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by Frances Gough

The balancing act myth

by *Fabulous Mag*

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Being a mum and having a career isn't easy. But is it even possible? As a controversial new book once again takes on the subject, Fabulous investigates



(<http://fabulousmaguk.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/f73a947379df712263b71161207c4257-51f69662094b6-myth1.jpg>)

How do you combine children with a successful career? It's a question every working mother asks herself and a new book, *Getting To 50/50: How Working Parents Can Have It All* by Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober, has thrown the topic up for discussion once again.

The book covers subjects such as planning your return to work before your baby is born and how your partner can help to make the process smoother. But can it really work for the everyday working mum? The authors have both worked as well-paid managing directors of global companies, and the foreword is written

“When my maternity leave at the firm was coming to an end, I asked my bosses whether I could work part-time. They turned down my request, so I had no choice but to return five days a week.

“I couldn’t afford a nursery, so my parents looked after Josh. My hours were 7.30am-3.30pm, which meant I was up so early that it was easier for them to have him overnight. At the end of the day, I’d race to their house to bathe him and put him to bed, before going home alone.

“I felt like a terrible mother, not waking up with Josh and spending so little time with him. It was a struggle, especially after we’d been inseparable for 12 months while I was on maternity leave.”

For Emma, from Rochford, Essex, the situation was impossible. “It felt like I was living a half-life, constantly pulled in two directions and, after about a month, I knew I couldn’t keep it up,” she says.

“I struggled with the thought of leaving behind a big company, my healthy salary and bonuses, as well as my plans to move up the career ladder. But resigning was the right thing to do. I was offered a similar role with a local company in Essex, which allowed me to work part-time and be closer to home. The boss was very flexible, and we negotiated a four-day week that allowed me to spend much more time with Josh. However, as it’s a smaller company, I now have less chance of promotion.

“I’m sure there are women who struggle on in silence to the detriment of their health, career and family. But that’s not ‘having it all’ – it’s having nothing,” she says. “Working mums should do what’s right for them. Don’t bust a gut trying to be Superwoman, especially if your company won’t meet you halfway.”

Mum-of-two Kerry Haynes, 38, who lives with husband Leigh, 38, in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, found striking the balance very difficult, too.

“When I became pregnant with my son Jacob, now six, in 2007, I assumed combining my career and motherhood would be a breeze,” she says. “I’d always been ambitious, working my way up to director at a large media company, and felt very confident that I could return to my career and continue to be as successful as before. But that wasn’t the reality.

“When it was time to go back to work in July 2008, I asked if I could do a three-day week. My company said no, but agreed to four days – which may sound fine, but I had to squeeze a week’s worth of work into that time.

“Jacob, who was one when I went back to work, was always the first child to arrive at nursery and the last to be collected after I raced home on the train. My husband Leigh works 14-hour days in retail and his employers wouldn’t negotiate on his hours, so all the childcare arrangements fell to me.

“Getting up from my desk at 5pm was an ordeal because everyone else worked late, and I was paranoid they judged me. I felt constantly guilty that I wasn’t spending sufficient time with Jacob, and anxious that I wasn’t doing enough at work either. From someone who’d once felt so confident, I became convinced I was failing at home and work.”

Kerry was burnt out after three months. Constantly tearful and unable to sleep, her GP diagnosed stress-induced depression and prescribed antidepressants.

Although her employer offered counselling and a move to a less-pressurised role, in 2009 Kerry took voluntary redundancy and set up her own PR business.

“Life is still a whirlwind, but one that I’m in charge of. I’ve now got another son Archie, three, and if I need to take time off, I don’t need to worry what anyone will think. Quite often I finish at 3pm and start again when the kids are in bed, which can be hard but works for me.”

which was reassuring.”

But employment expert Denise Keating, CEO of the Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion, argues that many mothers are still either disappearing from the workforce, or dropping down to a lower level.

“A combination of pressures, from economic to personal, such as a loss of confidence following time out for maternity leave, or an inability to cope with the pressure to juggle, leads to fewer women at the top,” says Denise. She believes that the key to success is to be realistic about what you can achieve, combined with an understanding employer.

“There’s a temptation to put on a Superwoman facade for fear of being discriminated against or sidelined if you admit to the pressure you feel. And while it can be hard to admit you’re finding it tough, it’s essential to tell your employer how your life has altered, and what help you need to manage those changes. In turn, the best results come when employers reciprocate with flexibility, in order to retain staff they’ve invested in. Working motherhood is a joint responsibility.”

The Government has recognised something has to be done to help get mums back to work. In March, a new childcare voucher initiative was announced, saving a working family with two children up to £2,400 a year.

Prime minister David Cameron said: “Too many families find paying for childcare tough and are often stopped from working the hours they’d like.”

However, it remains to be seen whether this, or yet another book that claims to have the answer, will be enough, or if the ideal of keeping the job you love and being a happy mum is still a dream for most women.



(<http://fabulousmaguk.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/448e7d2688eb5fff997f00239e7889f1-51f6966649555-myth3.jpg>)

Left: Fiona pregnant with Leo. Right: Fiona with son Jack

HOW TO MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU

Occupational psychologist Sarah Speers says:

AT HOME

- Distinguish between work and home – switch off your phone when it’s family time.