



Parents Who Work Nontraditional Hours

Every family situation is unique—many parents work during the day; others might work at night; and still other parents work weekends or fewer (but longer) work days. Parenting with a fluctuating or unusual timetable can take its toll on the entire family, especially when your child needs to adjust to different schedules or care situations. We hope the following tips will help you manage a nontraditional family schedule.

Finding Care During Extended/Unusual Work Hours

If you work unusual shifts, you may need to find a child care arrangement that can accommodate nontraditional or extended hours. While in-home caregivers are more likely to provide nontraditional hours of care, more and more child care centers and family child care providers are serving these care needs. When speaking with out-of-home child care providers, ask about the consequences of a later arrival to retrieve your child.

Also, inquire about the additional fees involved with longer hours of care. Ask questions about how the caregiver will handle your child's concerns during extended or unusual hours away from parents. If your child will be cared for overnight, be sure the facility is equipped with appropriate accommodations. Remember, nontraditional care arrangements may be more susceptible to breakdowns than other care arrangements. Be sure you have a reliable backup plan in place should your child be ill or your caregiver be unavailable during a work shift.

"I'm planning to go back to work soon, and I've been feeling guilty about how it might impact my three-year-old son, Sam. I will be a full-time nurse, working some evenings and weekends in varied shifts according to the hospital's requirements. With such a radical schedule change, I'm worried that my son will miss me or have a hard time adapting to extended hours at the child care center."

Note—Keep in mind that some states prohibit overnight care or limit the number of hours a child may spend in child care during any one day. Call your local child care licensing agency to find out your state's requirements. For more information about finding and evaluating caregivers, please see the other publications in the education series.

Preparing Your Child for Longer Hours With Caregivers

Infants (Birth to 12 Months)

Provide your infant's favorite comforts: A blanket, pacifier or a special stuffed animal may help to ease the long hours away from parents. If you plan to change your baby's feeding, eating or sleeping routine, do so on a day off or a day when you are working fewer hours. Check in regularly with your baby's caregiver to discuss any changes in his or her behavior or schedule, and have the caregiver document your child's diaper changes, feedings and sleeping patterns. When you are not working, spend quality one-on-one time with your baby, playing with favorite toys or going out somewhere special together.

Toddlers and Preschoolers (12 Months to Five Years)

Establish consistency and security in your child's life so he or she is less affected by your nontraditional work schedule. Tell your child what schedule to expect each day. Give your child a sense of control during long days with caregivers by discussing the activities he or she might do, what may happen during the day, when he or she will eat, sleep, etc. Ask your child to help you pack his or her lunch and clothes. Let your child pick out a favorite toy or pacifier for security during long hours of care.

Show your enthusiasm for your child's care arrangement with your words and tone of voice. Tell your child that, even when you are not together, he or she is always in your thoughts. Casually discuss what you will do when you are together again. Maximize the time you do spend with your child by sharing ideas, playing games, reading books, etc. At night, establish a special bedtime ritual, such as reading a bedtime story, to add predictability to your child's life. Keep your child's bedtimes and mealtimes consistent and familiar, even if your job dictates that you must follow different sleeping and eating patterns.

School-Aged Children (Six Years and Up)

Together with your child, plan how he or she will get to and from home, the care provider and school. (If your child is beginning a new school and a nontraditional care arrangement, try to begin care a few weeks earlier. Although this is not always possible, the transition will go more smoothly if your child can "master" one new situation at a time.) Talk with your child ahead of time about your work schedule and what hours he or she can expect to be in someone else's care. Discuss the fun activities and friends your child will enjoy while you are working. Be sure to discuss his or her feelings about your timetable, and empathize with your child's concerns. Reassure your child that the caregiver will keep him or her safe and that you are still only a phone call away.

Note—Regardless of your child's age, be sure to supply caregivers with all appropriate telephone numbers and emergency contact information while you are at work.

Easing Your Child Into a Care Setting

Make sure the care provider greets your child warmly and cheerfully upon arrival. Take the time to see that your child gets settled comfortably—by arriving a bit early, you will not need to rush. Establish an arrival routine: Sign in together, stow your child's lunch and jacket, do a short activity together and then wave good-bye from a special place. Observe rather than participate so that your child will be drawn toward the activities of the other children. If you take the time to ensure a smooth transition and separation at the beginning, your child will feel more secure during the long hours away from you.

Do not leave without saying good-bye—if you do this, you risk violating your child's trust. Tell your child when you will be back, linking the time to an activity your child will know: For example, "I'll be back after you eat dinner to take you home." Always say good-bye with a kiss, hug and a wave.

Be firm but friendly about leaving. If your child whines or clings, displays tantrums, fights with friends, shows resentment toward you, has nightmares or demonstrates regressive behavior, a prolonged good-bye will only make it harder for both of you. Remember that these behaviors are usually just temporary coping strategies. Comforting words such as, "I know it's hard to say good-bye," are helpful; however, ridiculing remarks such as, "Only babies cry," will not help your child learn how to deal with difficult situations.

At the End of the Day

When you return at the end of a work shift, both you and your child may be running low on energy and patience. Make a conscious decision to put aside the day's problems and concentrate on your child's needs. Maintain a predictable pickup schedule. Children need to know that they can count on you to be on time.

What can you expect when you pick up your child? Some children may rush into your open arms, bursting with the day's stories. Others, even infants, may completely ignore your presence and refuse to leave. Sometimes, your child may acknowledge your presence and then return to play. However your child reacts, be firm (in a friendly way) about leaving to go home.

Help your child make the transition by setting parameters such as, "When the clock says five minutes are up, then we will leave." Create an end-of-the-day ritual: Put away any materials and toys, retrieve take-home items, say good-bye to caregivers and other children, and be on your way. You may want to bring a snack for the ride home. Some children will want to talk about their day and others will not. Listen, but don't pry. Your child may enjoy hearing about your day as well. Use the commute to ease the transition between work, child care and home.

Note—If you are retrieving your child during sleeping hours, turn lights low, keep a blanket in the car and talk softly as you move your child.

Preparing Yourself for Long Hours Away From Your Child

Many parents feel guilty about working and having to place their children in child care. Parents who work nontraditional hours are often particularly concerned since their children rarely experience traditional family time like their peers (e.g., regular dinners together, common weekends or holidays, etc.). Parents and children need time to adjust to nontraditional family routines. Find other ways to spend time with your child. One suggestion is to take an active role in your child's care arrangement. Or, establish your own holidays and rituals for family together time.

Tips for Parents

- **Become involved in your child's care arrangement**—This will help you stay in touch with your child and strengthen new relationships. Your child will develop a sense of security as both worlds begin to connect.
- **Meet other parents**—Consider organizing a potluck dinner with the families from your child's care facility or initiating/sitting in on parent meetings. It may be particularly helpful to establish networks with other parents who work nontraditional hours.
- **Plan a special activity**—Collect supplies or equipment that can be used for a special activity under the caregiver's supervision. Be sure to discuss this with your caregiver. Your child may enjoy completing a project with the egg cartons, fabric scraps, jars or magazines that you leave for all the children to enjoy.

- **Speak with your child's caregiver on a regular basis**—Compare notes with the caregiver regularly regarding your child's development, daily routine and other issues. Together with your child's caregiver, keep a daily journal. Have the caregiver record your child's eating and sleeping habits and activity schedule, and do the same for the caregiver when you and your child are together. Notify each other immediately if any concerns arise.
- **Volunteer**—You may want to volunteer to telephone parents about upcoming events, or you can help with a field trip. Ask if you could bake something special when one of the children has a birthday. Perhaps you could help the caregiver plan an outing or a project.
- **Send pictures or mail from work**—Your child will enjoy getting a special reminder of your love during the day. For a school-aged child, tuck a photo or note in his or her lunchbox.
- **Clip articles for the caregiver to use**—Magazine and/or newspaper articles could provide information on field trips, child development issues or special projects.
- **Decorate your workspace**—Bring pictures of your child with you to work. Hang his or her artwork where you can see it during your shift. These reminders will help you feel close to your child during long work hours.
- **Phone your child regularly**—Arrange to call an older child at specified times while you are at work, perhaps when he or she gets to the after-school care facility or when he or she arrives home from school. For the computer-savvy child, send him or her an e-mail or fax reminder of your love.

Keep in mind that your work enriches your child more than it deprives him or her.

For more information on related topics, please refer to other publications in the education series.

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