

## Consulting and Parenting ...Making it Work

By Christine Shields Kann

Is there a career choice that is the perfect match for raising children and having time for a fulfilling personal life? Some days you may feel that the flexibility of a consulting career is an ideal match for the demands of parenting. Other days it seems that a 9-to-5 job would be just the ticket for a more predictable schedule. Recently I spent time interviewing fellow research consultants and reviewing some available books and literature on the subject to see if there were clear answers to the question of how to successfully blend a career with family and personal pursuits.

My research quickly revealed that there are no “one-size-fits-all” answers. Every family is different, every child is different, and every person’s perception of the perfect blend of professional and personal life is different... so that means there are many possible solutions. What is important is to learn what resources available to help you with your particular needs. Then you can decide which of them offer advice most appropriate or comfortable for you. Will you rely on the suggestions you get from friends and neighbors, or from your family? Do you want to look for information on one of the many websites available, or in books that have been written on this subject?\* Or are you hoping, like me, that you will be able to improvise solutions as the need arises?

One warning: I’ve noticed that time management tips are sometimes cleverly disguised as “parenting tips.” Don’t confuse the two. In fact, if I hear one more person tell me the way to better manage my life is to get up earlier, I will scream. Yes, reminders to pack the kid’s lunches and put out clothes the night before are helpful. But these pointers are really more related to stress management than to your mix of parenting and career.

The best advice I found related to acknowledging the sometimes-unpredictable schedule of a consulting career. Your workload can ebb and flow based on project deadlines, and unexpected client needs can mean last-minute meetings or travel. This uneven workflow can wreak havoc on planning for family demands or having a little free time for yourself.

So, what are the most important things to focus on when trying to manage your business and personal life? Here are some key tips from fellow consultants:

1. *Develop your support network and plan for back-up help.*

This is probably the most important first step in being able to combine parenting with a fulfilling career in consulting. Your primary line of support will probably be your spouse and family members (parents, siblings, etc.) and probably paid professional care. But make sure you also mine relationships with neighbors, other parents in your children’s classes, and friends who are willing to help out—just in



case you find yourself running late on a deadline or facing a flight delay. You will quickly learn to appreciate the phrase “It takes a village to raise a child.”

No matter how hard you try and how well organized you are, you will at some point be confronted with what seems like an impossible situation. It only takes a sick child, an unexpected snowstorm, or sudden car problems to make a rock-solid support network seem like a house of cards. Play out some “What If” scenarios in your mind and then plan for them. The best advice is to build that “Plan B” now, before you need it.

2. *Respect your business.*

New parents often feel that they will be able to work with their children nearby, or even bring the kids along on business trips. There will be some opportunities to do this, especially with the help of a tag-along spouse, or a low-key child who doesn't mind coloring next to your desk while you put the final touches on that client report. But most consulting parents agree that a commitment to your business requires that work receive undivided attention. This means finding a safe and reliable place for your children to go for part of each day—or bringing someone to your home or office to care for them—so that you will have enough time for uninterrupted phone calls and productive thinking. While some clients may not mind hearing the noise of children in the background when they call, most will wonder how much of a priority you place on their projects. Think of childcare as a “firewall” between your business and personal lives. It is good for clients to know that you at least HAVE a private life, but they don't need to know the details. Don't make them feel concerned that they are going to have to fight for your attention.

3. *Over-communicate.*

OK, so this might be a made-up word, but still—you can't do too much of it. Make sure that communications between your spouse, your sitter(s), your children, and all the members of your support network are crystal clear. Have regular Palm Pilot update sessions with your spouse to make sure that your travel schedules are coordinated and that any changes to pick-up and drop-off plans are made well in advance. Write notes, carry a cell phone, and do whatever you need to do to feel secure that arrangements for managing your family and your business are well known to all involved.

4. *Think about tailoring your business to your family.*

Many of the consulting parents I spoke with indicated that they make conscious decisions about their businesses that allow them to integrate work-time more easily into their families' needs. Some choose to have only local clients in order to minimize travel. Others have worked to build up new services such as online research that will further decrease travel demands. And for many, working from a



home-based office has proven to be very helpful in making more time available for their family, because it becomes easier to shift work to evening hours.

5. *Keep your sense of humor.*

By far the most important tip for enjoying the unique challenge of combining a consulting career and parenting is to enjoy yourself and maintain the ability to laugh. There will be bumps in the road, but those I spoke with agree that their chosen career path has generally provided a great environment for them to feel fulfilled—both as parents and as professionals.

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\*Check out **websites:** bluesuitmom.com, advancingwomen.com, babyparenting.about.com, ivillage.com. **Books** of interest: The Magic Years by Dr. Selma Fraiberg, Life's Work by Lisa Belkin, How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, High Wire Mom: Balancing Your Family and a Business @ Home by Kendra Smiley

