

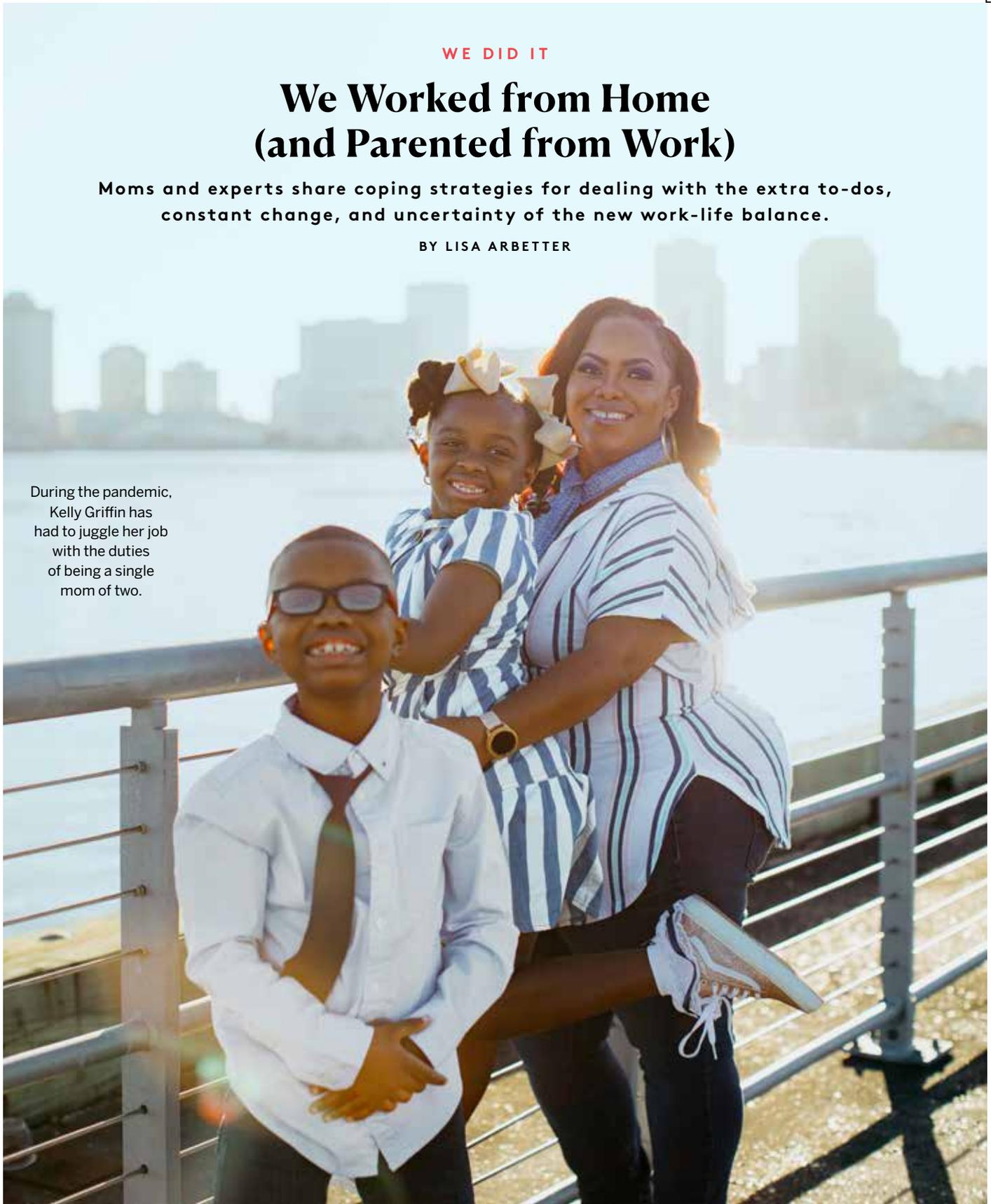
WE DID IT

We Worked from Home (and Parented from Work)

Moms and experts share coping strategies for dealing with the extra to-dos, constant change, and uncertainty of the new work-life balance.

BY LISA ARBETTER

During the pandemic, Kelly Griffin has had to juggle her job with the duties of being a single mom of two.



“I’m Feeling Mom Guilt but Trying to Retain Normalcy for My Kids”

Kelly Griffin

MOM OF AN 8-YEAR-OLD BOY AND 6-YEAR-OLD GIRL, NEW ORLEANS

IF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL showcased feats of mental flexibility alongside physical contortions, Kelly Griffin would steal the show.

On several occasions since the pandemic began, the first-grade teacher and single mother of two elementary-school-age kids has had to re-create her schedule from top to bottom. A return to the classroom last fall required new lesson plans, this time to engage both remote and in-person learners. And she was dealing with the stress of sending her own kids to school during a pandemic.

“I didn’t have a choice,” she says. “As a teacher, I had to go back, so they had to go back.”

Thankfully, her kids’ school instituted precautions that eased her mind about their safety. But in early 2021, their school switched back to fully remote, which upended the family’s routine again.

Throughout it all, Kelly has worked hard to retain a sense of normalcy for her kids—she takes them to the park on weekends, or has them pick fun activities out of a hat. But the additional work and childcare leave little time for herself. “I’m back in that space of overworking, neglecting my kids,” she says. “Everybody around the world needs to know: Give a teacher a break.”

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU “When you feel guilty, ask yourself, ‘Am I doing the best I can right now?’” says Jill Emanuele, PhD, senior director of the Mood Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute in New York City. Chances are, the answer is yes. “If your way of putting food on the table means you have to send your kids to school or your kid is watching TV for three hours while you do your work, then it may be that you’re doing the best you can.” And while it’s hard to find opportunities to unwind, she emphasizes that self-care, even in short bursts, can help your mental and emotional health. “Squeeze in a few minutes of listening to music or watching a video. Anything that will bring fun and relaxation to the stressful time,” she says.



“We Lay Ground Rules to Give Our Teens a More Consistent Routine”

Melissa Gunning

STEPMOM OF A 16-YEAR-OLD BOY AND 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ALAMEDA, CALIFORNIA

RAISING TEENAGERS challenges even the most serene parents. With heightened stress from a pandemic, you’ve got fodder for a household explosion that would be visible from space.

Melissa Gunning and her husband, Kevin, who have been working from home with their two teenagers since March, knew the family needed some ground rules. They formalized the transition from sleep to school by instituting a morning walk. They programmed their Google Wi-Fi to shut off at 10 p.m. to keep the kids from staying up all night on their phones. (If your service offers a scheduling feature, it’s usually found in settings.) They also created an online chore chart with a kanban board,

a project management tool, to keep track of tasks required for allowance (such as walking the dog) and optional ones that earn extra money (like washing a load of towels).

With the day-to-day needs of house and health mostly under control, the Gunnings are now wrestling with the psychological effects of living through a pandemic. Both kids have always been self-motivated, but as the months drag on, Melissa and Kevin feel the need to check in on them more. Melissa thinks their son, especially, has suffered the sting of not having the high school experience he expected. “He feels like he’s missing out on a lot,” Melissa says.

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU A study of American high school students last June found that 30 percent were unhappy or depressed due to the pandemic. Help your teens cope by working with them on resilience, says Aliza Pressman, PhD, cofounding director of the Mount Sinai Parenting Center and assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. Validate their feelings of stress, and when you can, encourage them to reframe uncertainty as possibility. Ask your kids to think about the joyful things that have happened during all this time at home that wouldn’t have happened otherwise. Doing so once a day, she says, will help your kids (and you) be more open-minded about uncertainty.

“We Shifted Housework Priorities for a More Peaceful Day”

Erlin Kakknad

MOM OF A 4-YEAR-OLD BOY AND 2-YEAR-OLD BOY, DES MOINES, IOWA

ERLIN KAKKANAD was in a virtual meeting when her 2-year-old came into the room and announced, “Mama, I want to poop.”

That’s the reality of potty training during a pandemic. Erlin has learned to roll with the challenges of parenting and working from home, but only after some trial and error. “In the beginning, it was overwhelming. I started to plan every detail of my family’s lives,” she says. “I started feeling like my health was going down the drain.”

So Erlin sat down with her husband, Joy, to figure out what they could delegate to their teams at work, where they had flexibility in their schedules and to-do lists, and what they could simply let go of. Erlin also keeps a stuffed Mickey

Mouse on her desk as a visual boundary for her sons: If Mickey is sitting up, they’re free to interrupt her. If he’s asleep, she tells them, “We have to be sh-sh-sh quiet.”

A shift in priorities was key, Erlin notes. “We now know that having a clean house is less important than having a peaceful day and satisfied minds.”

MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

On average, mothers spend 65 hours a week doing domestic labor, compared with a father’s 50 hours, per a Boston Consulting Group study. Before the pandemic, it was 35 and 25 hours, respectively. This sharp increase is why Eve Rodsky, author of *Fair Play*, recommends that couples check in with each other once a day. Set a timer for 10 minutes and chat over a glass of wine or dessert. “Start with ‘connection before correction,’” she advises. In other words, ask about the other’s day or point out something that went well before jumping into to-dos. And don’t worry about settling everything in one meeting; you always have tomorrow. “That’s the beauty of this,” Rodsky says. “It’s a practice.” ■



LEFT: COURTESY OF MELISSA GUNNING; THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF MICHELLE LOVELL PHOTOGRAPHY