How do I manage my time effectively?

DECAL Thriving Child Care Business Academy

Learn how to develop time management skills and systems to support your business.

Time management is an essential part of a successful business. Child care providers often have very busy, fast-moving days filled with many different responsibilities, and managing time can often be very difficult under these circumstances. With so many important things to do, it can be very difficult to know how to manage your time! But without proper time management, business owners can lose sight of both long-term goals and the important tasks that need to be addressed for daily operations. Properly utilizing time is critical when stabilizing and growing a child care business. In addition to the business challenges a child care provider can face, the stress that occurs when experiencing difficulties with time management can be severe. Not only can this cause trouble when it comes to managing your business, but it can also be very detrimental to your health and well-being, and as such, the importance of stress management is also crucial.

This guide will focus on time and task management practices to combat the challenges that child care business owners face, wearing many hats and filling many roles each and every day. To help you effectively manage your time and plan your day, this guide will examine the following:

- Why is time management important?
- How can task management help me to better manage my time?
- What are some task management tools and systems that I can use?
- How can I create a task management system that works for me?

Why is time management important?

When looking at all the tasks we need to get done, we might get lost in the details, or our plan of attack could get derailed by new activities. This often stops us from accomplishing as much as we wanted. Unfortunately, once you have problems with task management, your time management problems will only get worse if not addressed. A task management system can help prevent problems from occurring in the first place and can remedy any issues that arise.

The foundation for time management is broken down into two key practices:

1. **Self-Organization**: Use a system to arrange tasks.
2. **Task Management:** This is the process of managing a task through its life cycle. It involves planning, testing, tracking, and reporting. Task management can help individuals achieve goals or can help groups collaborate and share knowledge for the accomplishment of collective goals. Tasks are differentiated by complexity, from low to high, so that the proper amount of time can be spent on each task.

To implement these basic components, there must be an understanding of both why you need task management and how you can develop and sustain a system that works for you.

Beginning with a To-Do List

To begin addressing time management, it is important to create a list of all tasks you need or would like to accomplish over the course of a set time period. This can be daily, weekly, or monthly. One of the easiest places to begin with time management is with a to-do list. When you create your to-do list you will want to write down all tasks that need to be accomplished, both those that are a part of your daily routine and those that you will not be repeating daily. At this stage, you will collect everything that comes to mind that you would like to accomplish in the time period you have decided on. If you have an administrative calendar for your program, it would be useful to consult it as part of this exercise.

To capture all the tasks that you have on your plate, ask yourself the following questions:
- When I think about my business, what are the things that keep me up at night?
- What are the steps that I need to take to keep my business running? Is anything being overlooked?
- Are there tasks that I keep putting on the back burner to focus on more important issues?
- Are there actions that I need to take in order to reach any of the goals that I have for my child care business?

Write your list down or record it in a digital document. In the next steps, you will review your task list and begin organizing them using the Covey Time Management Grid©.

What are some task management tools and systems that I can use?

Once you have a list of tasks you will want to approach them with a task prioritization system. Choose a system that will work best for you.

The Covey Time Management Grid© is an especially effective method of organizing your priorities. It helps to differentiate between activities that are important, those that are urgent, and those activities that might not be necessary. Important activities produce results that are essential to reaching your goals. Managing your time will allow you to meet your goals.

There are several reasons why the Covey Time Management Grid© is a highly recommended time management tool. The process of listing and organizing your tasks using the grid:

- Is a simple and effective way to categorize your tasks (even if just conceptually);
- Allows you to address everything;
- Helps you to identify tasks that can be deferred; and
- Shows you when tasks cannot be deferred and attention must be paid.

The following chart shows how to set up the Covey Time Management Grid©:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Quadrant 1: **Urgent and Important**	Quadrant 2: **Not Urgent and Important**
Not Important	Quadrant 3: **Urgent and Not Important**	Quadrant 4: **Not Urgent and Not Important**

Defining Covey's Quadrants

You can separate each task that you have on your to-do list into Covey's four quadrants by asking yourself two questions about each task: 1) Is this task urgent? 2) Is this task important?

- **Quadrant 1** consists of those tasks which have immediate and important deadlines. An example of Quadrant 1 tasks would be paying your mortgage if the due date is near. Another example could be repairing an unsafe part of your building.

- **Quadrant 2** tasks require long-term strategizing and development. A business plan for next year would be an example of a Quadrant 2 task. Another example would be creating your employees' schedules for the following month.

- **Quadrant 3** tasks can appear urgent but are not important; they are time-pressured distractions. A Quadrant 3 task could be taking or making an unimportant phone call that is an interruption to your day and does not result in positive results that move Quadrant 1 and 2 tasks forward.

- **Quadrant 4** tasks offer little value. They are not urgent and not important. Quadrant 4 tasks could be scrolling through past business social media posts or organizing craft materials for children in your care.

Applying the Quadrants to Your Task List

With your new understanding of the Quadrants, you will next assign each of your tasks to the corresponding Quadrant. To begin, ask yourself if each task is important and/or urgent, and write the number of the corresponding Quadrant next to that task. Make sure that you are honest with yourself when you come across tasks that you most enjoy doing as well as those that you do not enjoy doing.

Once you have determined which of your tasks should be assigned to each quadrant, you can plan your approach to completing the tasks at hand. Approach each Quadrant in order, beginning with Quadrant 1 and finishing with Quadrant 4. If there are tasks that remain at the end of your day, add those to your to-do list for the next day and approach using the same principles you used initially to assign each task to a Quadrant. As you flow from task to task you will save time by not having to think of what to do next, as you already have a plan in order of priority. It may also help you identify which task must be done by you and which could be delegated to a trusted staff member.

Time Chunking

Another useful tool is known as "time chunking." "Time chunking" is the process of evaluating similar tasks in Quadrants 1 and 2 that can be accomplished together to help you save time. Often, tasks that have some overlap can be done in chunks together, which allows you to remain focused on similar topics and ultimately saves you time. Tasks such as paying bills, reviewing bank transactions, or filling out forms online for a loan can all be accomplished within one block of time since these tasks will most likely require the use of your online banking resources. Meal planning should be done in conjunction with grocery lists.

You can assign a block of time to concentrate on all tasks associated with scheduling and payroll. You can also save yourself time by accomplishing similar tasks that need to be addressed in the same physical area of your facility within one block of time. If you have several tasks that involve working in the food preparation area, conduct all those

tasks within a defined block of time. Look around your workspace and determine what tasks can be addressed in the same physical space and completed in a logical order to what you would like to accomplish.

Time Blocking and Reducing Distractions

Sometimes, blocking off portions of your day or week to dedicate to specific tasks can actually be a huge time saver. Bouncing from topic to topic and task to task requires time to transition – and those transitions can add up. Eliminating some of these transitions can help you gain some much-needed time back into your daily life that could be better spent on other things.

Similarly, find ways to reduce distractions during these blocks of focus time. Write the time on your calendar or daily planner just as you would any other appointment or meeting. Try to schedule blocks of time during slower periods of the day, such as naptime or after pickup. Be realistic with the amount of time you can actually take (15-20 minutes vs. 2-3 hours). If possible, ask a staff member for support. Sometimes distractions are unavoidable. In those cases, make a note of where you left off and begin there next time.

Transitioning from paying bills to answering a phone call can take just as much time as transitioning from one task to another, so silencing your phone, closing your office door, and avoiding checking your messages for a short period of time can help you save time in the long run. If you are a home-based provider or sole owner who must be available at all times during the workday, try to prioritize tasks that require the most mental energy (such as managing your business finances) for a time when you *can* disconnect, such as the early morning or evening.

Worrying and Impacts on Productivity

There are two main issues caused by allowing ourselves to worry about things that are either beyond our control or cannot be solved in the current moment: 1) backburner task pile-ups and 2) mental burnout.

By our nature, we tend to worry about what is Urgent and Important (Quadrant 1 = putting out fires). Unfortunately, that means that we may never get to the other activities (especially Quadrant 2). Even though they are Not Urgent, the activities in Quadrant 2 are Important, and not addressing these Important, Not Urgent tasks can be problematic.

The tendency to procrastinate when tasks do not appear urgent is a problem that many people face. It is essential that the deadline for Quadrant 2 tasks be determined and that Quadrant 2 tasks be addressed as seriously as Quadrant 1 tasks. Additionally, as we continue to focus on Quadrant 1, we end up with a traffic jam of tasks piling up in our

other Quadrants, which can be overwhelming and require large amounts of time to sort out.

When it comes to less important tasks, try setting aside time each week or month to clear your to-do list in specific Quadrants. Minimize distractions, block the time, and get everything done and off your plate. Think of this like a "deep clean" like you would do in your home: it seems time-consuming when you do it, but the deep clean ultimately helps you to be more efficient and feel less overwhelmed.

The other issue is mental burnout. When we hold tasks in our minds, we tend to stew about them and fixate on them, which does little to solve the problem. When we are doing this, it is a good idea to start by asking yourself, "Is there anything that can be done about this right now?" If there is, take care of it! As simple as that sounds, the impact can be quite noticeable. Think of the approach as ripping off a band-aid. Get it over and done with and then there is no need to worry. You also can check an item off your to-do list, which feels great. If you can't do anything about the task right now, write it down. Keep a log of to-do lists and put a due date on it when you will need to pay attention to it again. You can set an alarm if you need to, but the most important thing is to get the worry out of your head and onto a piece of paper or task management tool that will keep track of it for you. This will help you manage your stress levels and further reduce distractions, allowing you to focus on your other work, your personal life, and yourself.

How can I create a task management system that works for me?

You can prioritize tasks using *Covey's Four Quadrants* and determine which quadrant each task belongs to. The next step would be to break down your schedule for each day. Start your day with everything that can be done in under five minutes. This allows you to quickly get some items checked off and saves you time. Look for tasks that can be blocked together (time chunking). Proceed to other tasks based on importance using quadrants. When thinking about your day consider your natural tendencies. An example of considering your natural tendencies is that if you know you are most productive before noon, it might be best to assign yourself tasks in Quadrant 1 at that time, as they are urgent and important.

One additional point you do not want to overlook is that you cannot divide your personal and professional lives 100%. They are part of the same life. Often both professional and personal tasks belong on the same to-do list, just broken down in order of importance and the time frame in which they need to be accomplished.

Task Management Tools

Task management tools can be of great help by saving time and helping to coordinate your schedule. Be sure that these tools are useful and not a distraction. They must be

easy to implement and fit with your system. By trial and error, you will find that many tools can work well for you. Don't feel discouraged if the first tool you try doesn't feel like a good fit for your work style. Some tools suggestions are:

- Paper planners and notebooks;
- Free apps that can be found with a Google search;
- Apps with subscription costs may offer more features and customization; and
- Phone and calendar reminders.

Final Thoughts

Time management is a skill that must be learned. For many people, it does not come naturally. It is important to remember the following:

- Having a system, and sticking to it, is crucial. Don't let yourself get lost in details or derailed by distractions!
- Creating a combined system might be most practical and easy to implement.
- Recall Covey's principles of urgency and importance. Is the task urgent? Is it important? Regardless of which task management system(s), you choose, consider urgency and importance in prioritizing your to-do list.
- Use "time chunking". Group tasks that overlap together so that you can be more efficient as you accomplish both in sequence.
- Address tasks you are worried about head-on: If you feel concerned about a group of non-urgent, less important tasks that you haven't had the time to address, set aside a block of time just to complete those tasks. This "deep clean" of your to-do list could relieve mental energy and make you more efficient in other tasks.
- Remember to intentionally take time away from activities that lessen your focus, like emails, texts, calls, and social media.

    o As you are able, silence notifications from programs, apps, and your phone when you are working.
    o Schedule intentional "quiet times" during which your only focus is to accomplish tasks on your list.
- Constantly refine and evolve to adapt to changing tasks. It is alright if one system works for you now and does not work for your business needs in the future!

Additional Resources

If you have questions or need help, assistance is available.

GaPDS Website

DECAL Thriving Child Care Business Academy Website

Georgia Licensing Rules and Regulations

To Find Other Study Guides: Click on Resources on the Academy home page

To Find Training: Click on Trainings on the Academy home page

To Register for Training: Click on Schedules & Registration on the Academy home page

To Sign Up for Study Groups: Fill out the Intake Assessment

For questions about coaching or study groups: Email GAcoaching@civstrat.com

To Find Other ECE Resources: Visit the DECAL Website

For General Questions about the Academy: Email thriving@decal.ga.gov

For More Information:

Family Child Care Learning Home Rules and Regulations

Child Care Learning Center Rules and Regulations