

Say yes to yourself

Moms need to carve out personal time in a pressure-filled day.

Contrary to what many women think, scheduling time for yourself does not short-change your family.

BY CAROL KRUCOFF

back in my life B.C.—before children—I took a karate course that culminated in my breaking a board with a side kick. For a petite woman who had never even made a fist before enrolling in martial arts, shattering that solid piece of wood with my bare heel gave me a heady sensation of power and a glimpse into an exciting arena of personal growth. But when the children came, time constraints made it tough for me to continue training, so I gave it up for 15 years.

Then one day last year, my 6-year-old daughter announced that she wanted to take karate like her older brother. When I discovered that a family membership cost the same as paying for two kids, I considered signing up myself but was worried that I didn't have the time. The instructor assured me that parents often took classes with their children—a more appealing prospect than watching from the sidelines.

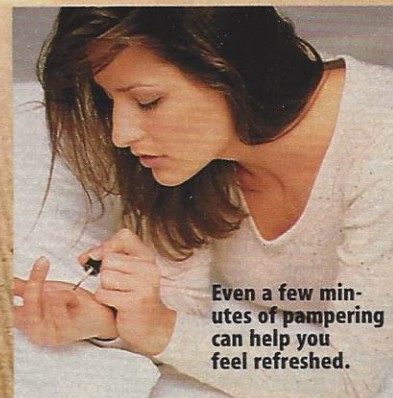
Karate soon became so important to me that I rearranged my schedule to train during the morning with other adults—mostly women, with a handful of men. The rewards are many, but the biggest two I've experienced are the confidence boost from learning self-defense skills and the wonderful camaraderie of my classmates, all of whom are on the path toward acquiring a black belt.

I have also been amazed to discover how useful karate principles have proved to be in my personal life. For example, martial arts teach you to harness your “chi”—or life force—to get the

results you want. After a few months of practicing karate with this attitude of calm determination, I realized how often I'd been using a hesitant, apologetic tone when asking my children to do things. No wonder they wouldn't listen. Now before I round them up for homework, bedtime, or another unpopular task, I focus my chi by taking a deep, centering breath. My tone is positive and confident, and it works.

I've come to think of myself as a sort of “ninja mom” and to guard those three hours a week of class time as though my life depended on them—because it does. After years of falling into the female trap of thinking that time, money, or energy spent on myself means I'm neglecting my family, I've finally realized that nurturing myself makes me better at nurturing others.

While karate does the trick for me, it's yoga that centers my sister Lynn, who



Even a few minutes of pampering can help you feel refreshed.

has three young children, and gardening that refreshes my friend Ippy, whose 7-year-old son has the nonstop energy of a basket of puppies. When I asked other busy mothers from around the country how they replenish themselves, they revealed an impressive array of strategies for carving out some private time.

"I take a mini retreat every six weeks or so by spending a Saturday afternoon at the beauty salon getting my hair, nails, and feet done," says Mary Sullivan, a Chicago social worker who has a 2-year-old son. "I make it a luxurious ritual by getting myself a cup of really good coffee and bringing along a book to read." Then, when she's back in her hurried routine, Mary says, "I can always look down at my toes and think, 'Well, at least that part of me is together.'"

Janet Kane used to dislike rushing home from work to drive her children to their activities. But then she got inspired to bring along some relaxation tapes that she occasionally uses in her job as chair of the psychology department at Immaculata College, in suburban Philadelphia. Now

when she drops her son off at sports practice, she often remains in the car and slips on a pair of headphones. "The tapes help me shift gears," she explains. "By the time my son is finished practicing, I feel rested and I'm in a much better frame of mind."

Jane Trevithick, a single mom who manages a biology lab at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, found she could tune out the world by plugging in one of her son's computer games. "Playing 10 or 15 minutes of Super Tetris clears my mind," she reports.

Finding what works for you is key

Social worker Cynthia Whitham often makes use of the early-morning hours. "I get up at five-thirty so I have time to take a bath and put myself together before everyone else wakes up at six," she says. "Then I'm ready to focus on helping my children with their morning."

In the Parent Training Program that she conducts at the University of California at Los Angeles, Cynthia recommends easing the "predinner pressure." One way she does this is by having healthy snacks—like

carrot sticks or fruit and cheese—readily available when the family gets home. "This helps when everyone comes roaring in, starving, at six," she explains. "We let the answering machine deal with the phone, and we all sit down and talk for 15 minutes prior to eating."

Belonging to a book club gives Amy Farley two important rewards: the pleasure of monthly meetings and the opportunity to read at least one book each month. "Reading has always been my favorite

For moms only

"Brief escapes from children and husbands can be a lifesaver for women, because our needs always seem to come last," says Kim Bruno, the publicity director for Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge (FEMALE), a support group for mothers who have taken breaks from their careers. Begun in 1987 by a

postal carrier who felt isolated after quitting her job, FEMALE now has more than 2,700 members and 120 chapters in nearly 30 states.

"We meet twice a month in the evenings, without children, and usually have a speaker or a discussion," says Bruno. Topics range from self-esteem to self-defense, from financial planning to

nutrition. **"The idea is to focus on the whole woman, not just the mother part,"** adds Bruno. "It all depends on the members' interests. Basically, it's a chance for moms to get together with friends and have a night to themselves." For information on a group near you, send a stamped, self-addressed business-size envelope to FEMALE, P.O. Box 31, Elmhurst, IL 60126, or call 708-941-3553.

escape," says Amy, a stockbroker in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. "The book club helps me to make it a priority."

Since reading at home can be difficult with two young children around, Amy sometimes leaves her husband in charge and takes refuge at a nearby mall parking lot. "It's one of the few places where I can't be reached," she says. "I found that the supermarket lot was too busy. People were always knocking on the window to see if I was planning to pull out. But if I park in one of the distant spaces at the mall, no one bothers me."

Even a catnap can help reenergize you

A favorite survival strategy of Linda Goodman Pillsbury is to take a 90-minute nap on Saturday afternoons. "My 7- and 10-year-olds know that short of an emergency, they have to occupy themselves quietly during that time," says this mother from Pasadena, California, who is the publisher of *Survival Tips for Working Moms* (Perspective). "When you set boundaries of private time for yourself, children learn to respect them."

Kelly Martin learned the importance of taking time out for herself only after her blood pressure climbed so high that her husband became alarmed and signed

her up for a four-day running camp. "I'd been a competitive runner in college, but I forgot that part of myself after I became a mother," says Kelly, an occupational therapist in Littleton, Colorado, who has two young children. "At first I was reluctant to go to the camp because I was still nursing, and I feared being separated from my kids." But she decided to go. She pumped and froze breast milk for her baby, and found that running was exactly what she needed. "My blood pressure's down," she says. "Running has helped me feel better inside and out. It's good for my family, too, because I'm much more relaxed."

After leaving her job to care for her two children, Kim Bruno realized that she missed the camaraderie she had experienced at work. So she started a chapter of Formerly Employed Mothers at the Leading Edge (FEMALE), which enabled her to get together with other mothers in her situation (see above). "It's great to have one night to talk about me, not about my children," says Kim, of Collegeville, Pennsylvania. "If I don't take some time out to focus on myself, it's way too easy to forget who I really am." □

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