

Writing With Children - Living In Fairytale Land

By Kellie Finley

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Ah, the joys of working from home – casual reading of the morning newspaper, leisurely coffee dates with friends, the setting of your own schedule with none of the hassles of car pools, time clocks and cranky bosses. Sound like fairytale land? Well, that's because it is just that – a fairytale! (Only to be outdone by the myths about stay at home moms, but I digress.)

After having the luxury – and curse – of working out of a home office for the better part of seven years, I like to think I'm a pretty good source on the topic. Thanks to my three children, ranging in age from five to twelve, I have mastered the three key survival skills for working from home: time management, space organization, and artful negotiation.

Time management: At first, I thought time management entailed creating a schedule for everyone to follow – one that included all of the many things that needed to get done each day. (Ok, you can stop laughing now; everyone starts out believing in the fairytale.) Little did I know that what time management really meant was knowing exactly how long (1) each of your children could go without direct supervision and still remain alive and well, and (2) any two of them could be in proximity of each other without there being a major meltdown.

Space organization: Just like with time management, I had space organization illusions too. I thought this meant “having a place for everything, and having everything in its place.” (Wow, when I fantasize, I really go all out, don't I?) The kids have corrected that illusion and I now understand that space organization is having (1) a place to hide all the scattered toys really fast if someone important appears at your door, and (2) enough room to separate all three children when need be.

Artful negotiation: Getting three children do to what I wanted couldn't be any harder than balancing what a client needs, with what they can afford, and with what is morally right, could it? Surely I had some transferable skills in this area – wrong. (I had no idea my children could wail, pout, and sulk for such long periods of time and with such depths of emotions – I wonder if maybe this is how famous actors get started?)

All that said, those of you that really do work at home, know exactly what I'm talking about. So, as summer approaches, let me share my tips and tricks with you (and please send me any ideas you have – we all need all the help we can get!).

Red, yellow, and green: At the kids school, there's a place in the door window that displays a colored sign. At school, it's an indicator of whether the weather conditions support playing outside during recess – red means stay outside, yellow means come in for short trips, and green indicates come directly in. I now have the same sign outside my home office door, and while it predicts my tolerance for interruptions versus the actual weather outside, it works very well.

Kitchen timer: When I say, “...just one more minute...,” the kids know that can mean one minute or one hour, especially if I'm deep in a scene. Now, we set a kitchen timer for anywhere depending from fifteen minutes to a hour; when the timer goes off, I take a break and spend some time with the kids. (Key point: when the timer goes off, a deal's a deal, and I have to stop and spend time with them.)

Small kitchen containers: At any given time one (or more) of my kids is constantly in the kitchen, staring endlessly into the refrigerator, mumbling something about, “dying of starvation.” So, once a week, I take somewhere close to a million small, single serving containers (Tupperware, Ziploc, etc.) and fill them with snacks, fruits, veggies, etc. The rule is, you can have

absolutely anything you can find in a small container, as long as for every sweet or salty snack you pick you also have a fruit or veggie snack. (I also depend on these single servings for packing lunches, and keeping on track with my current weight loss efforts.)

Fieldtrips: Just like the school, we now plan fieldtrips in advance. We pick the destination, establish a schedule, and for the most part, the whining about, "...we never get to go anywhere..." has dropped off substantially. It should probably be noted that we take an average of a fieldtrip a week, to such hot spots as the public library, the park, the gardening store. (Don't anyone tell my kids that these "fieldtrips" are synchronized with my errands list, ok?)

The drawer: In my office, I have a monster filing cabinet, one of the big, four drawer lateral ones. The bottom drawer is totally dedicated to the kids and having quiet fun (emphasis on "quiet"). Every time I go to Walmart, a dollar store, etc., I get new things to put in "the drawer." It's full of crafts, puzzles, small toys, books, etc. Nothing in the drawer costs over \$10, with most items being under \$5. When I get really desperate, or when I have to cancel a fieldtrip, or when I really need to ignore the timer going off, I offer up a trip to "the drawer." And my kids love it. They spend more time lovingly looking at all the stuff in the drawer, than they do staring in the refrigerator. If one of them really wants something from the drawer, especially our son, he might even offer to do something, like play with his little sister for an hour, if he can have it. This is good – very good!

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