

Mothering at the Workplace

Des mères qui emmènent leurs petits à leur lieu de travail racontent les avantages et les inconvénients.

Having a baby and/or a career is a hurdle many women have to face. For most of us our working conditions are inhospitable, to say the least, to babies. The obvious answer is that employers should be providing on-site day care centres to help working mothers. Until that happens some of us are taking the baby to work anyway . . . here's how three women are managing.

Taking care of my children and working are what I enjoy most. They are my priorities. I choose to take the baby to work with me because babies are babies for such a short time that it's important for me to have fun with him while I can. But I also need an interesting career and to do both jobs a woman has to be physically and emotionally strong — luckily I am — plus I really enjoy intense work. Children are delightful and sometimes frustrating companions and unless you create your own job situation you'll find it is often difficult to work efficiently with a baby by your side. But I'm managing and here's my typical day:

6:30 AM I get up and do laundry and paper work. By 8:00 AM I'm nursing the baby, then I bathe him, eat breakfast, make a bagged lunch for my eight-year-old Morgan and see him off to play with his friends at the Settlement House and meet me at the gallery later. At 9:30 I go to the park or play with Ben at home and then take a nap with him. I get up after an hour or so, make telephone calls, then at 12:30 go to Baldwin Street Gallery of Photography, taking the subway, walking down five flights of stairs with a ten, twenty, now thirty-pound baby, transferring to the streetcar for a half hour ride and I arrive at the gallery an hour later. I often need help on the subway because the station I use has no escalators and the load I carry is impossible sometimes. It's funny, but the people who consistently help me are older women. At times they seem so frail themselves that I feel I should be helping them! But I guess these women have been through it all. They know what it's like to lug a pram, a child, books, diapers, etc. and they want to help out. It's the one thing that makes riding the subway bearable. Another thing I've noticed when travelling with the baby is the humanness of people who ride streetcars. They're not like the clockwork-orange-zombies who ride the subways. If you ride a streetcar carrying a baby then questions get asked, the baby is cooed at and you can be sure you'll be talking away to another passenger for the whole of the trip. But on the subway we all sit there glum and silent — not even a happy baby



Laura and Morgan

John F. Phillips

The Music

Listen to the rhythm
Of the music as it flows,
You can feel it in your ears
You can hear it in your toes.

You can smell it with your eyes
And taste it with your nose,
If you let your senses revel
In the music as it flows.

The Magician

He stood upon the stage that night
His great eyes glowing in the light
And from somewhere inside his hat
He pulled a bright red baseball bat.

He put his hand inside his ear
And found a stash of fishing gear,
Then reached behind his magic head
And found an old four poster bed.

He turned around three times, no more
An apple tree grew from the floor,
Then sitting down in empty space
A silver chair flew into place.

I watched him slash the startled air
With jugs of milk just floating there,
And when the stage was filled with sheep
I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Fern Lebo

can break through the atmosphere. It seems the slickness of the transportation system is in inverse proportion to the humanness of its riders.

I'm negotiating renting a living space near the gallery and that will make it much easier.

My afternoons are usually spent at the gallery, feeding Ben, talking to gallery visitors, looking at portfolios, chasing Ben out the door, selling posters, watching him climbing the stairs, typing a letter (with the baby on my lap), taking some photographs (while holding the baby), answering the phone (while the baby pulls frantically on my hand, wanting to go for a walk). At about 3:30 I nurse him again and give him a snack and then discuss future projects with co-workers while wandering down the sidewalk after the baby (who can now manoeuvre the front steps). At 6:00 the gallery closes so I wash the floor — get the work ready I need to take home and by 7:00 I again take the streetcar and subway home, stopping to buy groceries on the way. Supper never gets on the table until after 8:00 and then the children go to bed, I do more paperwork, have a bath and about 11:30 I finally sleep.

This is my relaxed summer schedule! Last winter I taught two evenings and one morning a week as well. I still manage to read one or two novels a week (a luxury that will probably end with breastfeeding). My income is largely from teaching and freelance photographic assignments so I can't always take the baby. But I only take on jobs that I want to do because I feel it's important to be with Ben while he's small.

What jobs do I enjoy? Taking family portraits and photographing fast-moving events; I consider these a challenge. Another aspect of my life that I really care about is collecting photographs and researching the history of women as photographers. It's interesting to remind myself that most of the great women photographers had children. Julia Margaret Cameron had seven. Gertrude Kasebier had two and Barbara Morgan two. Canada's photographers were less famous but the women photographers historically adapted their photography around their children. Hannah Maynard operated a studio for fifty years in British Columbia while caring for two sons and three daughters. I figure I follow a positive tradition.

Sometimes it's very difficult, extremely so, but it's a way of living that I've chosen. It's what I want to do. It's a personal obsession that is so important to me that it makes the struggle tolerable.

Laura Jones

Taking your baby to work with you is not very difficult. On the other hand, it's not particularly easy either. Which is really to say it's pretty much like other things in life.

I got into this whole thing by blithely

taking two years off work and travelling. My husband and I reportedly sailed around the world. (Reported that way I think, because it translates so easily into a headline. Sail we did — but not around the world.)

It was a large decision: should we return to Toronto because we were pregnant? Although I was then thirty-eight and we both wanted a couple of children (crew for the next voyage?) — the Atlantic crossing in a twenty-one foot boat did have dramatic appeal. So in the passion of the moment, we did indeed return to Toronto in June 1977, nine months pregnant.

Having crewed for a boat in the Bahamas when we were six months' pregnant, I was not altogether surprised at being offered a job at the nine-month mark as soon as we docked. As I had not planned to start work so soon after my return, I was able to negotiate a contract that allowed me to dictate both projects and hours. A three-month contract seemed a good arrangement — I could leave with honour if the baby and I were attempting the impossible and the company had three months to find someone else for the job.

Penny was all of one day old, when I received a phone call from the office. When was I coming back?

'I don't really know,' I answered. 'I've never had a baby before. Six weeks maybe.' 'Make that three,' was the terse response. 'Also, I'm breastfeeding,' I added quickly. 'So — bring the baby with you.'

Having a spare-time carpenter as a husband is very useful.

'I need a crib for my desk, darling,' I said.

'What desk?' asked husband Paul.

'Well — the office desk,' I replied off-handedly.

'Of course,' said Paul, who is seldom taken off guard. 'I'll measure the baby. You measure the desk.'

I had no plans, strategy or pre-set rules for dealing with the fact of working with a baby, except those of common sense. A young baby needs a responsible person to look after her at all times — and as I was electing to take that young baby to work, that responsible person had to be me. All day, every day. At meetings, lunches, work delegation, planning, discussions.

The crib — with handy 'sit-up' addition — and a body baby carrier were my tools. The crib for sleep and play; the carrier for meetings and nuzzling, comforting and cry-the-blues-away times.

Day one at the office was busy. Everyone was interested in Penny. Many of my colleagues had, in fact, never seen a three-week-old baby. I worked — and the baby slept, basking in warm admiration. She seemed more than welcome.

Day two saw me at my first meeting. There were about thirty people there — and they all seemed to be radiating an atmosphere of good will around both of us. An hour later came the first test — a

loud cry, which settled into a wail. Should I leave the meeting or stay?

'You wouldn't be leaving this meeting if you didn't have a baby,' common sense reasoned. 'Are you going to leave meetings for the rest of your life?'

I had by that time come to the conclusion that Penny cried for two good reasons — when she was hungry and when she was wet. She wasn't wet. So I unbuttoned my crisp office shirt and put her on the boob. Silence, except for the speaker, and contented sucking noises. Nice smiles all round and no disruption.

'Hey, bring the baby next week,' said someone when the meeting ended.

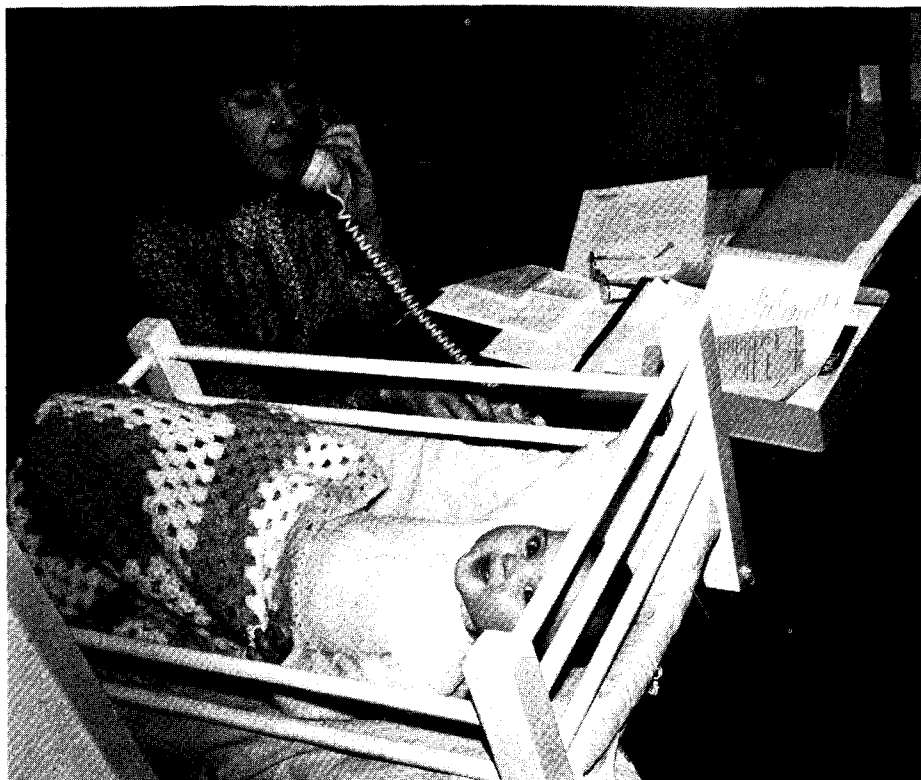
What a funny thing, I reflected, that so many women didn't want to breastfeed because it was so 'restricting.' If I hadn't been breastfeeding, I wouldn't have had the freedom to work 'normally.' It isn't every mother who wants to tell the world her baby is happier at the office than at home. I mean, what kind of home does that suggest!

But it's true. The office, which is open-plan, is a hive of activity and Penny thrived on the bustle and noise. She was fascinated by the typewriter, oogled the telephone and thought each and every employee's special responsibility was to say hello to her whenever they passed.

Cry? Of course she did, but it was in reasonable proportion to all the hustle around her. Even the open-plan office, which I thought might have done us in, turned out to be an advantage — Penny simply became a part of the office. But outside of it, she did, in fact, become a minor celebrity. One day when I was at the *Globe and Mail*, photographer Don Grant asked me what I did with the baby all day. When he learned she sat in a crib on my desk, he asked if he could take some photographs. A story duly appeared — much to the surprise of my board of directors, who were apprehensive that the work might not be getting done. They also felt that the image of the company might be suffering.

The board meetings were the only meetings that I didn't take Penny to. I reasoned that as I was not working with the board on a day-to-day basis, they needed the time to assess whether or not I was contributing. And I wanted to prove that I was more than able. Perhaps it was strange that it didn't occur to me that I was doing something all that different. Doing a day's work with Penny around soon became routine.

When I began my job, I was an acting director on a three-month contract (with a three-week-old baby on my desk). I've progressed to being a director after having taken Penny to work for almost a year. The *Globe* article resulted in quite a number of telephone calls, most of them from mothers with young babies. Did Harbourfront have a policy of hiring mothers and babies? No. Did I know of other compan-



Fiona and Penny

ies with such a policy? No. These calls made me think, and I reluctantly came to the conclusion that I was in a special position.

I had twenty years work experience and skills in a field for which there is a good demand. I was freelancing when I started work with the baby, and though I worked long hours, I was in a better psychological position than someone hired nine to five. I was also an executive, which meant although there were many hours of meetings and 'think' time, I was not in a factory with a quota of widgets to turn out each day. I also had a husband who worked at home and who often took Penny for the day. In fact, he shared the work of my taking Penny to the office. Dinner was ready when I came home at night and the housework and shopping done. And though I think it would be natural and obvious for the partner at home to provide this kind of help, I always felt lucky. It would have been much more difficult to have taken Penny to work without the kind of real support Paul gave us. (Later on, when Paul had Penny all day, I was able to share the chores with him.)

What were our days like at the office? The three to eight weeks period was the hardest in terms of interruptions. Babies at that age seem to need a dozen diapers a day — and mine was no different! By about two months Penny was alert enough to really appreciate the companionship of so many people around. At four to five months her routine was settled enough for me to take her for only half days. Paul would either pick her up around 2:00 PM

or bring her in for the 1:00 PM feed. She settled into the new routine as if she had ordered it herself — and the only complainers were my office colleagues, who missed having her around. A few months later, Paul just brought Penny in to be fed at 1:00 PM travelling to and fro by TTC.

At about eleven months, we started introducing Penny to other foods and when she was a year old, it was Paul's turn to look after her all day.

If you're planning to take your baby to work, I think it's easier to start as soon as possible. If you leave it until the baby is three or four months old, the psychological barriers may be too tough. Apart from the advantage of being able to pursue your career, there are other less obvious ones. The initial year with your child is very important in terms of bonding. With a child at work you will 'wear' your child close to you for much longer periods than you would if you were at home, where a child crying isn't going to disturb anyone. Your child will mature socially in an early and natural way. Penny is used to dealing with people and is well-behaved on social occasions. We had no problems in later years with babysitters, nursery schools or other outings.

And the last comment comes through Penny. She spent such equal time with both of us that she was never able to figure out who was mama and who was papa. But she does know where eight-week-old Peter goes at 8:00 AM every morning. To the office. Of course.

Fiona McCall

For the other half of this story, see *Mothering is a Legitimate Male Occupation*.



Ellen and Laurie

Taking a baby to work is still novel enough to make each situation unique. Laurie has been at work with me for five months and I now know, emphatically, that it would create a tremendous strain in a traditionally structured work environment. The instances that one hears about are almost always in unusual work places. In my case, where work hours are flexible and where the structure is loose and spontaneous, it has been relatively easy.

Getting permission to take your baby to the office is probably the most difficult part of the whole process; in my case, I asked and received approval from the executive of my association long before I was even pregnant! It might have been easier for them to agree at that time because it was then only a possibility.

Once over the hurdle of getting permission you are left with getting organized! Mondays and Fridays are moving days; practically everything the baby owns gets moved, on Fridays back home, on Mondays back to work: walker, jolly jumper, clothes, pampers, toys, bottles, stroller and food. Mental or written checklists are essential to preclude forgetting some vital thing like a change of clothing; you have to

be prepared for any and every eventuality.

People always ask me, after getting over their initial surprise, 'how do you manage?' Some are less charitable: 'I certainly hope that I am not on the same floor.' Yet without the unconditional support of other members of staff it would be difficult, if not impossible. Everyone in my office helps in caring for Laurie: feeding, diapering and taking her for walks at lunch hour. Now that Laurie is almost nine months old everyone is careful to keep the office baby-proof: babies have eyes like hawks and a constant watchful eye for paperclips and other nasty things is necessary. I remember only too well the day I saw Laurie chewing on something and put my finger in her mouth but couldn't feel anything; she continued chewing, so I tried again and out came a clump of about ten staples!

Babies are wonderful creatures; their changes are so dramatic, their interest and curiosity so concentrated and innocent. You have to be hard-hearted indeed not to delight in them. 'Baby breaks' are a regular occurrence in our office — the chance to pause, for a moment, from the work-a-day routine to the intense reality

of an infant has a remarkable impact on a world which too often denies or sets up blocks to what is human in all of us. And for women who are not mothers, and perhaps won't be, a baby taps instincts and responses that they enjoy. Babies demand spontaneity and a moment of mothering lets us laugh and giggle without being self-conscious.

The benefits for the office staff are obvious but the good effect on the baby is even more dramatic. The constant changes in an environment peopled with different faces from one moment to the next calls responses from a baby that normally do not appear until much later. Independence is a necessity for Laurie because she has to spend a large part of the day amusing herself rather than being amused by an adult. As a result she is very self-reliant and quickly became proficient in lifting, holding and reaching, all necessary skills for getting things for herself, and her joy in doing all of them makes living (and working) with her a happy experience.

As a mother I am grateful for the opportunity to combine working with child rearing. The dilemma facing women, to work or to have children (since in most cases it is an either/or choice), is at the core of the liberation movement. With the mounting evidence of the crucial impact of the first three years of a child's life, the decision about whether or not to have children is even more difficult. Some choose work and relegate the major portion of child care to some form of substitute mother — a nanny or day care. Others choose full-time motherhood and deny the potential of their career.

Since Laurie could come to work with me, the initial choice was not necessary, or at least could be temporarily postponed. But she will be walking soon, and then what? It will be easier to give her basic care over to someone else now that I see what kind of person she is. Her happiness or unhappiness in someone else's care will be easy to detect. However, I'm sure that mothers always carry a nagging doubt as to whether they've made the right choice in day care.

The combination of full-time job, children, home and husband creates undeniable strains. The old adage, 'a mother's day is never done' becomes quite simply the truth. A mother has scarcely any time to call her own. (My time is when I am out jogging at 6:30 in the morning!) Priorities have to change: tidy houses are out and you have to accept that you will do many things half well or badly.

And your partner? He has to take up a lot of the slack but he will also have an opportunity to spend a great deal more time with his child.

The richness and diversity a child brings to your life makes it all worthwhile. After all, who is nurturing whom?

Ellen Powers

Kim Cleary