

# **Survival Strategies for Writing Parents**

By:

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[http://www.ohiou.edu/oupres/LAKE COLONIAL.HTM](http://www.ohiou.edu/oupres/LAKE_COLONIAL.HTM)

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## Introduction

Not everybody is going to agree with what's written in this Ebook. Some parents are of the opinion that we have to sacrifice *everything* – our jobs, our happiness, our sanity – for the sake of our children.

I am not one of them.

That may be easy for me to say, since I have only one child, but I really think that being a parent is not just about being at your child's beck and call. I firmly believe in a child being independent, no matter how much we love them and want to "mommy" them all the time. Kids need to be able to rely on themselves just as they rely on their parents. If a child is old enough to dress himself, brush his teeth and get a snack, then, by all means, use this as a reminder the next time he asks *you* to do it.

Still, at the same time, our children *need* us. They need us to be there for them. And, even if we work a fulltime job day in and day out, we still need to be there for them. You don't get the privilege of being a parent only by name; it takes more than that.

For this reason, the essays included offer ways for writing parents to manage being both a good writer and a good parent. Yes, you can be both. You can have five kids, a part-time job, go to school and *still* write. (I have actually read about one such writer.) You can have a child, stay at home and write for a living. Nobody is going around saying that combination makes for bad parenting. It's doable. It's possible. And you owe it to yourself to follow your creative dreams no matter how many children you have.

The essays in this Ebook won't be right for everyone. In fact, they're not guidelines for you to follow, but ideas on how to develop your own method of balancing the two responsibilities. They're methods I have used and worked with during my nearly five years as a writing parent and, hopefully, they will empower, enlighten and inspire you to keep your dreams alive.

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Enjoy this Ebook and may you get one step closer to making your dreams a reality.

*--Dawn Colclasure*  
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## **Writing With Babies: To Nap Or Write?**

Before I became a parent, one piece of advice constantly offered to me was, "Sleep when the baby sleeps." Yet as writers, we are faced with a new dilemma: Should we sleep when the baby sleeps, or write?

Postponing the chance to catch some extra sleep isn't easy when you're a parent, especially a new parent like me, unaccustomed to the realities of fatigue. The sheer reality of how exhausting parenthood can be never hit me until after my baby was born, when I ended up trudging through the days half-awake after only four hours of sleep the night before. However, postponing the chance to write isn't desirable, either. I want to be a parent, but I want to be a writer, too. And once the baby is sleeping, the temptation to settle into that familiar place on the couch instead of write can be too great. The stress of our daily lives can add to our exhaustion.

But we are writers. And, as writers, we can never stop writing, even if all we manage to write are a few sentences before retiring for the evening. Parenthood or not, this desire can be too strong for us to subdue. The important thing is to find some way to keep writing in our lives, no matter, or even thanks to, the demands that we face.

There are options available to writing parents who face such demands. One of these options is, of course, to ask for help. Ask your partner, a friend or a family member to care for the baby so you can have an hour to write. There have been instances where my husband, sister or mother have cared for my daughter so I could get some writing done. Putting the baby into a playpen, crib or an area of the room surrounded by a baby gate can give you some extra time to write, too.

Another option is to keep a tape recorder with you. Because I am profoundly deaf, this is not available to me, though I have heard other writers find success in using it. I have heard of one writer recording the entirety of his book onto a tape recorder during his morning commute. It is convenient, practical and quite handy during those instances when we are feeding the baby, changing the diaper or giving them a bath.

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There was one instance when I made up a lullaby for my then 6-month-old daughter as she wailed in my arms, and after she listened intently to me singing it to her, I had to run to a journal I keep to write it down. Having a tape recorder would help in such instances. Inspiration can strike at any time.

Also, try writing while feeding your baby. Use one hand to feed the baby with and the other to write on a nearby pad of paper. Once the baby starts eating solids, you'll have the opportunity to get some writing in while she sits in her highchair eating.

Some writers suggest getting up earlier in the morning to write, before the children awaken and your day begins. As the parent of a newborn, this option didn't work very well for me. Any sleep I could get was sleep I greedily took advantage of, especially after getting through the night waking up every two hours to feed the baby. Also, a baby's sleeping patterns can be very unpredictable, and setting the alarm for an hour before they awoke yesterday means you risk waking up to their cries instead. Yet it can be done, and with practice, a parent can use this method to write during the early hours of the morning.

Finally, one other option a writing parent can use is to do both: Write and nap. After the baby settles down for a nap, take out your notebook or laptop and use five minutes to write down that idea you've had, an outline for an article, character sketch, etc. Then, after the time is up or you got down only the important notes, stop what you are doing and take a nap. You have done your writing for the day. You have written something. Now enjoy those extra few minutes that you have to catch up on your sleep. Or, when you wake up, jot down some images from any dream you had.

A parent with insufficient sleep isn't a very functional one, and this will show up in how you write. Without enough sleep, you'll miss out on typos, forget those extra notes you wanted to add or miss a deadline. Try to get enough sleep while still managing to keep writing in your life. Later on, you will get used to getting less sleep than you normally do.

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Remember, the day will soon come to an end and you will be able to sleep again, if only for a little while. These first years of a child's life are precious, and unfortunately very fleeting. The day will come when the children will be going to school all day and you will have more time to sleep. More importantly, you will have more time to write.

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## Redefining the Home Office

You hear it everywhere: If you work from home, get a home office. Aside from having the added benefit of making extra tax deductions next April, a home office justifies your desire to work from home. It makes the fact that you are actually putting your nose to the grindstone official.

But if you're a writing parent, chances are what else you hear about having a home office conflicts with the real world.

Take, for example, this advice: "When you're working in your home office, put a sign on the door that reads Do Not Disturb Unless the House is On Fire."

That may work if you've got teenagers (then again, maybe not), but what about the writing parent with small children underfoot? It's a bigger problem if those little ones can't read or have no idea what a sign is. Then there's the issue of writing mothers who nurse their babies; staying in the home office with that door locked just isn't doable! Believe me, I know all too well about writing something in spurts; you never get to write a whole thing in one sitting if you have small children. Or even accident-prone and/or adventurous children....

Instead, rewrite that piece of advice this way:

"When working in the home office, take time away from the work only if absolutely necessary."

The next piece of common advice you hear about the home advice is another head-scratcher for the writing parent: "Your home office is a place of business; no children, pets or toys allowed."

Uh-huh. In other words, the writing parent must hole themselves up in the bathroom, the *only* room in the house with a lock on the door, and scream at anyone who *dares* to bother them.

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Nah.

Let's try this instead: "The home office is just like any other room in the house; anyone can come in as long as they don't intrude on your workspace."

Ahh. Much better, yes? Gives you your workspace while also allowing your little ones to sit within eyeshot and color or play with their toys. And you don't have to be alone even when the kids are in school; your pets are, of course, just as welcome to snuggle up on your lap as your babies are.

There will be times, of course, you'll need absolute *quiet* and zero distraction while you work. These are the times you'll have to call your office "off-limits" to everyone else. Just be sure another adult is available to watch the kids while you work.

Here's another common piece of advice that's bound to incite a groan: "Just because you're working from home and not from a real office, it doesn't mean you can work only when you feel like it. Put in the same hours every day you would at a regular job."

Well, gee, Wally, if I was gonna chart 8 hours no matter where I worked, I wouldn't make it easier on my kids by working at home, would I?

Actually, feel free to chuck that rule, too. Trust me, folks: There are going to be days you'll be able to get *very little*, if anything, done. There will even be days you don't get a single thing done. It happens. The important rule is that you **work whenever possible**. There is no rule carved in stone saying a writing parent must clock in eight hours of writing time every day. Go easy on yourself. Work when you can but don't beat yourself up when you can't. Remember, you're a parent first.

Everybody is going to have their own ideas of how something should be and how it shouldn't be. A writing career can require serious time and effort but there's nothing wrong with bending the rules just a bit since you've got kids to feed and bills to pay. Actually, you're better off making up your own rules. You know you have to

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approach your writing career professionally, diligently and with the same amount of importance as a real job. But don't forget the *other* job you're expected to do 24 hours, 7 days a week. The most important job of all: Being your child's parent.

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## The Skeleton Writer

As a writing parent, time is practically unmanageable. Between taking care of the kids, meeting deadlines and working on that next book, all while trying to get food on the table, the bills paid and boo-boos bandaged, the ability to sit down and write becomes something to only dream about.

Unless, of course, you happen to be a skeleton writer.

Skeleton writers aren't something you'll find in a Stephen King novel. They don't have anything to do with eating habits, either. A skeleton writer is a writer who's mastered the skill of getting the "skeleton" of her ideas down amid the chaos of daily life.

If you've ever read a story that's all telling but no showing, you've seen skeleton writing in action. It's when your good buddy grabs your arms and says, "I've got a great story to tell! You see, first this happens, then that happens...." It's basically the outline of an idea but not the final product.

To give it a shot, take your next idea and, instead of writing out the first draft, write down your idea. Include a few extras to throw in if you have the time: expert quotes, bulleted items, books to cite and character names. If all you have is a title, write down the title, but keep this project in clear view so you can remember to work on it the next time you sit down to write.

You can also use skeleton writing to scribble that first draft. Just write it and set it aside to revise later. If you have the time, do some research online or give it a once-over before setting it aside to breathe.

Skeleton writing can be a lifesaver during those days you can't spend time writing. Instead of keeping ideas in your head, only to forget them later, you get to jot them down real quick. It gives you peace of mind knowing that forgetting ideas is now a thing of the past and, to top that off, at least your skeletal scribbles give you the

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jump start in figuring out your approach. Since you wrote down that you'll probably interview an expert on dog training for that article idea, for example, you can now focus on where to look and your angle instead of making sure you'll remember to interview an expert later.

The bonus of skeleton writing is that you can do it anywhere: on a notepad while standing in line, on a flier while at church, on the back of a business card while waiting for an appointment and even on a scrap piece of paper you've managed to dig up while stuck in traffic. Just jot your skeleton down, fold it up, put it in your pocket then work on it when you finally get back to your desk.

Use skeleton writing the next time you have that idea but no time to flesh it out. Get your idea onto paper and out of your head, ready to be fixed up when you have that extra time.

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## The Gifts of Being a Writing Parent

You have a deadline. Your work is due within hours, your contact keeps giving you the runaround and your e-mail account suddenly crashes. You're ready to dive out the window of a high-rise because you're this close to losing your next paycheck. Suddenly, a tiny pair of arms circles around you and a cherubic smile appears. A small voice peeps out from underneath you, saying, "I love you."

This scenario is just one of those moments you can count on when your day as a working writer gets chaotic. Because not only are you a working writer, but you are also a working writer *parent*. You have one or more children there to remind you how much your being a writer is important, how it can help you to keep the bill collectors away and how you will always have someone there to say "I love you" right after an editor has said "I hate you." And the former statement will always erase the latter.

As a writing parent, you can count on going through many ups and downs. You can count on constantly being interrupted, faced with little time to write or having to learn how to type with one hand while you tend to a child with the other. But what you can also count on are the gifts which being a writing parent offers: You have the gift of never-ending support, instant feedback, a source of inspiration and ideas, and a shoulder to lean on for those days when nothing seems to be going right. You also have the pride of creating something and the example that sets for your children when they are old enough to understand.

Being a writing parent is a blessing. It's one of those very rare periods of your life when, to survive, you absolutely *must* plan your workdays better, use the power of brevity when faced with scarce writing time, and learn the art of prioritizing your work. You are also in a position where you can write from the unique angle of a parent. Who else can better understand the labors of insufficient sleep, potty training or seeing your child off on their first day of school? You. And, even better, you, the writer. Because now you are able to write about these experiences in a way

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that almost makes you an expert on the subject. You are an expert, because you've been there. You are living life.

There won't be any other time in your life where you can write about a child's first step, the intrigue of a lightning storm, how to fight monsters in a closet or how to talk to your child about drugs, sex and violence. Children grow up and we, the writing parents, are there to experience every single moment of it. We are there to relive our first crush, our first date and graduation from high school. We are there to live through it and write all about it.

And that, above all else, is perhaps the greatest gift of all: The gift of memorializing these experiences forever.

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## When “Take Your Child to Work Day” is Every Day

Parents writing from home often find it difficult to keep their writer side balanced. The bad news: You’re a parent 24/7 but also a *writer* 24/7 because writers are always thinking. How do you keep one afloat while staying true to the other? That’s where the good news comes in: The task is darn near impossible, but just as conquerable.

Keep in mind that just because you’re a writer, you can’t turn off being a parent. The same goes in reverse. You have to figure out a way to lead this double life of cooking for your kids, cleaning up after them (and the house!), getting to the PTA meetings and soccer practice all while managing to meet your deadlines, work on an assignment, write a chapter and interview sources. Just that list could make the uninitiated run away screaming and swear off the job of trying to write from home with children underfoot. But for the serious writing parent willing to work around schedules, do without and be a little creative, the task can be done.

Here’s how:

### **Make both jobs a priority.**

I’m not saying you need to be a superhuman willing to do it all. You can’t. No matter what people tell you, **you can NOT do it all!** I’m only suggesting you go easy on yourself and do something for the writing here, something for the parenting there. Yes, I am saying you need to do both things at once. I’m saying you need to work on your assignments while, at the same time, committing yourself to the parenting duties.

For example, I’m constantly jumping in and out of my seat as I work, typing a paragraph, getting up to get my child some juice, typing another paragraph, then stopping again to admire a picture she drew. There are also times I’ll be typing with one hand as I entertain my child on my lap with the other, talk to her about what I am doing while she curiously examines the screen. I’ll even write a first draft in my

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notebook at the dinner table then type it all up after she goes to bed. That's just the way it is.

If you have little ones, you can't lock yourself in a room and work all day. That's not possible. You need to give attention to your kids just as you do for your writing. Take some time out to talk with them, ask about their day and even compliment something they're wearing. It's the little things that can make a big difference.

### **Switch gears.**

Being a writer doesn't mean being glued to your computer all day. Use that sharp memory of yours and allow yourself to go on a picnic with your kids or take walks during a sunny afternoon. Play games with them or read them a story. Keep a notebook and pen or a tape recorder close by to write down any ideas and to record notes. Getting outside and changing your scenery is very important.

### **Keep your workspace organized.**

Nothing slows down your day (or gets on your nerves) like a lost notebook or misplaced phone number. With every chance you get, back up your files, clean off your desk, dust off your equipment and keep folders in one place. An organized work area ensures you can continue to work without the hassle or distraction of trying to find something and it also prevents any missed cues from your child that you're needed.

### **Lower your expectations.**

Forget about the fantasy of writing for hours every day, working without distraction while you're children happily entertain themselves. That's *not* going to happen. Not now, not ever. Well, not until they move out, anyway. But while you've got little ones underfoot, don't put the brakes on your parenting responsibilities all in the name of that next check. It's not worth it. Money is nice, yes. Fame is just as nice. But what will it matter if your kids are forced to do without? Or if your health suffers? You can't expect everything to be absolutely 100% perfect all the time. Sometimes things

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go wrong. Sometimes you can't meet a deadline. The only thing you can expect from yourself is to do the best job you can, both as a parent *and* a writer. Just do the best you can.

### **Try to pursue less-demanding work.**

Part of giving yourself a break means looking for work that doesn't require a large chunk of your time. You don't need to freelance fulltime; if you've got the skill and the wherewithal, pursue other writing jobs like business writing, copywriting, greeting card writing, flash fiction writing and songwriting. These tasks are usually small enough to require up to an hour of your time (for most writers), maybe longer or shorter. But they don't require you to sacrifice your parenting duties. You'll eventually figure out a way to make these jobs doable while also being a great parent.

### **Take some time off.**

One rule I made for myself is to never work on the weekends. Of course, I tend to break this rule. But weekends are supposed to be about having fun, rewarding yourself for a great workweek and giving yourself a break.

More often than not, stepping away from the stress of work can do wonders for your creativity. If you're stuck on something, not dwelling on it somehow helps you come up with a solution later. This can only mean one thing: Time away from work is GOOD for you! You don't have to be some work monkey slaving away at the desk, typing frantically as you chug down a zillionth coffee. You have every right and every good reason to take a breather once in a while. If no deadlines are looming or if you're ready to scream from work overload, grab the kids and head off to the beach or a local amusement park. Sometimes, the joys of parenting help alleviate the stress and frustrations of being a writer.

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## **Be good to yourself.**

The saying "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy" is so true with any job you perform. If you're not happy with yourself or your work, it will show. If you're starving because you refuse to eat just so you can finish an assignment, that'll cause typos, poor structure and bad writing in your work. Worse, poor health in the long run will make everything fall apart. If you're too sick to even think straight, spare yourself the agony of trying to write. Take care of your children but, more importantly, take care of yourself, too. If you need a break, hire a sitter or drop the kids off at a relative's to have some time to yourself. Take bubble baths, go to a spa or cuddle up with a favorite book or movie. Reward yourself every once in a while. You deserve it.

Above all else, remember: Writers are often solitary, but you shouldn't be. Your children's need for varied experiences and attentive care must come before all else: before your deadlines, your final chapter getting written and before that sixth query in a row you're tempted to write. You're not just writing a story; you're also writing the most important chapter of your life story: Your role as a parent. How that chapter goes and how it turns out is up to you.

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## Resources

### Books:

*BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL: How We Survive as Writing Parents* by Dawn Colclasure. Published by Booklocker.com, Inc., 2004  
<http://www.booklocker.com/books/1743.html>

### Articles:

Minute Snatchers – How to Be a Writing Parent  
By Christine Louise Hohlbaum  
[http://www.absolutewrite.com/freelance\\_writing/minute\\_snatchers.htm](http://www.absolutewrite.com/freelance_writing/minute_snatchers.htm)

A peek into the writing parent's life  
Vicki M. Taylor  
<http://sheknows.com/about/look/2528.htm>

The Writing Parent's Guide to Enjoying Summer  
by Sherry D. Ramsey  
<http://www.writergazette.com/articles/article72.shtml>

WRITING WHILE PARENTING FROM HOME  
By Alison Lake  
<http://www.prairieden.com/lake/parenting.php>

WORK-AT-HOME PARENTS CAN CREATE SUCCESSFUL ONLINE WRITING  
BUSINESSES  
By Sara Webb Quest  
[http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/parents\\_addicted\\_writing\\_paw\\_mag/109269](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/parents_addicted_writing_paw_mag/109269)

A Day in the Life of a Writing Mom

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By Lori Zecca  
(at AuthorsDen. Membership required to read.)

A Writing Mom  
By Carol Goodman  
<http://www.mamaphonic.com/features/writingmom.html>

The Writing Dad  
By Frank P. Baron  
[http://www.frankbaron.com/writing\\_dad.htm](http://www.frankbaron.com/writing_dad.htm)

Priorities-Perspectives and...Swords  
By Frank P. Baron  
<http://www.frankbaron.com/priorities.htm>

### **Web Sites:**

Write From Home  
<http://www.writefromhome.com/>

Momwriters.com  
<http://momwriters.com/>

Sara Webb-Quest's Parents Addicted to Writing Magazine  
[http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/parents\\_addicted\\_writing\\_paw\\_mag](http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/parents_addicted_writing_paw_mag)

Mom Writer's Talk Radio  
<http://www.podcastpickle.com/casts/4401/>

The HOMEWriter  
<http://www.thehomewriter.com/>

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## Author Bio

Dawn Colclasure is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Take My Hand* and *Topiary Dreams*, as well as two nonfiction books: *BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL: How we Survive as Writing Parents* (Booklocker.com, Inc., 2004) and *365 TIPS FOR WRITERS: Inspiration, Writing Prompts and Beat The Block Tips to Turbo Charge Your Creativity* (Filbert Publishing, 2004). She is also the author of the horror novel, *November's Child*. She has written for both print and online media, with articles appearing in magazines such as *Succeed*, *Mothering*, *American Fitness* and *HOMEspirations*, as well as on the Web for sites and E-zines such as Write From Home, Absolute Write, Writing World, Worldwide Freelance Writer, SheKnows.com, The Writer Within and Writing Etc. She has also written under the pen name Dana Mitchells. She edits and publishes the FREE E-zine for writing parents, the Burning the Midnight Oil Book Zine. She is a contributing writer to the newspaper, SIGNews, and a staff writer for the Web site, The Shadowlands, where she writes about ghost and hauntings. Her Web site is at <http://dmcwriter.tripod.com/>.

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