

The best of both worlds

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Monica Friel, president of a Chicago home- and office-organizing service, started her business 16 years ago, before she became a parent. But even today, as mom to children ages 10, 8 and 3, she still feels that working from home offers the proverbial "best of both worlds" in terms of being successful as a parent and an entrepreneur.

"My children know that when mom is on the phone, they need to be very quiet," she says. "Most of the time, they remember that."

Linda Barr has run her home-based Evanston remodeling business, The Fix It Company (www.thefixitcompany.com), for almost 20 years. She started it when her children were 11 and 15 and she was newly single. Now her daughter, Nadine Horwitz, also works from home in her own company, Fragrant Design (www.fragrantdesign.com).

"If you have enough self-discipline, you can start a business in any room in your house," Barr says. "Budget your day by setting office hours and sticking to them. Don't let yourself be distracted." She has always been able to work in lounge clothes while still maintaining a professional manner, but suggests, "If you need to, get dressed before you start work."

Despite its challenges, working from home has become "a growing phenomenon, particularly in these times when two parents each must bring in an income," according to Dr. John Mayer, a Chicago youth and family expert and clinical psychologist.

Parents who decide to work from home do so because they want to provide their children with consistent and nurturing caregiving and attend to their physical, emotional and cognitive development, says Michele Nealon-Woods, assistant professor at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. "While most parents are excited about the possibility of doing both and plan to care for the children, keep up with the house, provide home-cooked meals and supplement the income, many mothers find that just one of these jobs is quite a feat," she says. "Both parenting and holding a job are full-time jobs. Mothers quickly realize they are holding down 2.5-plus jobs."

Working from home and providing children with the constant attention they seek is a challenge for even the most organized parent.

"Children love having mom home and can be almost guaranteed to interrupt phone calls and computer time because they are excited to have you be a part of everything they do," Nealon-Woods says. "It is funny how children who manage to tie their own shoes and blow their own noses when they are away from you become incapable of doing these things when you are around."

So parents who work from home "will need to find a way to manage all of your children's daily needs, your relationships, the demands of your job and the never-ending list of household chores."

Is it possible? Yes, say experts and parents who have been there. Here are their tips for making it work.

Put kids first. Consider a child's developmental age before setting up a home-based business. "Babies are high maintenance and require 24-hour care, while toddlers believe in 'seek and destroy missions' and need constant supervision," says Nealon-Woods.

Look at your home-based work as "a good opportunity to teach toddlers and young children about

boundaries and enable them to learn to entertain themselves and acquire the ability to self-direct," says Dr. Risa Beckwith, a Chicago psychologist.

She explains that a traditional job requiring eight hours of work a day likely will not work as a home-based business. "Freelance work, or work that can be done while you are waiting for children at school, doctor's offices, etc., is best," says Nealon-Woods. "If you find that you cannot meet your child's needs because working from home is so time-consuming, consider whether your child would be better off in the care of someone who has more available time."

Mayer suggests that a business requiring immediate interaction with clients or customers is less likely to be adaptable as a home business. Peter Baylies, a home-based father in Massachusetts, suggests choosing a business where you can stop working momentarily at any time. He also recommends selecting a business that doesn't involve constant telephoning. "When you're on the phone all the time, kids know you're not paying attention to them. A business where you can use e-mail as much as possible helps because you are able to communicate at any hour of the day or night when they are occupied elsewhere or asleep."

Establish boundaries. When you work from home, your child can acquire a skill often missing in young people—understanding the concept of respecting boundaries, says Mayer. "Today, we encounter children who don't comprehend restrictions. They think that everything ... should be given to them. Having a home business can help them understand that certain things are off-limits and sacred, and that when mommy and daddy are on the phone, or in their workspace, that should be respected."

While one home-based mother dons a hat during crucial business phone calls to let her children know they need to wait a moment to talk to her, Mayer found that in his own family, a closed door signaled that he was at work.

Trying to work through your children's "wobble" time only leads to frustrations for everyone, says Nealon-Woods. She suggests scheduling important phone calls and tasks that require focused attention during naptimes, early in the morning, at night after the children are asleep or other times when your partner or support person is available to watch your children. "Don't let anything else distract you during this time, such as personal phone calls, housework, visitors or solicitors."

Maintain supervision. "Don't become so focused on your work that you neglect your responsibility to supervise, guide and organize your children," Mayer says. "Because the children are in the house and being quiet doesn't mean the parenting is over."

He suggests making sure the children are doing something worthwhile—such as reading a book—before beginning a segment of work. Then check on them every 10 to 20 minutes.

And although part of the appeal of working from home is saving childcare money, an occasional babysitter, nanny or older child can bring great peace of mind. "Use the babysitter or part-time day care when you need to, trade child care with other moms in your neighborhood or ask your partner or family for help," says Nealon-Woods.

Hiring a cleaning professional on a regular basis or as an intermittent "treat" is also a help that one mother claims is "as good as a psychiatrist."

Keep a schedule. Establish a schedule and stick to it, Beckwith says. "Most young and elementary age children—and actually many adults as well—feel secure and comfortable when they have a set schedule." Beckwith suggests setting times for meals, play breaks and work.

Nealon-Woods also suggests planning ahead when possible. "Make weekend doctor appointments if possible, and arrange for your children to be on a play date."

Befriend chaos. "Noise is only noise—bring your work to places with play areas where children can be safely and easily supervised," advises Nealon-Woods. In areas such as a McDonald's play area, "you can physically

see the children, and there is no way they can get out," says Nealon-Woods. "They can enjoy themselves for hours."

When a child is ill, Nealon-Woods suggests a backup plan, such as a "distraction basket" filled with toys and food. She keeps items such as healthy snacks and coloring books for her son in hers. She says that such a basket can help kids avoid "feeling frustrated that 'Mom and Dad are busy again.' "

Treat your home office like an office. A home office is a dedicated work space with office rules, says Beckwith. "It is no less important than your children's homework space." Create an organized office space and make it your own, free of stuffed animals and crayons if possible, suggests Nealon-Woods.

This space should be baby-proofed, child-friendly and accessible. Jeanette Lisefski, editor of At-Home Mother Magazine, advises, "Mixing toddlers and office equipment can be dangerous for both child and equipment. Put as much out of reach as possible, cover disk drives to avoid food and toys being inserted and use electric outlet and plug protectors."

She and other home-based entrepreneurs agree that in addition to involving kids in actual business tasks, kids can create their own "offices," using a child's desk or table and chair next to the parent's larger one.

Take care of you—and your marriage. You are more likely to be a successful parent if you are in a successful marriage or relationship, says Nealon-Woods. "Partners need quality time too, and marriages only survive when they are nurtured. While it can be easy to put your spouse on the back burner, do find the time to stay connected."

And if you are exhausted, stressed and frustrated, you leave yourself vulnerable to becoming less productive in your work and less available for your children. "Know when to put yourself in a personal time-out," Nealon-Woods advises.

Looking back on her own childhood, Beckwith says, "I personally have many fond memories of hanging around my Dad's office and my mother's schoolroom after school hours. Although they didn't work at home, I had the opportunity to watch my parents work and I think that was beneficial for me."

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