

# In Her Time

by Lilli-ann Buffin

**Y**our center is closing for the day. You eye paperwork on your desk. Due to a steady stream of interruptions, you are not as far along with it as you had planned to be. You resolve to stay an extra hour. A departing teacher knocks on your door to report that one small boy remains. You turn out your office light and go to him in his classroom.

You wait while the boy plays quietly. Ten minutes pass, now 15. Where is his mother? Inside you feel torn between irritation and genuine concern. Forty-five minutes pass. This child is bored and tired. It is apparent his fears are growing larger in the quiet, empty classroom. The boy crawls onto your lap. His little voice utters the unspeakable, "If something happens to my mom, can I come live with you?"

Moments later, a young mother bursts through the door looking pale and frightened herself. Her outerwear is disheveled and hanging to the floor. She and the boy race into

each other's arms, both with tears in their eyes.

The mother explains: a late meeting that got started even later; her spot on the agenda moved back for someone with a plane to catch. Someone else jokes about being home in time for *Seinfeld*. Each person around the table shares a favorite *Seinfeld* episode. Dare she say, "I've got to pick up my kid by 5:30"?

The meeting gets underway. The work the mother felt so much pride in now feels like a noose around her neck. She can barely focus on what anyone is saying. She wants to

scream, "SHUT UP!" Finally, she hurries through her presentation and bolts for the door — worried about how she will be perceived, but more worried about her young son at child care.

We have allowed ourselves to believe we *can* have it all. We have mistaken a busy life for a full life. We spend vast amounts of money on time management seminars and planning tools. In the end, our lives are no richer. We fail Time Management 101 and time fails us.

Recently, at a workshop for child care professionals, I asked, "How many of you use a planner?" — No hands. "How many of you ever attempted to use a planner?" — Most hands. "For how long?" — Less than one month.

Most participants were familiar with the most popular time management strategies: prioritizing, list making,



*Lilli-ann Buffin, MSW, is the owner of New Developments Family Enrichment Services in Wooster, Ohio. She develops programs for and about children and families. Lilli has worked as a child and family therapist, child care director, and educator.*

handling paper only once. I, too, have read extensively on the issues of time, organization, and personal effectiveness. I admire the work of Hyrum Smith and Stephen Covey. I even purchased an expensive planner. For a short time, I was able to use it as prescribed. Soon, I was adapting it. Not too much later, I wasn't using it at all. It just wasn't working for me, and I found the planner cumbersome to carry around. I began to question why so many of these life management systems seem so attractive and yet fail us in important ways.

What I have come to realize is that the most popular planners, planning systems, and time management strategies are developed by men — frequently men with wives and/or secretaries. I asked the women in my workshop, “What would *your* life be like if *you* had a wife?” Some chuckled at the thought. A look of pained realization was on the faces of others. I went further to ask, “If you simply eliminated all laundry from your week, how much additional time would you have to do great things? . . . or little things that would make you feel great?”

When I look at the sample entries provided with planning systems, I may see *dinner with family*. What I don't see is *plan menu, shop, cook, serve, eat, clean up dishes, remember that Johnny is allergic to milk, Susie will not eat any two foods that touch, Billy will only eat with a certain spoon, the children will not come to the table during a “Rugrats” episode, and your spouse may not be home on time*. I ask women, “How many of you have to pencil in *dinner with family*?” They always look at me in disbelief or complete disgust.

These systems that come from a male-oriented perspective do not take into account the abilities, concerns, demands, and interruptions

that women with children, or women who care for others, face. Sadly, women feel guilt and shame at their inability to successfully make these systems work. And it becomes another way to underrate and undercut women because *they do not know how to manage their time*.

Earlier time management strategies focused on structuring time in order to do more in less time. Most women already are good at balancing multiple tasks. (As I write this article, clothes turn in the dryer, the washer hums, dinner is in the oven, and my husband and children are out on errands . . . planned by me.) The problem for women is that the demands grow in a relentless fashion.

Time management experts might say, “Then you need to prioritize.” I agree that prioritizing tasks works very well for men whose priorities are their own. For women, however, their list of priorities must incorporate the priorities of others. You might not care much for soccer, but your kids love it. They are good kids who could use the exercise, skill, and team experience. Do you say, “Sorry, but my personal priorities dictate that I need to exercise, meditate, and read several books a week. I can attend only one game per week. You are on your own for sign-up, fees, physical exams, shoes, uniforms, equipment, laundry, practices, transportation, fundraisers, injuries, and bruised egos.” It is easy to write *Attend soccer game* onto a page in my planner; it is another thing to *consider and carry out* all the tasks that go with it.

The new wave of planning systems encourages us to come to grips with our personal values and beliefs. The issue for women is we always have been aware of our personal values and priorities — kids, family, and relationships come first. Women

don't need to pencil in dinner and soccer. What is difficult for women is to pencil in time for ourselves.

Though women have tried to buy into *quality time*, we have always felt like frauds. Women know that it takes a certain quantity of time to make quality. After reviewing the various time/life management approaches, I have come up with ten simple but powerful ways to begin to enrich the quality of women's time and lives.

**1 Be realistic about the true number of hours in a day.** In an average day of sleeping, eating, grooming, traveling, and working, there are about two to four hours left for everything else.

**2 Don't cheat sleep.** You may be able to cheat for a night or two in an emergency, but lack of quality sleep catches up with you. People who chronically cheat sleep are more likely to be irritable, have mood disorders, display poor concentration and reduced efficiency, and experience more accidents. Physically, they feel bad. Remember that women, in general, need more sleep than men.

**3 Get organized and prepare for moments of uninterrupted time.** Interruptions are the biggest stressor in a woman's day. I get up an hour earlier than the rest of my family. I go immediately to my work area where I spend the first 10 or 15 minutes planning and organizing my day. The rest of the hour I use for chipping away at other projects. It is amazing what a woman can accomplish in one uninterrupted hour.

For you, it might be one hour at the end of the day or getting to work an hour before everyone else. If one hour is too much for you to grab, start with 15 minutes. After a week

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of experiencing the satisfaction and reduction in stress, you will be energized to add more time.

**4 Simplify and minimize your commitments to others so there is no need for an elaborate planning system.** Develop a simple system that works for you. I find that most women do fine with a centrally located family calendar and an appointment book at work. Most women seem to mentally keep track of important information.

I don't carry a planner or appointment book. I do have a central, all-events calendar in my home. Next to my phone I have two small, open, hanging file containers. One has a file for every month of the year. The other has a folder for each day of the week, plus one for the library and one for copies to be made. As I empty my in-basket each day (during my uninterrupted hour), I file materials in the month I will need to deal with them. Each weekend, I review the current monthly folder and put the pieces into the appropriate daily files. Each morning, I begin my planning time with the daily folder and a glance at the central calendar.

**5 Remember that parenting and housework are not the same job.** They are separate, if not mutually exclusive, in the time, energy, and skills required. Strive for order and put parenting ahead of housework. Delegate and expect others in the household to participate in its care.

**6 Don't go out on a financial limb.** The stress will burn your energy and creativity and limit your choices. You will have to work harder and longer just to stay behind.

**7 Know thyself! Always consider your own peak hours**

**of energy, efficiency, and concentration.** If you usually are exhausted by 9:00 PM, don't leave the most important or most fulfilling tasks of the day until after the children are in bed.

**8 Take breaks from noise.** When you spend time around children, noise is unavoidable: it is also exhausting and irritating. Constant noise robs us of quiet moments to think. We lose energy and efficiency when we have no quiet time to reflect, re-energize, and plan.

**9 Practice saying no.** I say practice because this is often the hardest skill for women to develop. We know we can manage many things at once, and we care about people. Remember, once you say yes to someone, no matter how much you are overextending yourself to do it, this yes becomes the new norm in your relationship. People will expect more of you, not less, the next time.

**10 Reduce or eliminate television from your life.** It is a hypnotic time robber. When you really appreciate what a woman can accomplish in an uninterrupted half hour, why trade it for 10 minutes of entertainment and 20 minutes of commercials?

Women will never think, plan, or organize like men. Our culture has paid a hefty price for belittling the sacred nature and mightiness of women and all that we do. We see the evidence of this every day in our centers. You already know how to do a lot in a little bit of time. We have come to a place now where we must honor our abilities to be multi-focused in a way that enriches our own lives. Seize the day!