

# Starting the School Year Off on the Right Foot

Handout

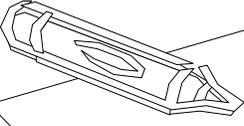
September 30, 2009

Presented By:  
Chris Essex, MA



Sponsored by NIH Child Care Board &  
ORS/Division of Amenities and Transportation Services.





**Starting the School Year Off On the Right Foot**

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**Objectives**

- Understand developmental milestones of your child's age group
- Develop creative communication strategies with your child
- Explore ideas for promoting academic success
- Learn the role of parents in communicating with their child's school and teachers



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**Child Development**

Every child is different.

Know that there are resources for every stage that your child enters.



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## 6 Essential Needs of Children - At Every Stage

- To be loved, valued and encouraged
- To have their physical requirements met
  
- To feel safe and secure
- To have structure, consistency, and predictability
  
- To be children
- To have parents be strong role models



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## Back to School Considerations

- Communication
- Homework
- Routines
- Setting Limits
- Child Care
- Family Activities



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## Back to School Considerations Communication

- Communication is key.
- The most important thing your kids need to know is that they are loved.
- How you communicate with your kids - whether they're toddlers or teens - will deeply influence their level of cooperation, as well as the overall quality of your parent-child relationship.



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## Back to School Considerations Homework

- **Homework - Structure for success**
  - Communicate expectations
  - Set up the space
  - Provide resources
  - and follow up (when appropriate)



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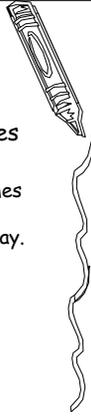
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## Back to School Considerations Routines

- **Routines** - Important to establish routines early and keep them consistent
  - Everyone knows what to expect at various times of the day, and each family member can contribute to the household in a meaningful way.



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## Back to School Considerations Setting Limits

- **Boundaries** - Enforcing rules and setting limits is a necessary part of raising your children.
- **Expectations** - In fact, you actually make it easier for your kids to listen to you and do what you ask of them when you make your expectations very clear from the beginning.



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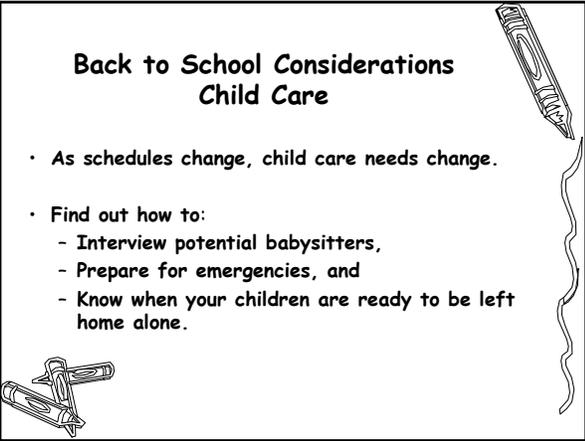
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**Back to School Considerations  
Child Care**

- As schedules change, child care needs change.
- Find out how to:
  - Interview potential babysitters,
  - Prepare for emergencies, and
  - Know when your children are ready to be left home alone.




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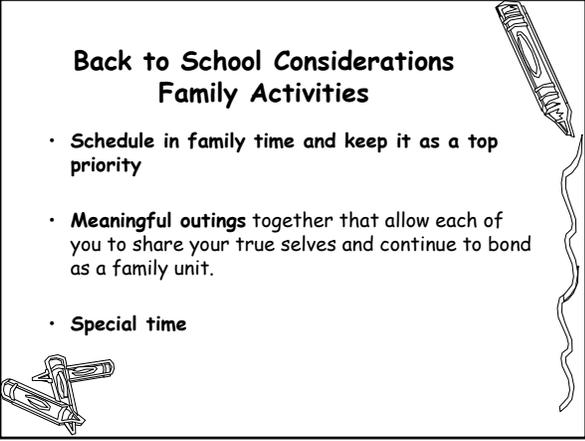
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**Back to School Considerations  
Family Activities**

- Schedule in family time and keep it as a top priority
- Meaningful outings together that allow each of you to share your true selves and continue to bond as a family unit.
- Special time




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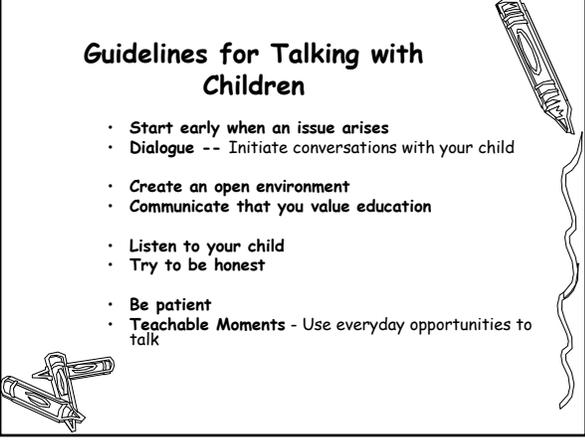
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**Guidelines for Talking with  
Children**

- Start early when an issue arises
- Dialogue -- Initiate conversations with your child
- Create an open environment
- Communicate that you value education
- Listen to your child
- Try to be honest
- Be patient
- Teachable Moments - Use everyday opportunities to talk




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### Guidelines for Talking with Children

- **Start early** when an issue arises
  - Pay attention to:
    - **Body Posture**
    - **Eye Contact**
    - **Speech (The Words)**
    - **Tone Of Voice**





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### Guidelines for Talking with Children

- **Communicate that you value education** by:
  - Enrolling in classes
  - Showing an interest in reading
  - Taking part in study groups
  - Talking about educational issues
  - Paying attention to school matters
  - Showing concern for child's progress
  - Giving time to the school-classroom, PTA/PTO, or library.





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### Communication Techniques

- **Conversation Extenders** - "Tell me about..."
- **Humor** - This is a good way to bring out creativity and not let certain situations escalate into bad feelings.
- **"Seek first to understand, before being understood"**
  - Don't present your ideas/opinions/observations until after you have listened.
- **Write your messages**





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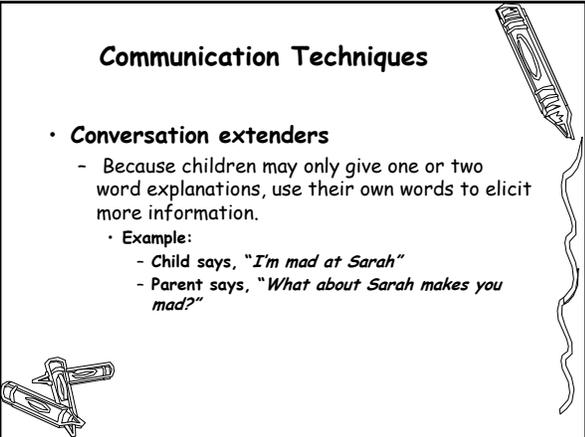
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**Communication Techniques**

- **Conversation extenders**
  - Because children may only give one or two word explanations, use their own words to elicit more information.
  - **Example:**
    - Child says, "I'm mad at Sarah"
    - Parent says, "What about Sarah makes you mad?"



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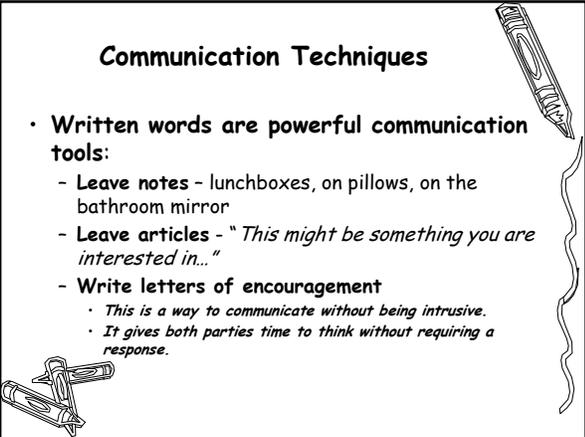
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**Communication Techniques**

- **Written words are powerful communication tools:**
  - **Leave notes** - lunchboxes, on pillows, on the bathroom mirror
  - **Leave articles** - "This might be something you are interested in..."
  - **Write letters of encouragement**
    - This is a way to communicate without being intrusive.
    - It gives both parties time to think without requiring a response.



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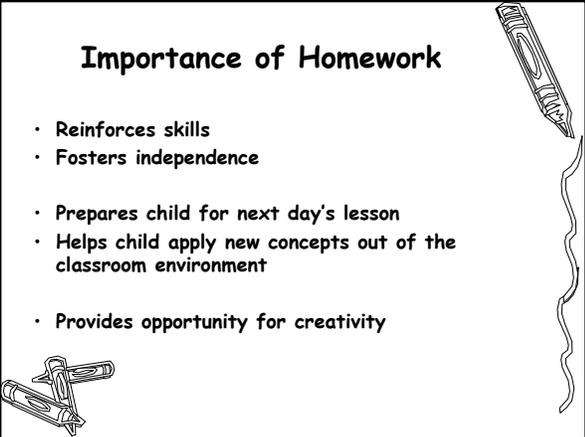
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**Importance of Homework**

- Reinforces skills
- Fosters independence
  
- Prepares child for next day's lesson
- Helps child apply new concepts out of the classroom environment
  
- Provides opportunity for creativity



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## Parent's Role in Homework

- **Make homework a priority;**
  - Communicate to your child the importance of homework.
- **Establish a structure** and a consistent approach for homework.
- **Provide environment conducive to study and learning.**
- **Offer to help your child,** but do not do the work for them.



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## Grades

- **Focus on efforts and improvement.**
- **Talk with child about his/her feelings.**
- **Do not punish child for poor grades.**
- **Avoid offering material rewards.**
- **Focus on solution** rather than problem.
- **Think about whether you are placing undue pressure on child.**
- **Help your child with test anxiety.**



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## When there is a change

- **Emotional**
- **Academic**
- **Physical**

Consider the age..  
**Elementary School**  
**Middle School**  
**High School**



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## Extra-Curricular Activities

- *When is it too much?*



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## Extra-Curricular Activities

- **Key supports:**
  - Routines are important
  - Bedtime
  - Preparing for the next day
  - Morning
  - Healthy breakfasts
  - Extra-curricular activities
- Be realistic about how much your child takes on.



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## Manage your own stress

- **Compartmentalize** - Make a conscious effort to leave work at the workplace
- **Self- Nurture** - Take time for yourself
- **Relax** - Use relaxation techniques to calm yourself
- **Manage Time** - Practice time management
- **Organize** - Develop organizational skills and systems



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### Have reasonable expectations for your child's behavior

- Be familiar with developmental stages
- Match chores to developmental abilities
- Remember that unreasonable expectations can turn into inappropriate behavior
- Reasonable expectations and chores promote responsibility and independence



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### Know Key Contacts

- School telephone number and school secretary name
- PTA president name, telephone number and email address
- School newsletter frequency
- Principal email address
- School Web site URL
- Teacher email addresses and voice mail telephone numbers, if available



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### Communication Strategies With Teachers

- Meet the teacher
- Schedule a meeting with the teacher early in the year
- Go to parent teacher conferences
- Find the right time to talk to the teacher
- Write short notes and follow up
- Follow e-mail etiquette



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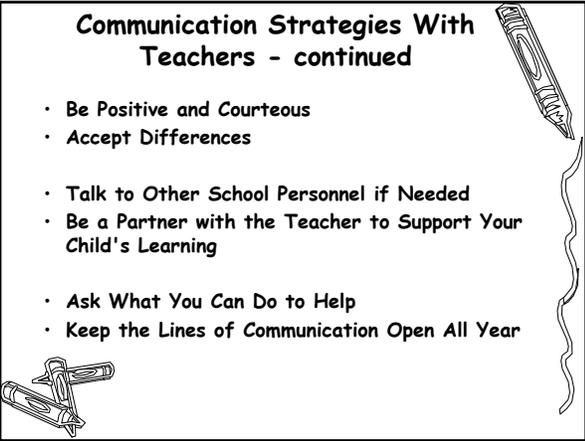
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**Communication Strategies With Teachers - continued**

- Be Positive and Courteous
- Accept Differences
- Talk to Other School Personnel if Needed
- Be a Partner with the Teacher to Support Your Child's Learning
- Ask What You Can Do to Help
- Keep the Lines of Communication Open All Year



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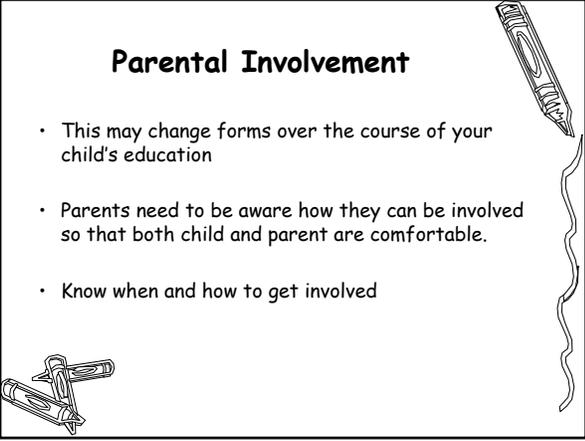
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**Parental Involvement**

- This may change forms over the course of your child's education
- Parents need to be aware how they can be involved so that both child and parent are comfortable.
- Know when and how to get involved



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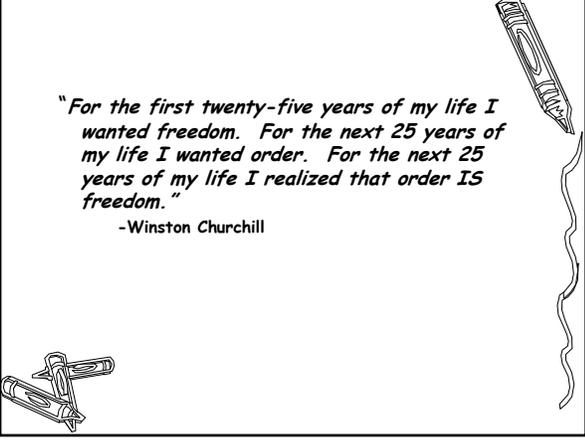
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*"For the first twenty-five years of my life I wanted freedom. For the next 25 years of my life I wanted order. For the next 25 years of my life I realized that order IS freedom."*

-Winston Churchill



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## Summary

- Summary - What is one idea, thought, strategy or concept you are taking with you?
- Of what will you be more mindful as a result of our time together?
- Q and A



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## Thank You

- Please take a moment to complete the evaluation form provided, your input is appreciated.



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# Communication Strategies with Teachers

- Meet the Teacher
  - Go to your child's school open house or meet-the-teacher day.
  - Even though time may be short, a few simple steps can show your interest and support:
    - Introduce yourself and your child.
    - Collect any information the teacher provides.
    - Offer to help by signing up to donate items to the class or to volunteer for other jobs.
  
- Schedule a Meeting with the Teacher Early in the Year
  - If your child is in elementary school or has special needs:
    - Provide information that will help the teacher get to know your child as an individual. Be sure to share relevant information that could affect learning, such as:
      - Health (allergies, diseases),
      - Behavior (tendency to be distracted or behave impulsively),
      - Learning issues (difficulty with vision, hearing, learning disabilities, ADHD),
      - Changes in family life (grandfather moving in with family, parents divorcing)
  
- Expectations -- Ask the teacher about expectations about homework, what to do if there are problems with homework (for example, if she or he has set hours for homework help), and other expectations (such as a big project later in the year).
  
- Find out the best way to contact the teacher.
  - Some teachers like parents to send a note to school with their child, while others prefer a phone call or e-mail.
  
- Bring a notebook or paper so you can take notes.
  - You may want to prepare a summary sheet with your contact information and other important information (for example, the fact that your child is allergic to nuts).
  - Some teachers ask parents for this information.
  
- Upper Grades - Keep in mind that middle and high school teachers typically have many students and usually are not able to schedule a meeting early in the year, unless the child has special needs or there are other concerns.

# Parent Teacher Conferences

- More information about how to get ready and what to ask can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/succeed/part8.html> and <http://www.nea.org/parents/ptconf.html>.
- Make sure that you schedule a conference if:
  - *Your child has special needs, and your teacher needs to know this early in the year.*
  - *Your child's grades drop suddenly.*
  - *You suspect that your child is having difficulty understanding her or his schoolwork.*
  - *Your child is upset about something that happened in school--with peers, or with the teacher.*
  - *Your child does not seem to have any homework.*
  - *Something changes at home that may affect the child's learning (e.g., new baby, parental illness, divorce, or upcoming move).*

## Find the Right Time to Talk to the Teacher:

- If you are at school, you may run into teachers and be tempted to ask about how your child is doing.
  - Ask, first – “*Is this a good time?*” or “*When would be a good time to talk?*”
    - Just before or after school may not be the best times.
  - Public Privacy - If you run into a teacher around town, simply exchange pleasantries.
    - This is not the time for a parent-teacher conference.
- If you want a quick response to a question:  
Send a brief written note or an e-mail message (if allowed) to the teacher with your question clearly stated.
  - Include your phone number and/or e-mail address.
  - Be aware that teachers get many e-mail messages and have many other responsibilities during their day, and may not be able to respond immediately to yours.
  - Be diplomatic.
    - You can't take back an e-mail message, and e-mail can be easily forwarded.
    - Be calm, choose your words carefully, and avoid criticizing the teacher.
    - Don't write and send an e-mail when you are angry.
  - Follow E-mail Etiquette
    - Be brief and stick to the point.
    - Don't include animations, pictures, and graphics.
    - Use upper and lower case, not all caps (that's considered shouting).
    - Stick to school-related matters.
  - Don't forward someone else's e-mail, including a teacher's, unless you have their permission.
  - Be Positive and Courteous - many teachers are overworked and underappreciated.
  - Speaking in positive ways opens up the lines of communication so you can work together to help your child succeed in school.

# Communication Tips

- Open up communication with phrases such as "*Can we talk about...?*"
  - Avoid criticizing and blaming the teacher with comments such as "*You should have...*" or "*You must be mistaken.*"
  - Instead, use "I statements" that present your thoughts or feelings without putting the teacher on the defensive.
    - For example, you might say, "*I'm confused about...*" or, "*I am wondering (or concerned) about...*" instead of "*You weren't clear*" or, "*That project was messed up.*"
- Make respectful requests, such as "*Could you send home the information about...?*"
  - Avoid giving orders to the teacher by saying, "*You have to...*" or "*You need to...*"
- Use kind and polite words.
  - For example, "*Please, could you...*" and "*Thank you for all you did,*" go a long way in building a good relationship.
- Accept Differences
  - Sometimes you may really "click" with a teacher, and other times it may seem a struggle to keep the lines of communication open.
- Listen to the teacher to get a sense of who she or he is.
  - Hear what the teacher has to say about his or her expectations, classroom, and your student.
  - Don't argue with or criticize the teacher in front of your child.
- Don't send e-mail messages written in anger.
- 
- Try to work things out with the teacher before going to the principal.
- If you have conflicts with the teacher, remain calm.
  - Listen, be positive, and talk things out.
  - Sometimes it may be difficult to hear what the teacher has to say.
    - Parents may be defensive or upset if the teacher gives them bad news about how their child is doing in school.
    - Partner and collaborate -- Try to focus on solutions and work with the teacher to come up with solutions and make a plan to help your child learn.
- Sometimes a parent may not be able to work things out with a teacher.
  - In that case, continue to be an advocate for your child by talking to others who may be able to help.
  - The school's guidance counselor or school counselor may be able to intervene or mediate discussions.
  - The vice principal/assistant principal and principal also may be able to help.
- Be a **Partner** with the Teacher to Support Your Child's Learning

## ***Thirty years of research shows that children do better in school when their parents are involved.***

- Some of the most important things you can do are to:
  - *Help with homework as needed and appropriate.*
  - *Help your child learn the skills needed to manage time and stay on task.*
  - *Ask teachers for clarification on instructions and assignments as needed.*
  - *Talk about school matters with your student at home.*
  - *Ask teachers what you can do to help your child at home.*
- At the same time, as your children get older, teachers expect them to be able to take on more responsibility and to function independently.
  - Your child likely will want more and more autonomy as well.
  - Help them build these skills while also continuing to be supportive.
- Ask what you can do to help with classroom activities, presentations or fairs, field trips, or anything you can do at home or just in general.
- If there is something you can do to help your child's teacher, offer to volunteer.
  - Hand the teacher your business card or a note with brief information about what you can do (for example, speaking to a science class about chemistry or tutoring) and how to reach you.
- Keep the Lines of Communication Open All Year, give the teacher your phone number and email address.
- Through positive, respectful, and helpful communication, you can build a good relationship with your child's teacher that will last all year and beyond.
- Send a note of appreciation to the teacher when something goes well in her/his class, and mention this to the principal.
- Check the school and teacher Web sites (if available) to keep up with what is going on, in and out of the classroom.

This seminar was presented by  
**Chris Essex, MA**

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Chris has a Masters Degree in Counseling Psychology and is a mental health counselor, work/life strategist and parenting educator with over 25 years of experience. She is the director of the Center for Work and the Family, and a trainer and consultant on the LifeWork Strategies team.

She develops psycho-educational models and services to support the challenges facing working professionals navigate the combined demands and responsibilities of career and personal/family life. In addition to consulting with corporations, Chris also consults with media. The Center has been featured in the following: CNN, The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, National Public Radio and the Oprah Winfrey Show. Chris was interviewed by the Franklin Covey Company (Stephen Covey) and is featured on Stephen Covey's audiotape, "Balancing Work & Family" (1998).

In addition, Chris was a contributing author to the book, *Having It All Having Enough* (Amacom, 1997, Deborah Lee, Ph.D.). Chris is married and the mother of a college-age son. She resides in Rockville, Maryland.

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