



THE FAMILY THAT SKYPES TOGETHER

Body Doubling by Skype

by Leah Martinez

MY HUSBAND AND I SPENT LAST WEEKEND with our 25-year-old son, Sebastian, in our home. Sebastian had a ten-page paper that was due on Wednesday. My husband Adrian, an artist, was working on a beautiful still life. I was paying bills and writing a blog entry for our website. This is a pretty ordinary weekend for us. The only thing out of the ordinary is that Sebastian lives over five hundred miles away. A computer, an internet connection, and Skype can make that distance insignificant.

Sebastian has ADHD (primarily inattentive) and is working on his doctorate in philosophy. He loves what he is doing, but knows he has chosen a path that forces him to manage his time effectively and deal with long, difficult projects. He was diagnosed after his first year in college almost became his last. Since then, he has done a terrific job of educating himself about his disability. He has learned that in order to start a paper in advance and to stay on task, it really helps to have

someone else around. I recently found out that this is called having a “body double.”

During the week, Sebastian attends class, works as a teaching assistant, and spends time in the office space he shares with his fellow graduate students. In this environment, he has very little difficulty in getting his work done. However, graduate school has more than a forty-hour work week and he lives alone, so weekends can be a challenge.

How it works for us

Skype is an amazing tool that is tailor made for the job of being a body double. You can hang out with someone in the comfort of your own home, and if you have a computer and a working internet connection, it is free! This kind of body doubling works particularly well with Sebastian. It allows us to have visual as well as audio contact, it is hands-free, and it is conveniently located on the very device that Sebastian uses to do the majority of his work.

Some of our Skype sessions are what you might expect between parents and child: We talk about our lives, have great philosophical discussions, and make plans for his next trip home. Some sessions are just body doubling, and those often involve small moments of conversation mixed with many hours of silence. These sessions can be marathons that last anywhere from two to eight hours.

So, how can you spend eight hours on Skype?

First, you have to have a plan. Sebastian always sets the time based on his schedule and needs, and once we know when he wants to start work, Adrian and I can figure out our availability. On Saturday mornings, I usually have some computer work. So as Sebastian prepares to begin his work and I get ready to open up Quicken (or some equally exciting piece of software), we call each other on Skype.

Sebastian's work day will involve reading, writing, thinking, or grading papers, and he does all of this at his desk. After an hour or two of computer work, however, I might want to move on to something else. If you have a laptop, Skype can go with you all over the house. If I need to be in the kitchen, I set up the laptop in there, or I simply leave the computer in my office on and go vacuum, put a load of laundry in the washing machine, or clean the closet.

Sebastian just needs the structure, not my constant presence, and I peek in every once in a while to make sure all is well. If I have to run errands away from the house, Adrian takes over because he usually has emails, writing, or research to do. If Adrian has a painting day, we put the laptop in the studio and Adrian paints while Sebastian writes. If one of them needs to take a break, they just leave to fix a meal, go to the restroom, or take a phone call.

No need to disconnect

The beauty of Skype is that you never really have to disconnect. If noise is a problem (Adrian often listens to music), he can mute the microphone. When mid-terms or finals are close, they can Skype in Adrian's studio during weekdays or weeknights as well.

One Saturday, after Skyping in the morning, Adrian and I had a short function to attend, and Sebastian was in the zone with his writing. So, we left the house and were gone for a few hours while Sebastian typed away with only the cats

to keep watch. It was quite wonderful to come back home and be greeted by our son. Apparently, the cats had behaved themselves.

If all I want to do on the weekend is rest and read a good book, I will happily curl up in a comfortable chair, look at my son's wonderful face, and feel only slightly guilty that he is working so hard and I am drinking a glass of red wine. A few times, when Sebastian was on a deadline and worked late, Adrian and I watched television while Sebastian typed away. The laptop was pointed at our faces (glowing in the light of the flat screen) and, of course, we put the microphone on mute.

Sebastian also uses our Skype sessions as a motivational tool to keep his apartment clean(ish). If he is talking about his plans for the day and mentions that he wants to clean his kitchen, his bathroom or do laundry, I give him the "how bad is it" check. If he is unwilling to point the camera at the mess, he knows that dealing with it should probably be prioritized.

It works both ways

Since I also have ADHD, the body doubling works both ways. I did my taxes early this year (the week before mid-term papers were due) because I didn't have to face the task alone.

Using Skype to body double could work with any friend or a relative, and you don't have to be five hundred miles away. You could Skype with a friend down the block if you both needed to get some work done and really needed to stay in your bathrobes.

Skyping with your child with ADHD is rewarding in so many ways. I think that Sebastian is well aware of the fact the he is giving his parents the gift of allowing us to help. He is still setting the agenda, doing his own work (we cannot do his laundry over Skype, which he admits makes him a little sad), keeping his independence, and living his life. But we get to keep in touch, be useful, and, most importantly, feel connected as a family. 🍷

Leah Martinez is a judicial administrator and parent who has been educating herself about ADHD since she and her son were diagnosed six years ago. Thanks to the resources available through CHADD, her own experiences growing up with undiagnosed ADHD, and a working knowledge of technology, she has been able to supply her son with some practical support as he moves through academia. Leah also acts as website designer and manager for her husband, artist Adrian Martinez.

