Work-life balance

Caring and career a tricky mix

How easy is it to mix working from home and parenting? asks Fiona Macdonald.

Live the dream. ‘‘Create your own freedom. ‘‘Be a stay-at-home mum and work.’’

We have all seen images of a happy mother with her baby in one arm and a laptop in the other used to promote the benefits of working from home for ‘‘work-family balance’’.

Breaking down the barriers between work and home life so as to easily move between paid work and family responsibilities – or to do a bit of both simultaneously – seems like a good way for mothers (or, less often, fathers) to manage demands from both domains.

Certainly, there is a lot to be said for reducing the geographic distance between the workplace and home when it comes to finding more time in the day for parenting and domestic work on the one hand and paid work on the other.

Everyone can see the advantages of getting washing done while being linked to the office online or being able to leave work and pick the kids up from just around the corner, but able to leave work and pick the kids up from just around the corner, but

While working from home sounds like a great solution for someone combining paid work and care, research identifies some common issues and problems with these arrangements.

My study of the working arrangements of women employed as small-business bookkeepers revealed some tensions and downsides that have been found in other research. This was the case for both self-employed women and for employees who often worked from home.

All the women I interviewed who had caring responsibilities experienced some negative spillover from paid work into their family time and space. However, this was much greater for women working from home than it was for those who went to work elsewhere.

Certainly, women working from home generally had a lot more flexibility in their working time than those who had to keep to a formal workplace schedule, and this flexibility was important for managing multiple demands. The downside to this was an increased likelihood that work would have to be done at weekends and in the evenings and at night, when mothers wanted to be involved with their families.

Flexibility can also have other disadvantages. While mothers who left home to go out to work relied on having regular predictable schedules to manage their paid work and care, those who worked at home were often engaged in endless decision-making about how to prioritise competing demands. In other words, they experienced a constant and daily tension between their caring and paid work responsibilities.

One woman stopped working from home because she found it too difficult to give her children the time and attention she wanted to do and what she felt was ‘‘a proper job’’ in her paid work role.

She preferred to work regular hours in the office, because she did not want to have to think about work when she was at home. Physically separating work and family also meant that she could enjoy ‘‘getting out of the house, talking to people, going out for a sandwich at lunchtime and having set work times’’.

Like others in my study, she found working from home left her with little time when she was not juggling her dual roles, trying to be a good mother and a good employee.

Feeling isolated was also a common experience. Missing the social life of the workplace is one aspect of this. Another aspect can be not having any leisure time, because women’s work becomes completely organised around the rhythms of children’s activities.

A Canadian study found the time women saved from not having to commute to an office was reallocated to caregiving, housework or paid employment, not to themselves.

Women can also end up feeling marginalised from the professional life of the workplace and missing out on training, development or promotion opportunities.

Working from home offers a certain flexibility and can contribute to a high level of satisfaction with work-life balance. However, for this arrangement to work well, paid work hours need to be scheduled and contained.

For people who do all their work at home, containing work also means containing the spaces in which work is performed, so the door can be shut when the paid work day is over. Where possible, having a mix of hours at home in a separate workplace may be important for staying connected.

Perhaps it is a case of the old adage, ‘‘Beware of too much of a good thing’’. Fiona Macdonald is a research fellow at the Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, and holds a visiting appointment at the Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work at RMIT University.

Tools of the trade

Boxing gloves

Name: Shelley Lask.
Job: Personal trainer.
Where: Body Positive Health & Fitness.
Why is it important? Boxing and Muay Thai got me passionate about fitness. Both of those helped me connect to my body.

With boxing, you use your whole body. All your power starts from your feet. You don’t need to be big or strong to hit hard. It’s about using your body well. People often see their body as being problematic. I teach them to work with it. Everyone can box, but they all improve over time. It’s also a good distraction from thinking of exercise as work, because you’re thinking about technique. People like it, as it’s a good stress relief.

What do your colleagues think of it?

A lot of personal trainers use boxing gloves, but those without a boxing background just get people to punch. When you work with someone who is trained in boxing, you are focused more on the whole body technique.

Unusual moment? I provide gloves, but for training at home, you don’t need anything fancy to start with. You can pick up a second-hand pair for $10, while new pairs cost up to $100.

How much does it cost? All the women I interviewed who had caring responsibilities experienced some negative spillover from paid work into their family time and space. However, this was much greater for women working from home than it was for those who went to work elsewhere.

Certainly, women working from home generally had a lot more flexibility in their working time than those who had to keep to a formal workplace schedule, and this flexibility was important for managing multiple demands. The downside to this was an increased likelihood that work would have to be done at weekends and in the evenings and at night, when mothers wanted to be involved with their families.

Flexibility can also have other disadvantages. While mothers who left home to go out to work relied on having regular predictable schedules to manage their paid work and care, those who worked at home were often engaged in endless decision-making about how to prioritise competing demands. In other words, they experienced a constant and daily tension between their caring and paid work responsibilities.

One woman stopped working from home because she found it too difficult to give her children the time and attention she wanted to do and what she felt was “a proper job” in her paid work role.

She preferred to work regular hours in the office, because she did not want to have to think about work when she was at home. Physically separating work and family also meant that she could enjoy “getting out of the house, talking to people, going out for a sandwich at lunchtime and having set work times”.

Like others in my study, she found working from home left her with little time when she was not juggling her dual roles, trying to be a good mother and a good employee.

Feeling isolated was also a common experience. Missing the social life of the workplace is one aspect of this. Another aspect can be not having any leisure time, because women’s work becomes completely organised around the rhythms of children’s activities.

A Canadian study found the time women saved from not having to commute to an office was reallocated to caregiving, housework or paid employment, not to themselves.

Women can also end up feeling marginalised from the professional life of the workplace and missing out on training, development or promotion opportunities.

Working from home offers a certain flexibility and can contribute to a high level of satisfaction with work-life balance. However, for this arrangement to work well, paid work hours need to be scheduled and contained.

For people who do all their work at home, containing work also means containing the spaces in which work is performed, so the door can be shut when the paid work day is over. Where possible, having a mix of hours at home in a separate workplace may be important for staying connected.

Perhaps it is a case of the old adage, “Beware of too much of a good thing”. Fiona Macdonald is a research fellow at the Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, and holds a visiting appointment at the Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work at RMIT University.