

KEEPING ALL THE BALLS IN THE AIR

Shirley Ann Summers Morrow

When I was about to go on maternity leave with my second child a colleague sent me a video clip called "Under the Mess".¹ At the time I laughed and feigned horror that he could suggest my house would ever look like that. In reality with 2 children under 6, both parents working full time, major renovations underway and a fledgling building business to run, there are times when there are disturbing similarities between that clip and my life.

What makes me qualified to speak to you?

Today I am going to share with you some of the pitfalls that I experience as a working mother, and some remedies that I have found to keep my head above water. Overall, what I want to impress upon those of you who are at a point where the juggling act may soon become a reality, is don't choose work over family, but just as importantly don't choose family over work, unless that is what you want. The type of people that can keep all the balls in the air are the type of energetic, proactive and enthusiastic people that we need in the library profession today.

I am currently employed at St George College in Sydney NSW. Part of TAFENSW, this college boasts an EFT (effective full time student figure of about 12,000. There are approximately 400 full time and 400 part time staff. The library contains over 40,000 physical items and is staffed by 8 full time positions: 4 librarians and 4 technicians. I supervise 6 of those staff.

As well as traditional responsibilities such as shelving, circulation, and reference work, I also undertake metatagging; web page creation and

¹Available online at http://www.navarroland.com/goodies/trivjoke/funnyvid/under_the_mess_for_IKEA.mpeg (Accessed 31 January 2005)

maintenance; training programmes for new and existing library staff; and the operation and management of 5 information literacy programmes. My role also encompasses project work such as the recent creation of an e-reserve to give our students 24/7 access to high demand materials.

As you can probably judge my days at work are always full. With my current home commitments I no longer have the luxury that I used to have of being able to take work home and finish it off.

Why librarians make good jugglers

Anyone who has worked in a library knows that librarians rarely perform one task at a time. Those that have worked a circulation desk in any type of library are familiar with the routine of circulation, answering the phone, un-jamming the photocopier, explaining the arrangement of books on shelves, and assisting with databases all simultaneously.

Despite the belief by some in the community that librarians wear tweed, horn rims, a bun and spend their day reading and saying SHHHH, those of us in the industry know better. We know that the librarian's role can consist of a diverse range of tasks, from the traditional tasks of circulation and shelving to the emerging tasks of web page design, metadata tagging, electronic reserve, current awareness and anything else that we can provide in a new technology form to improve the access and dissemination of information to our patrons.

Should we be shocked then that a librarian dares to attempt to juggle work and family commitments but and is successfully doing so? Librarians being a group of people who like to organise and categorise should find it not such a surprise that we manage to train our family members to pre-sort their own washing into colours and whites. The strict routines that we can devise and so easily stick to should not amaze anyone that knows us. Of course the downside is that we tend not to be very flexible when the rest of the world doesn't share our timeliness. The toddlings of a toddler are difficult to put a time limit on.

I have found that my hectic life has made it easier for me to devise new and better ways to do things at work. Online renewal requests, and email queries make it possible to access library resources without the need to go to the library. The move to an e-reserve was more than just trying to have the latest and greatest – we saw students struggling to access materials for the 2 hours closed reserve gives them and decided to find an answer. We already have an online information request form available, and one of my next projects is having a live chat service to assist the information process and also an SMS service to provide information.

I believe that the experience of coping makes you inventive in finding solutions that work for others.

What works

Let's start with some positives, things that can make the hectic lifestyle easier.

The most important thing is to make sure BC (before children) that you and your partner are in agreement about who will do what when/if children arrive. It is no good coming home from hospital only to discover that you haven't discussed who will be taking what tasks. If the female partner wants to return to work in 6 months and plans to put the children in care you need to know in advance if the male wants a "stay at home mum" or indeed wants to become a "Mr Mum".

Those that have parents or other relatives close by who are willing and able to look after the children while you both work have an asset that can't be overstated. If you have anyone that could possibly take on this role speak to them in advance and see what level of support they are willing to offer. This type of support means that when disaster strikes the rules can be easily broken. Unlike a childcare centre, family and friends can keep the children longer when parents get held up at work, they can do favours like supply dinner or baths or even a bed for the night when the system fails totally.

Another factor that can be critical to the balancing success, is the flexibility of one or both of your workplaces. Jobs that offer flexible work hours, flexi or banked days, and the ability to work from home in crises are invaluable. I believe that having one partner with reasonable flexibility is vital to make the family balance; having both of you with flexibility would be bliss.

Talk to friends, family or colleagues in the same situation (or at least with a sympathetic ear). Find people you can admit in front of when the juggling act gets weary. There are plenty of books on time management, and managing family and work. You may find that some of them provide useful tips on the juggling act. For a more light hearted look at the whole thing try “I don’t know how she does it” a fiction book by British author Allison Pearson – it is written from the female perspective but I think anyone would find this light hearted account of what so many of us go through amusing.

There are always challenges

Like my colleagues I have to work night shift. Night shift can present both pluses and minuses for a family in the balancing act. It is nice being able to spend time at school helping with reading and taking toddlers swimming, but it does present a logistical nightmare for the other parent who, on those evenings, must not only do collection from carers but also organize dinner, baths, bedtime stories and finally sleep. For the person on night shift it means that rather than coming home to unwind after work, there are checks to be done: are the bags packed ready for tomorrow, was the homework done, any notes from school that need to be acted upon etc.

You have to accept that your house won’t be the neatest and cleanest in the street – unless you pay someone. When you shop for clothes forget looking for designer labels – wash and wear is what you care about. No longer can I reach blindly into the pantry and know with certainty what I am pulling out.

What doesn't work

Don't overcommit; take on only what you can manage. Even for those that strive on, determined that their expanding family won't impinge on their career, there are times when you need to compromise. Don't volunteer for extra work and projects that may affect your ability to leave at a designated time each day if you are the one due to collect the children. Don't feel you need to prove that you are superhuman. Taking on too much will leave you stretched and at some point you will falter; it may be yelling at the kids, not having time to play with them or failing in completing a work task on schedule. Early in my second pregnancy I took on a secondment at a college further from home. My carefully balanced life fell apart – I never saw my son or my husband, we lived on heat and eat food and overall we were all miserable. In the end after 13 weeks I asked to have the secondment ended, and returned to work commitments that were within the realm of possibility.

As important as it is to find a sympathetic ear for when it gets too much, you also need to stay clear of people that will make you depressed, make you feel inadequate or that you are not doing "the right thing".

What I think will work but haven't tried

MUM OR DAD DAYS

No matter how much you love your kids there are numerous sacrifices that must be made to cater for their needs, and times when you feel as if you need to do something for yourself. I believe that one parent being able to have a flexi day or annual leave day to achieve some things for themselves by themselves is important to a sense of feeling of being in control. Be it watching a movie, doing some gardening in peace, having a massage, even something as mundane as getting your tax done without chasing children around the office, spending a day without other peoples demands can do wonders to make you feel human again.

MUM AND DAD DAYS

A similar idea is one where both parents take a day off work at the same time. While nights on the town may now be a rarity for you, you could have a long lunch, go to the latest movie, or just sit around discussing your ideas for the future. Unlike a night or weekend 'date' you aren't spending less time with your children than what you normally would as they are at their normal school, or care arrangements. There is no cost of baby sitting or worry about a new sitter. You can make the day as busy or as quiet as you like and be happy in the knowledge that you have 7-8 hours without interruption

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

BC you had a life outside of work be it sport or hobby. While you will have less ability to pursue these activities once you have children, you need to remember that these activities are a part of who you are and a part of your sense of yourself. Cut back on how much of these activities you are doing rather than give them up altogether. Once you give them away it is much harder to re-slot them into your schedule. If you feel resentful about having to give up everything that you use to be about you are going to find it more difficult to not pass that resentment onto your family or begin to resent the time that you spend at work.

Days when you doubt

There will always be those days when you doubt, doubt your own capacity, doubt the wisdom of your path, doubt the whole philosophy and doubt that your children won't suffer.

I take a flexi day every 4 weeks from work. BC it use to be a day when I watched my favourite movies (that my husband can't stand) and pottered about the house. These days they are filled with chores like mending, and attempting to spend time with my children doing activities I can't otherwise attempt: finger painting or sitting watching a bug crawl along the ground for half an hour. One of these days fell as I was drafting this paper. As I walked my eldest son to school I noticed a smile on his face. When he broke into a skip I commented how great it was to see him so happy to be going to school. "I'm really happy

today, know why?" "No," I responded, "why?" "Because you are picking me AND walking me to school today." I didn't know whether to laugh, cry or burst with pride that the simple act of being there for him at the beginning and the end of a school day was such a special event that it could invoke such happiness. I still don't know if the lump in my throat was from the love I knew he had for me or the fear that I wasn't usually there for him when he needed me. At the end of the day I know that I am doing what is right for me and my family. I'm a happier person for being at work and that makes me a better mother when I am at home. While our house will never make it to the pages of Home Beautiful or House and Garden it is a home that contains a family that appreciates the time they do get to spend together.