over can help you start the process of saving your work and calling it quits for the evening.

Choose a Dedicated Work Space

Have a place you go specifically to work. Just because you are not at the office, doesn't mean you can't have an office. It could be a certain table, chair or location that is consistently your work space. Instead of barricading yourself in your room or on the couch, which are spaces

associated with your leisure time, dedicate a specific room or area in your home to work. A dedicated work space helps get you into the right frame of mind.

In an ideal world, remote employees would have not only a dedicated office, but also two computer screens, printers, etc. But that is not realistic. Your space should be relatively free from distractions such as family, pets, home telephone, the television, even an attractive view if you are new to telecommuting. You should have a good quality chair and large monitor if you are primarily working at the computer, in addition to supplies such as writing pads, pens, sticky notes, paperclips, etc.

Pretend like you *are* going into the office.

The mental association you make between work and an office can make you more productive, and there's no reason that feeling should be lost when telecommuting. Get fully ready for the day and pretend you're actually going to work. When working from home, do all the things you'd do to prepare for an office role: Set your alarm, make coffee, and wear work appropriate clothes. Most telecommuters indicate keeping a regular routine such as showering and dressing for work increases productivity and positive outlook. These small measures make the home office more like a real office, and reminds you that although you are sitting at home you are actually working.

Structure your day like you would in the office.

You are your own personal manager when telecommuting. Without the day-to-day office activities such as in-person meetings to break up your day, you can easily lose focus and direction when working from home. To stay on schedule, segment what you'll do and *when* over the course of the day. If you have an online calendar, create personal events and reminders that tell you when to shift gears and start on new tasks.

Use your same office work schedule at home. More than likely, task will be completed much faster at home than at the office, so structure will help keep you focused and productive. Having clear guidelines for when to work and when to call it a day helps telecommuters maintain work-life balance. That said, one of the benefits of remote work is flexibility, and sometimes you need to extend your day or start early to accommodate unforeseen challenges and task, just as you would in an actual office setting.

Set Ground Rules with the People in Your Space

When you first begin telecommuting, friends and family may not understand the demands this requires of you. In the beginning, you need to be careful to set a tone for your family and friends as well as good work habits for yourself. If anyone else is going to be at home when you're working, they just have to be clear that when you're in your 'office' you're working. It's easy to get distracted by the many things that have to be done around the house during the day.

Additionally, just because you're home and can take care household chores or responsibilities does not mean other family members should assume you will. If that's how you choose to divide up the domestic labor, that's fine, but if you simply take it all on by default because you're home, you may feel taken advantage of, and your productivity may suffer.

Understand and Exceed Your Supervisor's Expectations

As a telecommuter, you need to understand if your job requirements and duties will be the same at home as in the office environment. Are there modifications on expectations and deliverables due to the change in work area? How much support will you receive as a telecommuter? Do previous deadlines and task remain the same? What changes in processes will occur due to limitations of telecommuting?

Most organizations have very stringent guidelines about what equipment and support will be provided by the company and what will not. South Louisiana Community College is no different, and this critical factor will need to be clarified and workarounds discussed if applicable. It is important to clarify where SLCC stands and what alternatives (if any) are available.

You should also make sure your supervisor is aware of you meeting and/or exceeding his or her expectations and accomplishing the anticipated results. How will you communicate your efforts and results? Don't rely on them to evaluate this.

Don't Hesitate to Ask for What You Need

If you're working from home unexpectedly due to coronavirus, ask for what you need within reason. You could be working from home for weeks on end and you should be comfortable, but remember this is an emergency situation and resources are limited. Consider your needs and ask yourself is this a *need* or a *want*?

Have regular meetings with your supervisor and/or co-workers to share needs and seek guidance. These meetings should be scheduled as often as you feel necessary to successfully navigate your new home work environment. Talk to others in your department who are also telecommuting.

If something is not working, don't be afraid to change it. Every employee of SLCC is new to telecommuting and the new norm for an indefinite period of time. Invest time in researching ways to improve your productivity as a telecommuter. Don't be afraid to ask for guidance to a quicker, better, more effective method. Just remember not all solutions meet all users' needs.

Identify what needs to get done every day and make sure to do it.

Waiting to figure out what you'll do to each day can take away from actually doing those things. Try solidifying your schedule the day before, making it feel more official when you wake up the next day to get started on it. It's important to let your agenda change if you need it to, but it's equally as important to commit to an agenda that outlines every assignment before you begin. As long as you have a plan on how to complete the list of daily tasks, it doesn't matter if or how often you may be interrupted, as long as things get done by the end of the day.

When planning your day, remember projects typically take longer than you initially think they will. For that reason, you'll frequently accomplish less than you set out to do. So, just as you're encouraged to overestimate how much time you'll spent doing one thing, you should also overestimate how many things you'll do during the day. Even if you come up short of your goal, you'll still come out of that day with a solid list of tasks filed under *complete*.

Stay connected and communicate.

Loneliness, disconnect, and isolation are common problems in remote work life. At the office, you have a lot of coworker interaction and low isolation. When you are at home, you have less interaction and increased isolation. Naturally, this aspect will become more much worse with the COVID-19 pandemic, where we are encouraged to shelter in place and stay home.

1. It is important to figure out how much interaction you need to feel connected.
2. You may need to be more proactive about nurturing relationships
3. Telecommuting requires you to overcommunicate. You will find you and your colleagues may email, call and text more often to stay in touch and updated.
4. The less face time you have with colleagues, the less they (and you) know how to interpret written messages. Be aware of messaging and communication styles.
5. Periodically teleconference, video chat or Facetime to share important information. These methods allow you to read facial and body cues lost in email.
6. Find a colleague for support when you feel the need to chat and have verbal interaction to avoid isolation and loneliness. Your coworkers are having to adjust and transition to the new norm, so partner with some experiencing the same challenges.
7. Talk on the phone versus relying heavily on emails.

Take a Break.

Breaks can recharge you to do better work. It can be so easy to get distracted as a telecommuter that you let breaks slip past you, or even feel guilty about taking them. Don't let the guilt of working from home prevent you from taking a few minutes to relax and step away. Do not assume you need to be working 100% of the time while you're home to be more productive. You took breaks at the office, so take a break or two guilt-free and don’t short-change yourself during your lunch hour.

Many employees who telecommute find they spend too much time at the computer which can decrease overall productivity. Schedule breaks into your day. Take a regular lunch, stand up and walk around periodically.

Work from Home Anxiety is a real thing. When you’re in the office, it is obvious you’re working. However, when there’s not a direct line of sight between you and your supervisor, it’s easy to assume that they’ll think you’re slacking off if you’re not online every waking second of the day. Ease your own anxiety by stepping away for a coffee or take a break to clear your head before starting another task.

Work when you're at your most productive.

Nobody races through their work from morning to evening. It is natural that your motivation will ebb and flow throughout the day. As discussed earlier, the morning commute is now missing and you have lost the buffer between home and office. As a telecommuter, it's all the more important to know when those ebbs and flows will take place and plan your schedule around it.

If you're challenged to create a reasonable work schedule for yourself as a telecommuter, start with the solitary tasks in the morning. If possible, save phone calls, meetings, and other collaborative work for when you've officially "woken up." Save your harder tasks for when you know you'll be in the right headspace for them.

Utilize sick days and personal time off.

Sick Time and Personal Time are part of our compensation package. When you're not feeling well, take the sick time you need. Keep in mind that sometimes it's best to rest and get better so that you can be your most productive self in the long term.

Stay out of the kitchen.

Much like the “freshman 15,” new telecommuters tend to gain a little weight when transitioning to a work from home environment. Resist the tendency to snack and avoid the kitchen as often as possible.

Create your own music track/TV in background.

Create playlists that are diverse and match the energy of the project you’re working on. Finding music that motivates you and keeps you focused can increase productivity. Also, many telecommuters recommend turning the TV on in the background at a low volume to simulate office noise.

Use laundry as a work timer.

Doing laundry is a built-in timer for your home to establish mini-deadlines. Use the time to start and finish something from your to-do list before changing the load. Committing to one assignment during the wash cycle and another during the dry cycle can train you to work smarter on tasks that you might technically have all day to tinker with.

Look for Training Opportunities.

Take the opportunity to seek out new online trainings or courses to enhance skills. Remember the Center for Professional Development is here to assist, as well as courses through the LCTCS system (LEO). You might be missing out on an opportunity to learn something useful to help you adjust to the new norm, or apply when you return to a normal work setting.

Don’t stay in your pajamas all day.

It’s tempting, but doing this will only make your little brain think that it’s time for bed. Taking a shower and getting dressed and ready for work signals your brain, which is used to getting ready and getting out the door, that it’s time to get working.

Network electronically.

If you are not already connected, get active in LinkedIn groups that relate to your work, employer, alma mater, past employers, or other interests that you follow. This is an ideal time to learn how other professionals are handling telecommuting. Plus, it’s remarkable how many new “connections” you can link in with.

Track Your Work and Progress

Your supervisor may have a specific way for you to track your time and work progress. It may be as simple as emailing your supervisor with updates, or a more elaborate tracking system. Keep track of what you are doing in detail. It may come in handy during your performance/evaluation meetings. It is important to organize your work in such a way as you are able to quickly and clearly see what you have accomplished.

Take a walk or do an at-home workout.

The CDC and our Governor recommends that you do not gather in crowds and exercise “social distancing,” but they said nothing about walking down the street, taking in 10 minutes of fresh air and calmly returning to your home to resume work. Just exercise caution and try to keep yourself a safe distance from others. Try an at-home workout. YouTube has plenty of videos for free that do the trick.

Minimize distractions and set limits online.

Telecommuters know all too well the distractions of the internet. It’s easy to fall into the trap of Facebook, Instagram or other sites if you keep it open on one of your browser tabs all day. Allow yourself to check in before you start your work and on breaks only. When it’s work time, close any non-work-related tabs and websites. If you keep Facebook open, you will undoubtedly keep flipping back to it to see if there’s anything new posted.

Section IV: Telecommuting with Kids at Home

Have realistic expectations

In order to be successful as a telecommuter, you must have realistic expectations from your new norm. If your children already demand attention during non-business hours, do not expect them to sit in a corner with a pile of crayons, coloring books, or an iPad for hours at a time while you work. Now that schools, daycares and other activity places are limited, children are also adapting to social distancing.

Don't forget, as adults we are easily sidetracked ourselves during work hours by phone calls, text messages, email alerts, social media, or an idea that suddenly invades our thoughts. How much more so are kids easily distracted? Also, you are the main attraction for your little ones at home.

Have the talk

For those at home who are old enough to keep themselves occupied, explain the situation and that you'll need to remain focused throughout the day with minimal interruptions. Communicate to them that they are a part of the team and their role is to help you remain productive.

Play out scenarios

To minimize the risk of embarrassing outburst from children during conference calls, share a few scenarios and run through options with your children. Nothing is guaranteed, but it's worth a few minutes to share expectations.

A few examples:

- If the phone rings and I step into my office space, do you follow me or quietly have a seat and wait for me to finish the call?
- If you enter my work space and notice me on the phone, how do you react?

It is going to take some time for both you and your children to work out a plan, but keep practicing.

Designate an area for your "home office"

We discussed in an earlier section regarding the importance of creating a work space. This is more of a challenge for individuals with children at home. You cannot isolate yourself from the

children if no one else is around to tend to them, but the kitchen table isn't an ideal work space either. Search for a well-lit area in your home, preferably a spare room with a door, that will enable you to organize your files, stay on task, and minimize interruptions.

Adjust your work space

Some children will entertain themselves for a period of time as long as a parent is in sight. If this sounds like your child, designate a small area of your home office as the activity station. Load it up with your child's favorite games, electronics, and activities.

Also include construction paper, glue sticks, crayons, scissors, and washable markers. To make it more fun, submit requests for particular artwork to hang in the "office gallery" they have created. Visit websites to retrieve printable worksheets for your child to complete while you're working.

Provide a folder of fun-filled educational activities or even assign them some of your simpler tasks, such as organizing or shredding papers. Ask them to join you at your desk to read their favorite book on the floor near you.

Rotate toys and/or activity items to keep them new and interesting. This can buy an extra 10–20 minutes of independent play time to get a few more items checked off your to-do list.

Remember, your new work day with children as co-workers depends on "pockets of time" versus blocking out large sections.

Use your time wisely

If you have an infant or toddler at home, utilize the sleep/nap times. Perhaps get up a little earlier and try to sneak in some work before they wake up. It's the perfect opportunity to knock a few items off the mile-long task list and get organized before the madness starts. Or if you're not exactly in the mood to start working at five o'clock in the morning, use the time to get things organized for the day and do a few chores around the house. They have to get done at some point, so why not early in the morning when no one's in your way to create more messes or disrupt your flow?

Naps are probably a part of your child's daily routine, and may or may not be easy to schedule. Make the most of each one. Create a specific "nap time" list of tasks that need to be completed, but don't include anything too urgent in case nap time is interrupted or skipped. Have a bottle ready before meetings. If baby might wake up or get cranky mid-meeting, having a bottle ready to go can be a life-saver to distract and appease.

You'll be surprised at how much you can accomplish in an interruption-free zone.

Plan ahead

Always add more time to each project and task, and definitely avoid waiting until the last minute to get started. Take control of your schedule by establishing your own internal deadlines, because you never know what each day will bring when you have kids in the house. Procrastination is the enemy when telecommuting with children at home in your workspace.

Remember the bigger picture.

Some days may be a bit rougher than others. Strive to keep focused on the work tasks that are most pressing and in need of immediate attention.

Take kid breaks from work

If you were in the office setting, you'd take a coffee break or hang out in the office of a co-worker to discuss a project. You should schedule short breaks throughout the day to play with your kids, between projects or meetings, guilt-free. Spend some time playing, exploring or learning with the kids. Read them a short book, serve up a snack or play a quick game of hide and seek. These interactions will re-energize you, and shows your child you haven't forgotten about them. Think through when it's best to focus on working and when there's more flexibility to hang out with the family and have some fun.

Have structure

Although telecommuting can be great, you must have structure for the day. This is not only essential for you, but also for your children. There is definitely flexibility within each day, but your family should understand when you get started for the day when you normally wrap up work for the evening. Everyone should become familiar with your rhythms, breaks and lunch times. Creating structure will help set expectations and create space throughout the day.