

Articles

"Straddling the Work/Life Divide"

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Though it's every lawyer's obligation to keep personal crises out of the office, the legal profession should find a way to help parents cope

"Too many female attorneys seem to trot out the kiddies as a convenient excuse for not doing the work for which they were hired."

So writes a Georgia lawyer in response to a column I wrote in December ["*A Woman Lawyer's Survival Guide*," *Texas Lawyer*, Dec. 15, 1997, page 24.] The writer goes on to say that childless attorneys bear the brunt of this kids-first philosophy, picking up the slack for women lawyers who spend "as much time on the phone with the kiddies as [they do] with the clients."

I have to admit I'm a little ambivalent about that letter. As a supervisor of both lawyers and staff, I'm tempted to say "Amen." After all, when a task isn't completed, it goes no less undone because the lawyer had a family crisis than if the lawyer had a hangover.

But as the parent of a 3-year-old son, the letter rankles me a bit. In the face of a true family crisis, I have little doubt that my son would win out over work any day of the week.

Much as I'd like to ignore that fuzzy divide between where my job ends and my home life begins, however, the writer forced me to confront it. As most women lawyers will attest, the legal profession is not a forgiving career when it comes to finding a balance.

It's not just a touchy-feely women's issue either. A recent proposal from President Clinton, which includes \$500 million in tax credits for businesses that offer child-care services for their employees, solidified the child-care crisis as a front-burner issue for both genders.

As for my angry letter writer, though, I have to admit she has a point.

The legal profession is a service industry. We provide our clients with nothing more than our time and our expertise, and they count on us to keep them out of trouble. It's our responsibility to make their well-being our first priority. If I close a deal and later discover that the \$30 million building my client just bought is about to lose three of its major tenants, my client doesn't care if I overlooked that minor detail because I or one of my colleagues had a family emergency.

He's still the proud owner of a major liability. As much as we'd prefer it to be otherwise, however, some emergencies are unavoidable. And, in general, being both a parent and a full-time lawyer is often untenable. Unless this quandary can be addressed (and there are no simple solutions), the profession will continue to lose women who have given up trying to reconcile the two.

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This isn't just a problem for the women who are forced out of rewarding, lucrative careers. It's also - or it should be - an area of concern for law firms, which lose several \$100,000 investments each time a lawyer they've trained for several years walks out the door.

Some Juggling Tips

Unfortunately, a solution is not imminent. In the meantime, the onus is on us to make our lives tolerable. Juggling a demanding job and a family is difficult, but with a lot of advance planning, and plenty of compromises, it's doable.

- **Don't be a clock-watcher:** There are enough time pressures during the day that parents don't need to be obsessed about when to relieve their nanny or pick up their children. If your child has to be picked up from day care by 6 p.m., either arrange to have him picked up by another family member or trusted friend, or find yourself a child-care provider who works on your schedule.
- **Recognize the importance of your primary caregiver in your life and treat him or her accordingly:** Yes, I'm guilty of buying my nanny first-class tickets to Hawaii, as well as a recurring assortment of other gifts. She's my family's MVP. Without her, the delicate house of cards my family has constructed would blow away in the blink of an eye. (I hope she's not reading this.) In terms of my ability to be a reliable, successful lawyer, hiring her wasn't a luxury; it was a necessity.
- **Plan ahead, to obscene lengths:** I've had people laugh when I tell them that I made an entire year of pediatrician's appointments for the first year of my baby's life, just to make sure I could have the 8 a.m. slot. But it made perfect sense: Not only did it minimize my time away from the office, it also allowed me to focus on the appointment, pay more attention to my doctor's advice, and, ultimately, spend more quality time with my son. You can't underestimate how important planning and organization are to juggling the two roles.
- **Be realistic:** Take stock in your own life, your spouse's availability and aptitude for child care, and how much help you can expect from family members. And be realistic in evaluating how much assistance you will receive and how reliable it will be. If your expectations from friends and relatives are not met, you will forever be in child-care crisis mode.
- **Savor the small bites:** No matter how little time you may have to spend with your child, focus on that time and enjoy it.

Nobody ever claimed that having a life and a rewarding career would be easy. Now, if we could only find time for a little revolution. . . .

Next month: The Dirty Little Secret of Women in the Workplace: Do women really make bad bosses? Or do women employees approach working for other women with the wrong mindset? Send your comments to kwu@akllp.com.