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Women Lawyers Deploy Tactical Maneuvers to Handle Child Care

With women still carrying the bulk of child care responsibilities, lawyer-moms working long hours handle the kid-care challenge with creativity and precision.

By **Angela Morris** | January 23, 2019

Jeanene Jobst, senior counsel at Turner Broadcasting in Atlanta, was at work when a phone call sent her into a panic.

The babysitter who was scheduled to pick up her young daughter at her school bus stop was canceling at the last minute. With just 10 minutes until drop-off, it was physically impossible for Jobst



Jeanene Jobst, senior counsel at Turner Broadcasting in Atlanta, with her daughter Madison. (Photo: Rose Limb)

to get there in time to ensure her 7-year-old, Madison, wasn't left on the side of the road—alone.

"I frantically texted and called neighbors. Thankfully, one works from home, so she was able to get my daughter and keep her until I could get home," Jobst said. "Needless to say, the babysitter was fired, but it still doesn't help you in the situation."

Jobst's story would strike fear in the heart of any lawyer-mom, who—despite the day's plans for a high-stakes deposition or a pressing client hearing—always keeps mental space and energy to know where her children are and ensure they're cared for. However terrifying Jobst's example is, the truth is that each and every mom-attorney has her own story of a time that, despite the best-planned child care solution, care fell through and left her needing to drop work and fix the problem.

Child care is such a common topic among members of Mothers Esquire, a national group of lawyer-moms, that the organization chose to partner with the trade association Women Owned Law to produce a webinar on the topic, called, "BossMoms: How to Manage When You Manage It All."

"Everybody is just craving the information," explained Laura Landenwich, a founder of Adams Landenwich Walton in Louisville, Kentucky, who was one of the webinar presenters.

Mothers spend twice as much time on routine child care than fathers, according to Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, a psychology professor at Ohio State University, who researches (<https://theconversation.com/dads-are-more-involved-in-parenting-yes-but-moms-still-put-in-more-work-72026>). dual-earning households with shared parenting duties. The birth of a baby increases a mother's workload by 21 hours per week, but only 12.5 hours for dads, Schoppe-Sullivan found. Moreover, Schoppe-Sullivan notes that, according to others' research, fathers' involvement in parenting is focused on direct child care, meaning that most mothers are in charge of managing how their children are cared for when moms and dads are away.

At the same time, working moms face bias and stigma, dubbed the “motherhood penalty,” said Liz Morris, a professor and deputy director of the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco.

“Whenever a mother does something that highlights her motherhood role, that may trigger bias,” said Morris, who researches workplace gender equity issues. “If a mother is unexpectedly unable to come into work because child care falls through, or her baby is sick, that’s going to trigger that bias.”

And for lawyers, who don’t have the typical 9-to-5 hours, finding child care that fits with the work schedule can be particularly difficult.

A live-in nanny is a great solution for lawyer-moms who earn top dollar in big law, but other moms must find solutions better suited to their budgets. Day care is a common option, but it can be tricky finding a facility open before 8 a.m. and after 5 p.m., noted MehaffyWeber associate Elizabeth Perez of San Antonio, who sends her 2-year-old daughter to a private preschool.

Support from family and friends helps tremendously. For example, Blank Rome associate Sarah Wilson of Cincinnati, Ohio, relies on her mother to watch her child—three days per week at Wilson’s home, and two days at grandma’s. As kids grow up and attend public school, lawyer-moms use after-school programs to provide care until they’re off work. But when school is closed for holidays or the summer that’s a new problem: Babysitters or summer camps are among the top answers.

Even with a solid child care strategy, on any given day something can go wrong and the best-laid plans can fall through. That’s when tactical thinking kicks in, said Houston solo Samantha Martinez, the co-presenter of the BossMoms webinar. As a litigator, she’s very familiar with the challenge.

“I deal with such tremendous, big problems on a daily basis,” she explained. “For me, when I hit stumbling blocks with my kids—whether child care or otherwise—I have a better perspective, because I have to get over these things all the time.”

Landenwich, the co-presenter of the BossMoms webinar presented last month said it's easy for a lawyer-mom to feel burnout, if she starts feeling failure on every end—like she's not raising her children, managing her household or juggling her practice the way that she wants.

To help alleviate feeling overwhelmed, Landenwich came up with a solution she dubbed "Take Tuesdays," when she stays home from work and handles all the chores at home, knocking out a to-do list just like a job. She makes up her work time on other days. In addition, she and her husband have a meeting every Sunday to chart out each others' work schedules and their kids' school and extracurricular events on a calendar, planning out who will pick up, drop off and chauffeur the kids each day.

Martinez, meanwhile, uses shortcuts to manage it all. Meal delivery services that prep ingredients for home cooking are a big help, and when her kids were small she would purchase toys in bulk so she always had a gift to pull out for birthday parties they attended. She delegates housework—her husband and kids do chores for themselves.

Despite the best research, planning and organization, there will always be times that motherhood clashes with work. While some firms and corporate employers are sensitive and understanding, other attorneys face serious consequences—not always from their employers. This happened to Elizabeth Steen, who took off work to care for her sick daughter.

"I could not go to a meeting. I had to cancel appointments, lose a client, and the members of a networking group I am in sent me an email questioning my commitment," said Steen, lead attorney at Washington Business Advocates in Seattle.

Morris, the workplace gender equity scholar, said that, to spur change, employers in the legal profession need to train all employees about unconscious bias against mothers.

But there is good news: Research has shown that millennial men have different views of parenthood. They want to be involved in their kids' lives and be equal partners with their wives—which includes child care. This trend could eventually alleviate the motherhood penalty for lawyer-moms.

“Employers will begin to be less likely to see women of childbearing age as a disproportionate burden on the workplace and company and begin to realize that most people have someone or more than one person in their lives they are responsible for caring for,” Morris explained. “It’s not just a woman’s issue—it’s a human issue.”

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