

When Worlds Collide

By Marnell Jameson

It's enough to make even the sanest woman feel crazy. One minute you're at the office, fielding telephone calls and making split-second decisions; the next you're on your knees on the floor, picking up Cheerios and talking in repeated bursts of single-syllable words. While an outsider might think you should be committed, another working mother would just give you a knowing nod.

Indeed, making the transition between career woman and mommy at the end of each day can be difficult, mostly because the two worlds have almost nothing in common — except perhaps you.

Two worlds, one life

“At work, tasks are defined. You get to complete them and get immediate acknowledgment,” says Tandy Parks, a maternity educator at the Santa Monica/UCLA Medical Center in Santa Monica, Calif. “At home, the work is relentless and largely under-appreciated.”

The change of pace and structure are probably the most difficult to handle, Parks adds. “At work, we're entrenched in a world of time. It's linear, and it all counts,” she says. “With kids, that's not so. They have no notion of time and of what ‘has’ to get done.”

As difficult as it may be at times, you must learn to switch roles at the end of the day. Women who stay in career mode at home are doomed to frustration. Likewise, those who can't get their minds off their children while they're at work don't perform well. The following tips can help make that inevitable transition as smooth as possible.

Shift mental gears. At work, most people are in active problem-solving mode and running on the clock. At home, that needs to change. “Our skills should flip from active to receptive, from performance-directed to mirroring our child's behavior,” says Carol Lindquist, Ph.D., a Laguna Beach, Calif., clinical psychologist. She recommends that when they get home, parents spend 10 minutes doing whatever the child wants to do. “Children are very good at helping parents with the transition — if parents will let them,” she says.

Turn your commute time into transition time. A working mother of two young children, Janet Horrocks of Avon, Ohio, says that she uses her travel time home to mentally review her day and clear her head of any work thoughts. “When I hit the door of the day care, my focus is all on my kids,” she says.

Take time to rejuvenate. After putting in a day's work at the office, then coming straight home and giving yourself to your family, there's not much of yourself left, says Debra Waterhouse, author of *Outsmarting Female Fatigue* (Hyperion, January 2001). A new mother herself, Waterhouse says working moms need to rejuvenate themselves by carving out a bit of personal time each day. Putting some space between work and home — even if for only 10 minutes or so — often helps bridge the transition. Some ideas: Meet up with a friend, write in a journal, buy yourself some flowers or take a walk.

Have a mind-emptying ritual. Before you get home, do something that puts closure on the workday. Clean out your briefcase and organize it for the next day. Or spend a few minutes in the car collecting your thoughts or meditating before going in the house. One anonymous writer in *A 4th Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, edited by Jack Canfield (Health Communications Inc., 1997), notes that when he arrives home, he touches the tree in his front yard, mentally hanging all of his work issues on it before walking in the door and becoming Dad.

Plan time to connect. On the way home, think about one specific activity that you will do with your child, whether it's playing on the floor together, taking a bath or reading a book, says maternity educator Parks. Let that one activity be your focus; then let the evening fall around it. For Colleen Campbell, an art teacher in Great Neck, N.Y., and mother of one, that activity is taking a walk with her baby when she gets home from work.

Avoid the technology trap. “As technology changes, bringing us pagers, e-mail and cell phones, it's harder to unplug when we walk in the door,” says Rivka Polatnick, senior researcher at the Center for Working Families at the University of California, Berkeley. But unplug we must. When Horrocks, a bankruptcy manager, arrives home from work, she turns off her cell phone and screens her calls. She waits until the kids are in bed to check her e-mail.

New mom and author Waterhouse, a dietitian who works at home, says that when she's not working, she turns off the ringer on her business line and lets voice mail pick up. “I do my best to keep work at work, even though it's in my home,” she says.

Buy some time. If you have in-home child care, pay for a half-hour past the time you get home. Use that time to shift gears. Change from work clothes to mommy clothes, take off your jewelry — even your watch — then discuss the baby's day with the caregiver. This makes the transition easier on the child so he doesn't feel handed off like a relay baton. If you can afford to, pay people to lighten your workload at home so you can spend more time with your child. Hire a weekly housekeeper and order your groceries online so they're delivered.

Cut yourself some slack. Conflicting feelings — such as wanting to be at work when you're home and at home when at work — are normal when you love your baby but are also committed to your career, says Sandy Anderson, M.B.A., Ph.D., author of *Women in*

Career and Life Transitions (Jist Publishing, 2000). “Accept the feelings, vent them — especially to other career moms who can relate — then move on,” she says.

Above all, remember that practice makes perfect. “As long as you’re committed to making it work, in time you’ll make the switch easily and smoothly,” says Anderson. “Eventually, you’ll see the rewards as your baby grows up knowing he has a mommy who’s a tremendous role model of how to love and care for her baby and develop her own life, too.”