



## THE DO'S AND DONT'S OF WORKING FROM HOME

'Should I go back to work or not?' This dilemma is faced by many parents, yet there is an option: that of working from home. Working from home can have many advantages, and a few disadvantages, especially when children are added to the mix. Home working can offer great flexibility, but you have to put down some ground rules to ensure that you do find the right balance. On a good day it is a dream: no commuting, no petty office politics and you can put in a day's work in a couple of hours. On a bad day, you just feel like giving up. It can sometimes take an eternity to get into the right frame of mind, let alone deal with the more pressing tasks of getting the kids dressed, school runs and spending time with your youngest.

Before you make the decision to be a home-worker, review your current circumstances and assess how well your time is spent. Make a list of all the activities that currently take up most of your time in an average week. Include work, partner, self, social life, domestic activities, especially children. Work out how much time you devote to each activity per day and put together a realistic weekly plan for how you will spend your time. If this plan states that you must not work late in the evening, stick to it. Similarly, don't busy yourself with filing when you should be spending fun time with your kids. Let everyone know that you are working from home and that your time is valuable, because you are at home it does not mean that you are not doing anything and can be interrupted at will. This is especially relevant when your kids try to pull you away for a game of football.

It's essential that you keep a well-organised work/family diary, ensuring that commitments are prepared for and agreed in advance. For example, if you know that you have an important deadline then make sure you have organised childcare ahead of time. Have a back-up plan, such as a child-minder, where you can leave your children if your first plan does not work out. Build up a favour bank with fellow parents over childcare arrangements. You never know when you might need it.

Remember to manage your work. If you are getting more work than you can reasonably do yourself, then consider getting some help in. You need to make sure that your workload is realistic; otherwise you will end up feeling over stretched and stressed. By working from home you get to choose your own hours – which should suit both you and your family's needs. You can base your working day around your children's school hours, or you may do a longer day with short breaks for the school run. The workload also includes your family commitments as well. Remember, by working from home you are also contributing to the family coffers so don't get bullied into doing all the housework and childcare. Share it!

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It is essential to have a separate work space, as it will ensure that you are not interrupted when working, as well as ensuring that when you leave the home office and close the door, you can switch off. Even try dressing for work; it could make you feel more professional. Make sure that the space is lockable and that your children know it is your workspace. The last thing you want is your youngest trying to feed your computer a sticky bun. Also have a separate phone line to stop one of your brood answering your clients with 'There's a funny man on the phone'.

Sometimes working from home can leave you feeling very isolated, especially if you are used to a social work life. If you find this, make an effort to build up a social life and have fun with it. Avoid bringing social and family issues into your work and vice versa. You will need to be very disciplined to keep both separate, but the effort will be worth it.

Part of the strategy of successful home working is believing that you can really do it, and sticking to the rules you gave yourself. Don't let yourself be bullied into taking on more work than you can handle. Don't feel guilty if you have some time out to yourself and your children when, in theory, you could be working. You deserve time off with the most important people in your life and shouldn't waste that time by worrying!