

*Leadership coach
Jamie Woolf
explains why
sometimes the best
thing you can
do to be a better mom
is take a break from
everything—at
least temporarily—and
indulge yourself.*

3 GUILT-FREE HOURS

Carla Jones was anxious and irritable. Maria Riera was consumed by self-doubt. Trudi Roth was flat-out exhausted. And then they did the unthinkable. They dropped everything—kids, husbands, chores, career—to do exactly what they wanted, without an ounce of remorse.

These great escapes were temporary—just three hours—but each of these working moms came back a changed person, a better person. For more than 20 years, I've been helping clients like Carla, Maria and Trudi realize how important it is to recharge. As a leadership coach, one of the first lessons I teach everyone—from executives to religious leaders—is this: To perform your best and inspire the best in others, you need to step back from the pressure and nurture yourself. I've found it's easier to convince dads to do this than moms, who often feel guilty that they aren't giving enough of themselves to their kids. As the mother of two daughters, 12 and 8, I can relate. But once I finally do talk women into taking a mini break, it wakes up the "I need time for me" impulses buried deep in their mommy brains. Whether they're running a company or a carpool, joy is too often displaced by feelings of resentment and pointless drudgery when they don't take a breather. In fact, a recent BizRate survey reflects the burden that many mothers experience: Out of 1,062 moms polled, almost half

(47 percent) said they were the "least happy person in the household." Yikes.

So how do I persuade busy, ambitious moms to take a time-out? By using this introspective quiz that I helped design with Carol Evans, CEO and founder of Working Mother Media. It's intended to help mothers shed their guilt and take three hours all to themselves. Before you unleash excuses as to why *you* couldn't possibly do this, humor me. The quiz takes only 20 minutes, so start thinking about what you'd do.

Some ground rules while you daydream: You can't spend the hours with your spouse or your kids. They must be spent indulgently, selfishly. The rules have a purpose. Given three extra hours, some moms instantly say, "I'd spend them with my kids." But the point of this exercise is to help you come to a connect-the-dots moment in which you realize the delight and joy in your life and reawaken the passion you feel for your work, life and family. Chances are you are not going to get there while playing another round of Candy Land.

Moms who've done my workshop rave about it (see page 42 for testimonials from *Working Mother* readers). But the most gushing reviews come from spouses and kids, who—happier with their rejuvenated partners and moms—have been known to urge them to take this time and again.

By Jamie Woolf



1

You pull double shifts taking care of everyone else, yet you neglect yourself. What drives you to do this? Guilt that you're not spending enough time with your kids? Concern that you're falling behind in your career? List three reasons why you feel you can't slow down.

Now imagine that you *have* to slow down. What would happen?

2

Write down a guilty-mom moment that still makes you cringe.

Now think about whether there were unexpected benefits for your child. For example, your son says, "All my friends' mommies pick them up right after school. Why do I have to go to after-care?" Did he actually enjoy after-care? Make new friends? Try to find something redemptive that came from that moment.

What makes you feel guilty

on a regular basis? Is it Evan's mom doing museum-worthy art projects with her kids while yours make do with a bucket of broken crayons? Is it leaving your sick child with a babysitter instead of being with her yourself?

3

5

List three things you realistically could do to make your life easier at home.

What stops you from doing each of these things?

Now take a hard look at your excuses. No money for help with the housework? Is there something you could cut from your budget to afford help once a month? Choose one of your lamest excuses and find a solution.

4

List the three activities you most dislike doing with your kids. Dread supervising math homework? Resent driving them to karate on Saturday mornings?

Choose one activity that you could stop doing today. (Introduce your spouse to the joys of karate carpool.)

Choose another activity you could get help with. (Could you recruit a high school student as a tutor?)

6

Imagine that all of your responsibilities are on hold for three hours. What would you do with that free time all to yourself?

How would it make you a better mom, partner and employee?

7

Name someone you'd call in a crisis or someone who could help you get back on track if you drift off course.

8

Guess what? You just figured out where you can get three guilt-free hours (see your answers to questions 4 and 5). You've also figured out why you so desperately need this time (see your answer to question 6). Now commit to it. You officially have permission to take three hours off, so get out your calendar and block out the time. To keep you committed, have the person from question 7 sign the bottom of this page. This person is going to hold you to it. Now go. Be guilt-free!

Readers Who Did It

Dorothy Rivera, business manager; Nicolas and Ethan, 5, Ryan, 3, Jack, 10 months

What she thought she'd do with the time: I would love to just read a book in a shady place, undisturbed. No pedicures, no hair salons, no pampering—just a book.

What she actually did: I went to a baby shower. Now, that might not sound like an indulgence, but I didn't have any of my four boys with me, so I actually enjoyed the party. It was so nice not to talk about work or family and just “be” for a little while. I didn't realize how much I missed the joy of socializing.

What was the benefit? I got to remember what it's like to just be me in the world. I felt light—like I had shed five bodies.

Would you do it again? I would and I will. I have to thank you for opening my eyes to the fact that I need time for myself.

Phebe Neely, senior risk manager and CPA; Maria, 3

What she thought she'd do with the time: Go running. I run marathons every year, and finding time for a three-hour run is impossible.

What she actually did: Went on a three-hour run. It made me feel relieved, accomplished, independent, relaxed, patient and peaceful.

What was the benefit? I felt healthy for the first time in a long time. Not to mention how great running makes you look.

Would you do it again? Absolutely! Running for those three hours with no pressure of rushing around made me a happy mom. Happy moms make for happy kids.

Lynne Richer, customer relationship manager; Abigail, 5, Daniel, 3, Nathan, 6 months

What she thought she'd do with the time: I would go on a long, leisurely walk with my iPod. Then I would pick up a good book, plop into my hammock and swing and read.

What she actually did: I sat on the couch and watched TV and ate Chinese food. I was so tired, and it felt beyond good to get the rest and relaxation I so desperately needed.

What was the benefit? When the kids came home, I felt like a better mom. I actually wanted to hear all about their adventures of the day.

Would you do it again? Absolutely. I am going to set a schedule for my mom or sister-in-law to take the kids one night a week so I can focus on me.

Jamie Woolf, a leadership development consultant, cofounded Pinehurst Consulting. She provides workshops and resources to parents through www.theparentleader.com and is working on a book that links leadership to parenting.

Carol Evans is the CEO and founder of Working Mother Media.