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Creative Solutions FOR WORKING PARENTS

Andrea Mynard finds that flexibility and a little planning can enable a good work/life balance

COMBINING BEING THERE for our children and having a successful working life can be tricky. The debate continues as to whether it's possible to excel in one without sacrificing the other. All interwoven with plenty of guilt of course; guilt about neglecting your children if you work full-time, guilt about not providing for your family if you stay at home. Having worked on a freelance basis since my daughter was a baby, a major motivation was a desire to give my daughter the sort of carefree childhood I enjoyed myself.

I started thinking about this article as I sat in traffic on a Monday afternoon. I desperately wanted to have some time with my six year old daughter, Ruby, before bedtime. The new work I'd taken on was eating into precious playtime and I started to question why I was doing it. That afternoon, I got home just before bath-time and Ruby had been having a great time with her grandparents. She was settled and happy. Meanwhile, I was grateful to be at home the rest of the week, even if it meant working like crazy after she'd gone to bed.

Many other parents are finding that working on a freelance basis or starting their own business can give them the flexibility they need. The term 'mumpreneur' has been used a lot, but I was interested

'IT'S A REALLY GOOD IDEA TO DO AS MUCH RESEARCH AND PREPARATION AS YOU CAN BEFORE LAUNCHING A BUSINESS FROM HOME'

in how Dads too are thinking creatively about their working life. With this in mind I interviewed several inspiring parents to find out how they'd developed their own business or ways of working that enabled them to bring up their kids while earning a living.

SELF FULFILLMENT

Liz Knight, a mum of three children under the age of six, who runs Forage Fine Foods from her Herefordshire/Welsh borders cottage manages by setting herself a personal development plan: 'When your work is in your own home lots of things are compromised,' she begins. 'It's important to step back and consider "What do I need to achieve to make me fulfilled?" Look at every aspect and think about how you can make that happen. Personal development can often get overlooked in your own business.'

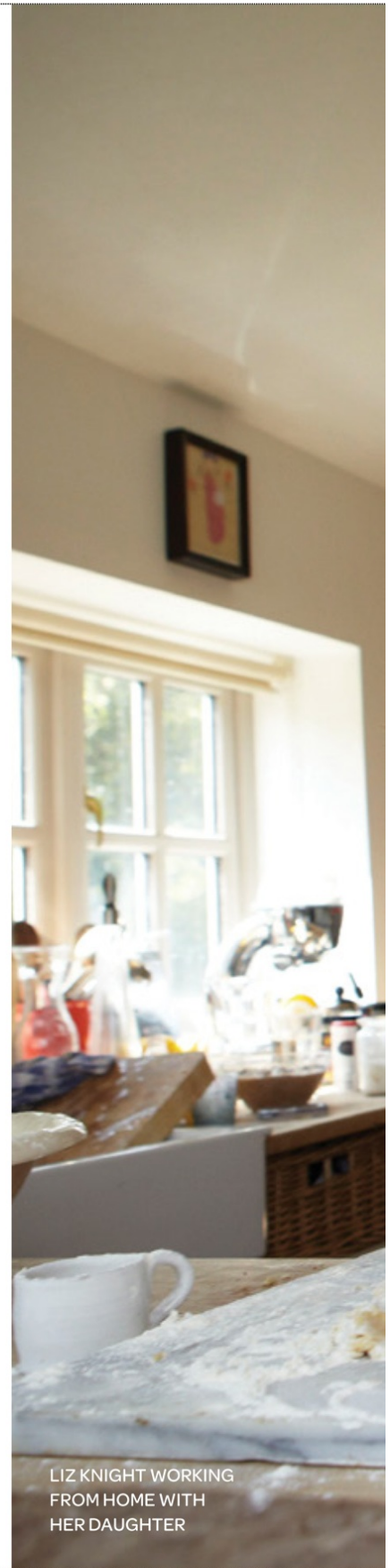
Somehow Liz manages not only to find the time to forage for delicious wild produce on the hills around her home, but

to turn it into concoctions, such as wild herb rub, which she sells at farm-shops, delis and even Fortnum & Mason. Her cottage industry generates work for other mums in her remote rural area too and she loves getting local pre-school and school children more interested in their local countryside through foraging expeditions.

An important aim for Liz is to help make older people in her community less invisible and bring young and old together. Pop-up wild food feasts in her village involve the younger generation foraging and then cooking with older people – who often have traditional recipes to share.

On a practical note, Liz points out that it's a really good idea to do as much research and preparation as you can before launching a business from home: 'Whether it's getting systems in place, researching your market properly or getting labels right, do it before you launch – there won't be time later.'

Expectations of what you can achieve need to be realistic too – to fit in around family life and factoring in those inevitable illnesses and downtime. As Liz says, 'The parent who works from home is always the one whose work stops because children are ill. Work out your plan for how you cope with this.' >



LIZ KNIGHT WORKING FROM HOME WITH HER DAUGHTER





SOFIA DYSON
AND HER TWO
DAUGHTERS

INSPIRED BY KIDS

Sofia Dyson, an Oxford graduate who worked in engineering for years before having children, gained inspiration from her daughters for a business which enables her to work at home and enjoy the school holidays. Wanting to make pretty, comfy dresses for Matilda and Alice that would be robust enough for outdoor adventures and lots of tree climbing, Sofia began sourcing gorgeous textiles. She created Bread and Jam with her best friend from university, Lisa Swerling, producing simple, retro style dresses.

Like many businesses set up by parents, Bread and Jam started as a hobby. Sofia had decided that her career in engineering didn't fit in with family life, partly prompted by a poignant moment one morning. 'Work was beginning to seem less important than it had been,' she says. 'One morning my daughter was sitting on the stairs looking at her shoelaces. We were all rushing around, she was fiddling with her laces and I found myself getting totally impatient with her. Then driving to work I thought this is wrong – she should have time to gaze at things and work it all out. I am always rushing her.'

My least favourite time is

'AS LONG AS I HAVE THE WINTER COLLECTION PLANNED, I CAN PRETTY MUCH TAKE THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS OFF'

weekday mornings when I nag about teeth brushing/eating breakfast/putting shoes on, doing coats up and I rush to get us ready on time, so I can sympathise with Sofia's story.

Sofia took a sabbatical, enjoyed being at home with her family and shortly after set up her own business. She now has a loyal following of parents and grandparents and fits in work during school hours, sometimes in the evening. Matilda, ten, and Alice, nine, love getting involved too, often having a say in the final selection of fabrics for each collection. Luckily the busy times fit in well with term times: 'I work from 9am to 3pm every day and every evening leading up to a new collection, then there'll be a lull,' explains Sofia. 'As long as I already have the winter collection planned, I can pretty much take the summer holidays off.'

Clearly happy with her family/work balance Sofia admits that the only downside to running your own business is getting used to the lack of recognition: 'In my engineering job I was rewarded financially and verbally. But working for myself, I still miss that recog-

niton and the stimulation of working with others. However good a job you do as a parent, you'll never get an appraisal!'

TIME FOR YOU

Factor some time for yourself; if you're self-employed the temptation is to work every minute you're not with your children, and to work long hours in the evening too. But attending a yoga class or going for a walk after school drop-off is important – to work hard and enjoy family life you need to be resilient, so time for yourself is vital for your health as well as sanity.

To make it work, a shared commitment to parental and domestic duties is essential. For poet David Raeburn and freelance vegetarian food photographer, Chava Eichner, childcare of their two boys Alex, four, and Sam, seven, has always been equally shared – and relished.

David used to take his boys to toddler group with bottles of expressed milk and clearly loves his mix of work and childcare: 'There's so much to gain from it – for us and the kids. Sometimes I'm up early in the morning with the boys and performing as a poet late at night, but you can't

put a price on the experience that you have with your children.'

David's partner Chava relishes her work as a food photographer, but partly because of her own childhood had a strong desire to be available to her boys as much as possible: 'My mum was a single mum who worked hard earning a living while my sister and I spent a lot of time with grandparents. I wanted to spend plenty of time with my children. We're lucky that our work enables us to do this.'

Admitting that, 'we have a timetable but rarely stick to it,' David says that they soon realised that 'kids quickly work out what they can get away with with each parent'. Holding family meetings help to make sure everyone is in agreement about parenting and rules.

Inevitably life is often busy. Alongside performance poetry and childcare, David finds time to get schoolchildren involved in poetry while Chava often finds project deadlines coincide with half-term. But they seem to have created a rich life for themselves and found a way to make it work for their family.

Sofia Dyson told me, 'It's taken a few years to realise there's no right or wrong - you just need to do what deep down makes you happy.' To me, this is what it's all about – not striving to be a mum who "has it all" but working out what feels right for my own family. In the hope that happy, fulfilled parents will enjoy and be enjoyed by their children.

MORE INSPIRATION

FIND Bread and Jam at ilovebreadandjam.com, Forage Fine Foods at foragefinefoods.co.uk, David Raeburn at judgethepoet.com and Chava Eichner at flavourphotos.com
READ Andrea's blog about relishing a simple life at shabbychick.me.uk