

Slower, Simpler, Smarter

This fall, life can be simpler. Three families show how they cut down, cut out and cut themselves loose from the race that never seems to end.

By Terri Perrin

I had been waiting all day for a phone call so I could complete a writing assignment that was already overdue. Then, at the very moment the phone finally rang, my daughter came home from school wanting to chat, the dog started to bark and my son began to pound on his drums.

I floundered through that interview, and as soon as I hung up the phone, I had a meltdown. I screamed at the kids. I yelled at the dog. I slammed the door to my office.

It was an ugly scene, but from it came positive change. My family needed to reduce the time tyranny we were living under. I decided that next year would be different.

The family time crunch is spreading across the country like a viral infection. A recent Statistics Canada study revealed that one-third of 25- to 44-year-olds identify themselves as workaholics and more than half worry that they don't spend enough time with family and friends. Worse still, all but a small percentage feel powerless to lessen their time pressures.

I was at the breaking point, too. I needed to make major changes, and

I found two other families in Calgary who shared my desire for change. Here are our stories.

Loss Inspires Change

On the outside, our lives looked pretty good. I was a freelance writer working from home. My husband, Ron, had a successful career with a computer technology firm based in the United States. Our two kids, Sean, 16, and Carmen, 14, were doing well in school. Our house was paid off.

But below the surface, life was a mess, as my opening scene underscores. Ron hated his job and never being home. I hated that I never seemed to leave the house. The kids hated that I was often preoccupied with work. The kids and I resented that when Ron was home, he was frequently frustrated and angry.

We might have limped along like this for years – even forever – but then, in December 2000, my mother died. Four months later, my sister died. Two months after that, I had a major car accident.

I was devastated and began to question my priorities, and Ron was eager to do the same. We needed to



The author, her husband, Ron, and teens, Sean and Carmen, got a distress plan.

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spend more time together (to be perfectly honest, the stress was also taking its toll on our marriage). And we both wanted to spend more quality time with our kids.

We needed a plan. First we realized that striving to live debt-free doesn't mean stress-free. So, despite what the investment experts advise, we took out a mortgage to free up some investment capital, pay off our line of credit, complete a few renovations and take a family vacation. It's amazing how much easier it is to plan to simplify your life while sitting on a beach in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

Reevaluating our jobs was the next priority. For me, working from home was great when the kids were young, but after 14 years I needed more social contact.

Ron, on the other hand, was hardly ever around. "After working nearly 25 years in computer technology, I had reached a plateau with no future beyond middle management," says Ron. "The travel, long hours and tedious administrative duties were taking their toll." Ron's true passion is cars, so we looked for a car-related business. We found an affordable franchise that matched our criteria: it had no weekend or evening commitments and was environmentally responsible. This past spring we took ownership of the Dent Clinic, a paint-free dent-removal shop. I moved my business to the new office space, and Ron walked away from his high-paying but high-stress job.

Household chores were another area that needed adjusting. When I worked from home it was easier to just



The Thistle family learned how to redefine the word *normal*.

do everything myself than to ask the kids for help. Now we've given them more responsibility for chores, which has freed up time for me. I've also lowered my expectations about how tidy the house needs to be. I've discovered that the kids suffer no ill health if they choose clean clothes from a laundry basket rather than a dresser drawer.

The best part is that now when I'm home, I'm not trying to proofread a story while peeling potatoes or listening to the kids. And Ron is home for supper on a regular basis. "I get a chance to drive the kids to some of their activities, which gives my wife a break and makes me feel more like part of the family," he says.

We're also trying hard to be better listeners and, in doing so, get more in touch with the kids' lives. To keep up with the children's busy schedules, carpooling

with friends helps us maintain our sanity, reduce stress and save money on gas.

Yes, we earn less money, but we've cut down to one phone line, dropped from premium to basic cable TV and made other minor adjustments that have added up to big savings. Most importantly, we now have a new outlook on life – and that's something money can't buy.

A New Perspective

For Lora and Owen Thistle, the trigger for them to reevaluate their busy lives was Lora's cancer diagnosis. Before learning that she had cancer, Lora was a stay-at-home mom with three daughters, aged six, four and three. Owen had a successful career with a high-tech telecommunications company.

Stress Busters

Faced with a stressful situation? Here's how to reduce the pressure.

- Take a hike. A walk in the park gives parents a chance to talk in a relaxed setting and helps kids burn off energy.
- Unplug the TV, computer and home phone. If you can't ignore a ringing phone, turn off the ringer for a specified

time each day.

- Act like an animal. When my dog wakes up from a nap, he stretches and yawns before getting on with things. We should stretch and flex our muscles several times a day, too (but don't bark at the postal worker!).
- Just say no. Is someone asking you to run another bingo night at the school or

arrange another bake sale? You don't have to say no every time, but it's OK to decline an activity once in a while.

- Refuse to excuse. A friend drops in for tea. The first thing out of your mouth is "Excuse my messy house, my bad hair and my gardening clothes." Your friend hasn't come to inspect your home. Put the kettle on and join the ya-ya sisterhood.

- What now? Many people focus on the what-ifs – how their lives would be different if they had made different choices. You can't change the past, but you can make decisions today that will shape your future.
- Laugh out loud. A good laugh is a powerful antidote to stress. Rent a funny video, have lunch with a friend who makes you laugh and feel free to laugh at yourself.

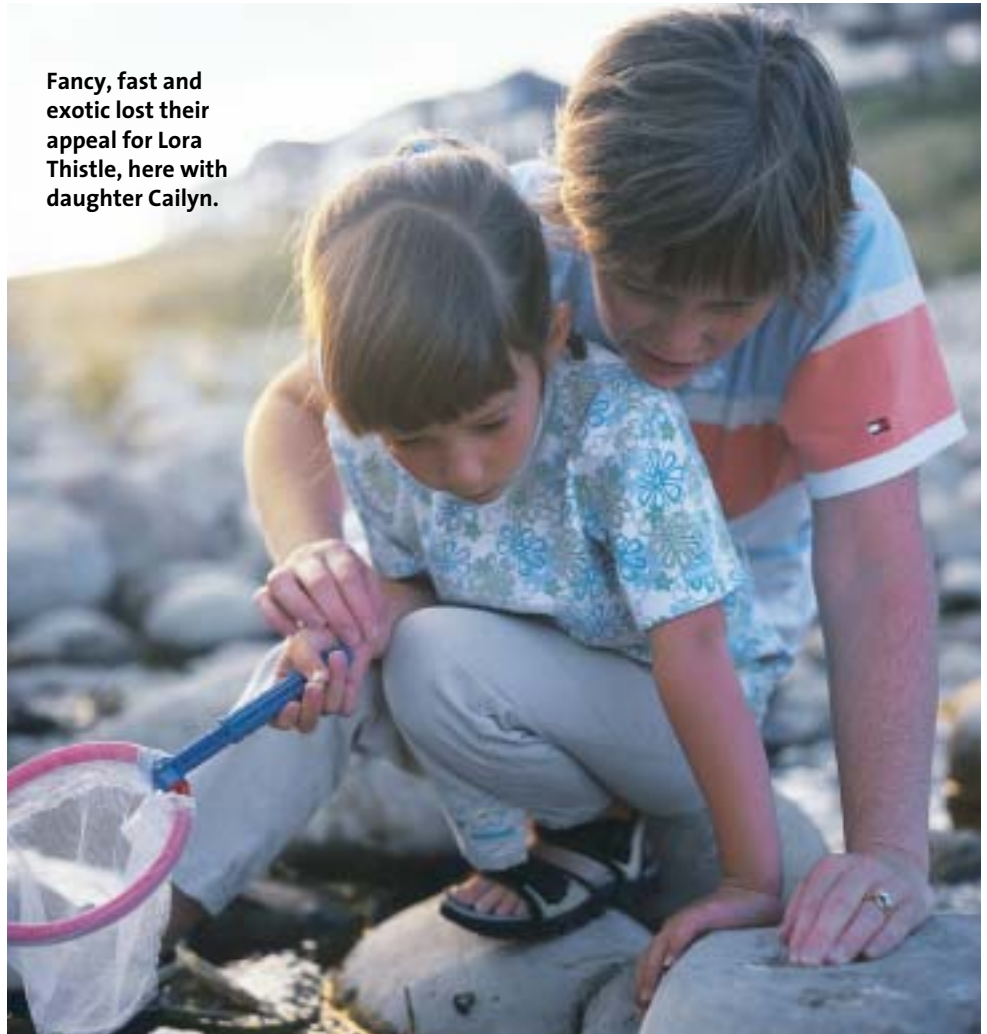
After the shock of the diagnosis, there were months of treatments that disrupted their lives in every way imaginable. “When the treatments ended and it was time to get back to normal, we decided that we wanted to change what *normal* meant to us,” says Owen.

“I planned on staying home until all the kids were in school, which, coincidentally, was just around the time of the cancer diagnosis,” explains Lora. “After a year of treatments and then another year to recover, I had plenty of time to think about what was really important to me. I felt like I had lost two years of my life with my kids and I wanted to spend more time with them to make up for lost time. A fast car and exotic vacations lost their appeal.”

“Before Lora’s cancer diagnosis, *normal* for us meant that we were working to maintain careers and lifestyles, addressing the ever increasing needs of a growing family and trying to achieve a good life,” adds Owen. “Now *normal* means appreciating the here and now, volunteering in the kids’ classrooms, enjoying each other and our friendships, and just pausing to realize that life is good as it is.”

Lora and Owen also decided to make a fresh start at life by building their dream home. “Our starter home was feeling too small,” says Lora. “We wanted separate bedrooms for each of the girls – a space they could call their own. Another important decision was to keep the TV out of the main living room to ensure that no one would have to compete with it for attention.”

Watching the house go up and picking out tiles and paint colours was good therapy for Lora. And when the family moved in, they made a determined effort to slow down. They



Fancy, fast and exotic lost their appeal for Lora Thistle, here with daughter Cailyn.

took their time unpacking and enjoying trips to the park and drives in the country rather than fussing over where to put the good china.

“We concentrate on spending more time together now,” says Lora, “and we recognize that we don’t have to go out and spend \$50 on a movie just to have quality family time. The girls enjoy it just as much – if not more – when we bake cookies, go for a walk or read together. These are the things they’re going to

remember.” Lora and Owen also make sure they have time both as a couple and as individuals. “We are more aware of the value of our marriage,” stresses Lora.

“We’ve also learned to say no to some social commitments and volunteer activities that may add stress,” says Owen. “When we entertain, we keep it simple: the emphasis is on being together with friends and family and having a few laughs – not slaving over a hot stove and cleaning the house.”

Activity Overload?

Kids pick up on stress, and they can also suffer from activity overload, says Jan Gordon, a family therapist for the Alberta Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, which is in Edmonton.

“Kids who are too heavily

programmed often lack motivation to develop their own problem-solving skills,” says Gordon. “We aren’t setting them up to be creative adults if we keep them too busy and structure every moment.” Kids should engage

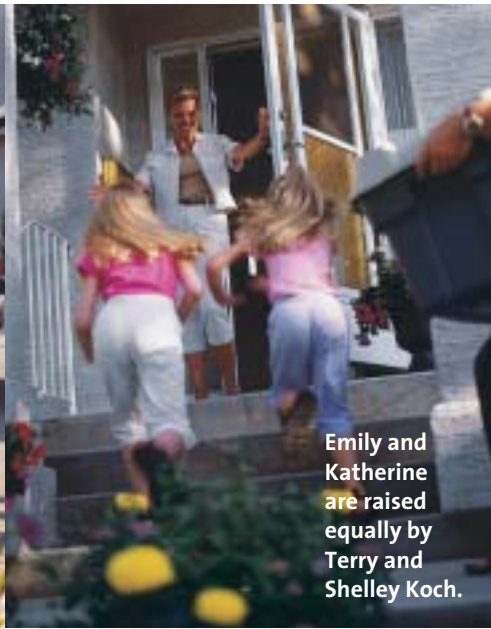
in unstructured, imaginative play without the aid of technology, she adds.

When choosing activities for your children, Gordon suggests you ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this activity a want or a need?
- Can I afford this activity?

- Is my child really interested?
- What is the purpose and what will my child gain from this activity?
- What will I gain?

If you answer all of these questions positively, then go for it. If not, don’t write a cheque. Go back and rethink it.



Emily and Katherine are raised equally by Terry and Shelley Koch.



Owen is fortunate to be able to adjust his work schedule so he can have breakfast with the girls, get them ready for school and walk them to the bus stop. It's the one meal where the girls have their dad all to themselves (Mom makes an effort to stay out of the picture until it's almost time for them to leave the house).

When it comes to homework, meals and hobbies, the Thistles want the family to be together as much as possible. Instead of putting desks, computers or TVs in the kids' rooms, the girls are encouraged to do their schoolwork and crafts in the main living area so their parents can keep in touch and help out.

Lora has also renewed her commitment to Parents and Children Together, a family-support program that

warns parents against overwhelming their kids with so many extracurricular activities that they don't have time to simply be kids. The girls are each allowed one weekday extracurricular activity. After school Lora encourages them to do crafts or play together. "Our daughter Kymber keenly pursues synchronized swimming, but she also loves to rummage through the wastebasket to invent a new craft in her free time," says Lora.

"Once you face cancer, you realize that perspective is everything," adds Owen. "Despite the challenges we've had to face, we have a lot to be thankful for." In fact, the Thistles consider their brush with cancer a blessing in disguise. Now they work hard to remind themselves to spend less time preparing for life and more time living it.

Leading Separate Lives – Together

The time crunch can be a whole lot tougher for families in which the parents are separated. The possibilities for confusion and stress are endless. The book needed for a project gets left at Dad's house. Mom has to work late, but it's her week with the kids. Mom and Dad get their wires crossed and neither one is there to pick up the kids from school.

But when Shelley and Terry Koch separated, they decided that they would do everything possible to ensure that their new living arrangements would help reduce stress – not add to it. And they both wanted an equal role in raising their children, Katherine, 10, and Emily, 8.

The Struggle to Juggle

The time crunch has become a normal part of our lives, according to a 1999 Statistics Canada survey.

- Time-stress levels were highest for 25- to 44-year-olds who were employed full time with children at home.
- In the ongoing "struggle to juggle," 25- to 44-year-old men averaged 48.6 hours of

paid work each week and women averaged 38.8 hours. Men spent an average of 22.8 hours each week on unpaid work – household chores, volunteer activities and parental duties – and women spent 34.4 hours. For both sexes, paid and unpaid work doesn't leave much time for leisure, let alone sleep.

- Canadians want better balance but, at this point, there is more talk than action, says Nora Spinks, president of Work-Life Harmony Enterprises, a consulting firm in Toronto. "This lack of action isn't a sign of low interest," stresses Spinks. "We live in a world where, if you exhaust yourself by working extra, you are valued by your employer and your social status rises.

New technology and globalization has affected our ability to achieve balance in our lives. We've created a culture in which relaxing is viewed as bad because it is nonproductive."

- There's no simple one-size-fits-all solution to reducing stress in your life. "Achieving harmony and balance is different for everyone," says Spinks. "There's no miracle prescription."

They made it clear to the girls what aspects of their lives would change, what might change and what would never change. “I knew from reading about coparenting that helping the girls understand the changes they would be experiencing was vital in helping to reduce their stress,” explains Shelley.

One thing the Kochs did not want to change was where the girls go to school. To make this possible, they sold their

family home and bought separate houses in the same community. The girls live with Shelley one week and Terry the next. From the start they established routines and set rules that applied in both homes. Homework, for example, is always done after school with the babysitter so that evenings are free to spend time with Mom or Dad. To ensure added stability, they have the same after-school caregiver for both homes.

The Kochs work hard to keep the lines of communication open so they can build two residences that their children call home. “Regardless of whose week it is with the girls, Shelley and I ensure they get to where they need to be,” says Terry. “For example, on Monday evenings Emily has Brownies and Katherine has basketball practice, so each of us drives one child to her respective activity. This reduces the hurry and aggravation

The Pelee Project

In the new book *The Pelee Project: One Woman's Escape from Urban Madness* (ECW Press, 2002), author Jane Christmas describes her fast-paced life as a single mother and an editor at the *National Post*. “It didn't seem like I was on a treadmill – that would

have been a luxury!” she wrote. “Instead, it seemed like I was constantly competing in an urban triathlon with no opportunity to relax and enjoy what I had.” Then a near-fatal car accident forced her to take a hard look at herself and the world around her. Christmas

started to ask soul-searching questions: “What was in store for the next 15 years? More of the same? Forget it! I was already tapped out.”

For Christmas, the solution was dramatic. She convinced her employer that a three-month sabbatical on an island in the middle of winter was the answer. Christmas and her 10-year-old daughter, Zoe,

moved to Pelee Island, a community of 180 in the middle of Lake Erie in Ontario, where she not only slowed down but ground to a complete halt.

Through 260 pages of enlightening text, Christmas chronicles her days and life's lessons learned: always listen to your inner spirit and never back away from a personal challenge.

Refuse to excuse: your friend hasn't come to inspect your home, your hair or your gardening clothes.

associated with trying to be in two places at once. For events like basketball games, piano recitals and parent-teacher interviews, we both try to attend the event together, sitting side by side, sometimes even driving together in the same vehicle.”

“And just because it's one of our weeks 'off,' it doesn't mean that we're completely out of the picture,” adds Shelley. “Even though I don't have the children sleeping at my house, I still see them, talk to them and participate in their scheduled activities. But I also use my 'free time' to put in extra hours at work, prepare meals in advance and catch up on housework. Then my 'single-parent weeks' are more relaxed and I can devote more effort to spending quality time with my children – and I know that Terry does the same.”

Recognizing that keeping track of

their children's possessions could cause stress, the Kochs store sports equipment, videos and computer games in a large bin, which moves with the girls each week. This helps avoid the need to duplicate expensive items and ensures that the children have the same favourite items wherever they stay. Shelley and Terry also have keys to each other's homes in case one of the girls forgets something important (Shelley stresses, however, that they never barge in unannounced).

Another major stressor in many divorced families is the ex-extended family. The aunts, uncles and grandparents may inadvertently cause stress by behaving unnaturally around the ex-partner, which is upsetting for the children. This is an area the family needs to work on, but at least they've recognized it as a stressor for the girls and are

trying hard to minimize its impact.

Terry and Shelley believe that the key to successful coparenting is to regularly ask themselves, What is best for the girls? Both admit that the answers require soul-searching and must be based on honesty and integrity rather than selfishness or revenge. They feel that it's every parent's dream and responsibility to raise healthy children who grow up to have happy childhood memories – whether they have two homes or one. ■

Destress Your Family

For destressing tips, visit www.kidshavestresstoo.org. This Web site is full of information for parents and kids on managing family stress and features links to other fact-packed sites.