

Learning at Home with Family Obligations

Setting Expectations

It is important to reflect on the unique needs you have in studying and learning from home so you can clearly communicate with peers and instructors- but also so that you can be clear with your family and your own expectations!

With instructors

Be as specific as possible when communicating your ability to perform academic work and learning with your instructors. You do not need to share the details of your personal life, but it is helpful if you can offer clear suggestions or amendments to your learning that would help you in your role as a student.

For example: a “real time” presentation in the afternoon may be disrupted by my children; would I be able to change my time or offer a written paper instead.

Note: always talk to the Family Care Office and your registrar or academic advisor before following advice of dropping or withdrawing from a course due to family care responsibilities. There are many supports and accommodations that can be made to support your academic progress. Dropping or withdrawing from a course or program should be a last resort.

With family

Where possible, ask for your families support with your studies by being specific around how they can help you in doing your work. For example, if you can get support from older siblings or a co-parent to watch a child for an amount of time per day, ask for it. If it would be helpful for a friend or family member can take on a household responsibility, be specific around what that might be so they can support.

With Peers/ Group work

Group work can be challenging in person but can be even more so if you are working on group work remotely with added family care responsibilities. Some strategies for successful remote group work that will not only help you but also your groupmates are:

- Set a schedule for meetings in advance rather than day to day conversations- this will help you organize your time with any supports you have at home and will also help your group mates organize their time
- Start a group meeting by asking everyone to share their own needs and expectations to work their best in the group- you may be surprised by what responsibilities or needs others have besides family care! All of us work best when we feel our needs are being

met- and you'll be able to define and negotiate your own preferences around meeting times and methods of working together

- Have a clear meeting agenda or objective! Even if a meeting is scheduled, ensure that there is a clear meeting agenda or objective before starting- everyone will be grateful for a productive meeting that has a clear finish time and/or outcome!

With yourself

Remember to be gentle with yourself and do the best you can do within your own unique circumstances. Allow for give and take with your family life and student life- some days you will be an amazing care-giver, other days you'll be an amazing student...and still other days you'll be great at both or neither! Set reasonable expectations of the quantity and quality of work that you can accomplish. It is ok to be frustrated, overwhelmed or upset from time to time. Practice being gentle with yourself around expectations – and ask for help- if things don't according to plan.

Asking for Help

There are many services and supports that can support you and your family's well-being as you enter the role of a student, including:

Family Care Office <http://www.familycare.utoronto.ca>: Our Office supports you by providing confidential guidance, resources, information, referrals, educational programming and advocacy on family issues. Please visit our website at: <https://familycare.utoronto.ca> You can also contact us at family.care@utoronto.ca

My SSP: [My Student Support Program \(My SSP\)](#) provides University of Toronto students with immediate and/or ongoing confidential, 24-hour support for any school, health, or general life concern at no cost to students. You can call or chat with a counsellor directly from your phone whenever, wherever you are for a range of concerns. Students who use My SSP still have access to existing campus and community mental health services.

<https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/cie/myssp>

Setting your home up for success

Prepare, prepare, prepare

Just as you prepare for lecture and class work as a student, prepare for life at home so that you are limiting the number of decisions and distractions that take you away from your learning during the week. Some ideas might be:

- Have a weekly meal plan written down so you don't have to decide what is for breakfast, lunch and dinner- you can also redirect hungry family members to the menu so they don't interrupt your work to ask!
- Break up any chores and household work across the week and create a schedule so you can complete them little by little and if possible assign to any family members that can help
- Set up any toys, activities or materials you need to occupy little ones the night before so you can carve out some time to work while they are engaged
- Set up your desk and materials you need to work the night before you can get started first thing (even during breakfast)! If you don't have a single work space set up, you may want to keep all your items together (in a basket or backpack), so you can easily access them when you're ready to work
- If possible, wake up slightly before your family so you can have a moment to yourself- it doesn't need to be spent working! You can meditate, exercise, have a quiet cup of tea or coffee. Note: this does not apply to parents of children who have disrupted sleep- in this case, sleep as much as you can.

Plan, Plan, Plan- but be flexible

When possible, try to set up a family schedule, especially if caregiving is involved. Here are some ways you can do this:

- Integrate care taking, such as serving lunch, bath time, family dinner etc. into your daily schedule so you can schedule your work, group meetings, and other responsibilities around your family tasks or use these family tasks to your benefit. For example: if lunch time has everyone seated and eating, this might be a good way to get some work done and then eat afterward.
- If you can, “trade-off” childcare between family members so that no one individual is responsible for the entire day. Once scheduled this will give you some moments of “quiet work time” to use for deep work and then when you are on “family care duty”, you can plan to do less focused work.
 - Note: caregivers don't have to be physically present! If family or friends are available (and children are old enough), they can virtually entertain your children- see the list of “Activities for Children below” for some suggestions
- For older more independent children, you may want to create a daily routine for them with independent activities such as “reading time”, “puzzle time”, etc. so they can following their own routine while you execute your plan for the day. Consistency, with a little freedom is key! Older children may also be interested in doing a large daily or

weekly project to work towards (such as putting on a show, or researching a subject of interest) that can turn into a fun family activity to share at the end of the day or week

Getting work done

Regardless of whether your schedule is predictable or not, it is important to have a clear sightline on what you are trying to accomplish so that you can make quickly make decisions on what to tackle when you have a moment.

1. Write down everything you need to do, then write down all the steps each task will require, and then an estimate of how long this task will take. For example: listen to lecture 2 hours, review notes from lecture, research for paper (4 hours), read research (5 hours), etc. This may seem daunting but writing it all down will actually free up the “brain space” and help you prioritize.
2. Organize these tasks in a way that showcases which are most important and need to be prioritized- a weekly or monthly calendar can help you get a sightline for major projects and which steps you need to take each day towards large deadlines.
3. **If your schedule is predictable:** create a weekly plan that allocates time to accomplish your tasks. For example, if need to do “deep writing”, schedule this during nap times, quiet times, after bedtime, etc. and leave “ listening to lecture” or organizing notes to a time that is less quiet but still workable.
4. **If your schedule is not predictable:** try not to create a fixed schedule! Instead look at the detailed task list you’ve created and priorities you’ve established so when you do have a moment of workable time, you can spend it on doing the task rather than deciding which task to do. At the end of each day, reflect on what you accomplished (it’s ok if it was a small amount or nothing!) and reevaluate what top 1-2 tasks you’d want to tackle if you have a quiet moment the day after. If you find yourself only completing 1-2 tasks per day, you may want to consider requesting extensions from your instructors to give you ample time to complete a task.

Caring for Children

There are lots of ways to keep children busy while you work- here are some strategies that fellow U of T parents have suggested:

- Schedule virtual chats with friends or family members to “entertain” and keep kids busy. They may want to:
 - Read a story to kids
 - Conduct a virtual scavenger hunt
 - Sing songs

- Or just chat!
- The Family Care Office has a blog on that topic, which you can access through their website at familycare.utoronto.ca
<http://blogs.studentlife.utoronto.ca/intersections/2020/03/23/working-and-caring-for-kids-while-social-distancing/> .
- Today's Parent, Parents Canada, Toronto 4 Kids are constantly releasing suggestions on their social media about children's activities at home. The YMCA has an online live weekly schedule of family activities.
- Virtual playdates with friends, classmates
- Public resources such as Toronto Public Library (including Dial-a-Story), Early Ontario, Facebook groups, etc.
- Use screen time intentionally at times of day when you need focused time
- YouTube has exercise videos for kids, story time, documentaries, etc.!
- If your young child wants to sit on your lap, tape some wrapping paper/ newspaper to the table in front of your laptop/ keyboard- move it far back so you can reach it but your child can't and then let them colour and draw on the paper on the table. They'll be on your lap, colour, while you type or listen to a lecture!