

the new family

# The Shortest Commute

Working from home can maximize the pleasures of parenting—if you avoid the pitfalls. Here's how.

by Melinda Blau

When her son Jordan was a year old, Joannie Burstein Besser, 34, gave up a hefty paycheck from a Hollywood agency to start her own talent management firm at home. "To me there was no option," Besser, of Los Angeles, recalls. "I was working so many hours, and I was spread so thin. I only saw my son for a couple of hours each day—and that was right before he went to bed!"

A growing number of parents are doing what Besser did: bringing their careers home. Because of corporate downsizing—a word that often means layoffs—some have had to. Others, finding that fast-track living is incompatible with family life, want to. And thanks to the advent of modern technology, many of them *can* work at home. "The tools of work have gotten smaller, cheaper, and also much more powerful," points out Joanne Pratt, a Dallas-based trend forecaster. "You can throw a computer disk into your shopping basket along with the Pampers."

Indeed, workers based at home now comprise between 25 and 33 percent of our current labor



Marian Gormley, a publicist, saves the cerebral work for school hours and does lighter tasks in the afternoons, when her twins can join her.

force, most experts agree. And 6,301 new home-based businesses are launched daily, say Paul and Sarah Edwards of southern California, authors of *Working From Home*. That's one every 14 seconds!

## Why Parents Take the Plunge

More mothers than fathers seek to work at home, for reasons that include snaring extra time with their kids. Sharon Italiano, a 34-year-old Medford, New Jersey, mother, says she felt guilty and sad about leaving 1-year-old

Parrie Marie and 2-year-old Angelica Lee to go do her job as speaking-engagement coordinator at Bell Atlantic. Italiano also recalls being mortified when she couldn't answer her pediatrician's questions about the girls' naptimes. "One of my co-workers, a male, was telecommuting already, so I asked if I could, too," she says. "My company could not have been more

supportive." Italiano now telecommutes two days a week.

Fathers tell different stories about why they work at home. After he left his job as a software consultant, David Raab, 41, of southeastern Pennsylvania, began sharing an office with his wife, Susan, 37, who had been working at home since before their kids—Brian, 9, Jeffrey, 7, and Joshua, 5—were born. "This is a very pleasant way to make a living," he says of the consulting work he now does from home. And both Raabs say they love the fact that their kids can always drop into their office to show off a good grade or ask questions about their homework.

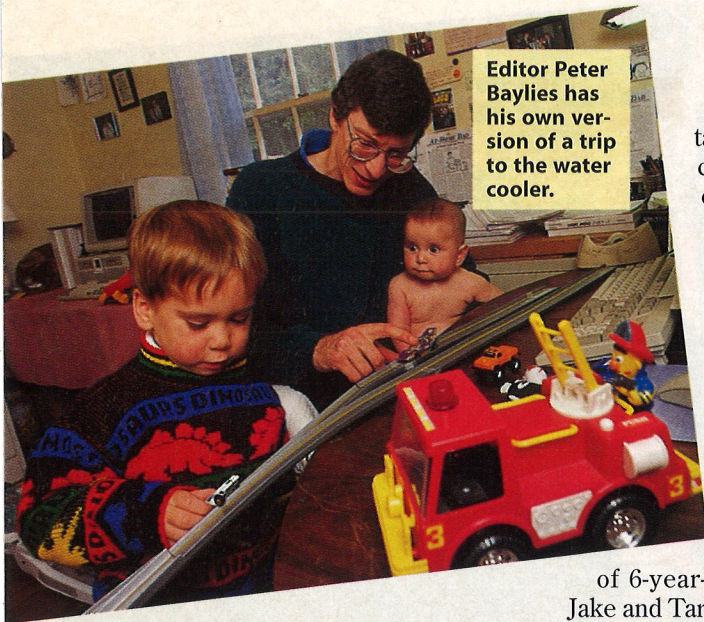
Still, working at home is not for everyone. You must be self-motivated, organized, methodical, a good planner, and passionate about what you do, experienced home-based workers say. And parenting doesn't necessarily get easier just because you work where you live, warns Terri Lonier, New Paltz, New York-based author of *Working Solo*. But fortunately, every homeworking challenge does have a solution. Here, from experts and parents alike, are problem-solving strategies that can work for you.

## 10 Fastest-Growing Fields for Home-Based Workers

- Cleaning services
- Computer consulting
- Computer programming
- Computer repair
- Executive search firms
- Management consulting
- Medical transcription
- Public relations
- Technical writing
- Temporary clerical work

Source: Paul and Sarah Edwards

MOLLY ROBERTS



Editor Peter Baylies has his own version of a trip to the water cooler.

**CHALLENGE: You want to get your work done and be a good parent, too.**

Peter Baylies, 39, of North Andover, Massachusetts, edits the *At Home Dad* newsletter while his two kids, ages 7 months and 3 years, are either napping or bedded down for the night. Like him, many home-based parents work night and day so they can care for their children themselves and also run a business. Says Pratt, "You have to ask, 'Is the stress worth it?'"

**SOLUTION: Get childcare help.** Deborah Vance, a 39-year-old single mom who runs a cleaning service in Totowa, New Jersey, says she soon realized that she couldn't run a thriving home-based business and care for her baby son, Michael, at the same time. "It's virtually impossible," says Vance, who put Michael, now 4, in daycare when he was 18 months old.

If you prefer home-based care to

taking your child to a daycare center, there are several less expensive solutions than a full-time nanny. Consider hiring a teenager to come in after school. Or join forces with another working parent either to share a caregiver or to swap babysitting hours.

Marian Gormley, 39, a Vienna, Virginia-based public-relations director and mother

of 6-year-old twins, Jake and Tara, saves on babysitting hours by sorting her tasks and matching them to different times of day. She uses the time when her kids are in school to do cerebral tasks such as writing press releases. But when she takes the twins to gymnastics class, she also takes along background reading that she can complete even during short bursts of time.

**CHALLENGE: Your child resents your working, even at home.**

Kids under 6, in particular, are not impressed by the importance of your job. And even though you work at home, they may still have trouble separating from you when you close your office door, which can be stressful for both of you.

**SOLUTION: Help your child understand what you do, and be realistic about his needs.** Respect your child's wish to have you near and to feel connected. Acknowledge this by saying a proper goodbye to your child, even when she's a baby, so that she can begin to master the lifelong challenge of being separated from you.

By the time your child is around 2½, she can already begin to understand that you go to your home office not to be mean, but for a good reason, says Wanda Draper, Ph.D., a child-development specialist at the

University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City. If your family needs your earnings to put bread and milk on the table, or if your job helps others while also helping you to feel good about yourself, by all means share this information with your child. By the time she's in grade

school, she can learn more about what you do for a living—and she'll probably appreciate it more, too.

"Tell your child that there will be things she'll like about your working at home and things she won't," advises Pratt. "If you level with children, most of them will understand."

Another good strategy is to child-proof your office rather than office-proof your kids. "That way, your kids can be kids when they come visit you," Sarah Edwards explains.

**CHALLENGE: Your day is fragmented by too many interruptions.**

When you work at home, everyone seems to want a piece of your time. Your spouse assumes you can drop off his clothes at the dry cleaner. When your best friend has an emergency, she asks you to watch her kids, "just for an hour."

**By the year 2000, half of all businesses will be home-based, either partially or completely.**

## Setting Up Shop to Work at Home

- **Carve out work-friendly space.** Try sketching the area you have in mind first, and then imagine how it might work in reality. If you don't have a separate room with a door, consider using a row of plants or a low partition to create a sense of separateness.
- **Invest in busi-**

- ness essentials.** These include furniture (desk, chair, filing cabinet, and good light fixtures) and equipment (phone, fax, computer, printer, and software). And consider a separate phone line for business.
- **Project a professional image.** Investing in business cards, letterhead

- stationery, and perhaps a promotional brochure can be well worth the cost.
- **Don't broadcast the fact that you work at home.** When you're first getting established, it may be helpful to downplay your business address. Some prejudice about home-based work still exists.

- **Maintain contact with those working in your chosen field.** Staying in contact with colleagues you admire could help you make the leap back into an outside job, when you're ready for one. In the process, you may also find a mentor who can help guide your career moves.

## It's smarter to child-proof your office than to office-proof your kids.

**SOLUTION: Establish some ground rules—and be consistent.** “It’s really important to set up some psychological and physical boundaries,” maintains Lonier (see “Setting Up Shop to Work at Home,” page 90). So first, give yourself permission to say “no” to worktime interruptions. Then, be clear with others about when you’re available and when you’re not. Even your preschooler can adjust to a predictable routine that includes him; for instance, you could take your coffee break to coincide with his “cookie break.”

Although working at home does require you to be flexible, it also allows you the leeway to take off from work when your child is sick. And that’s the kind of flexibility that other working parents only dream of.

**CHALLENGE: You feel “out of it.”** “There’s nobody out here but the

birds and me!” complained one mom, who gave up a corporate job to consult from home in a quiet suburban town.

**SOLUTION: Reach out.** If you’re angry, lonely, or both, search your soul. Are the reasons why you initially chose to work at home still valid? Are you accomplishing what you set out to do? Is your current career compatible with family life? Would confiding your feelings in a friend, your spouse, or a therapist be helpful? After asking herself such questions, Cami Gordon, 33, a writer and mother of 2-year-old Micah in Los Angeles, realized that the work she was doing from home, composing ad copy, wasn’t really appropriate because it required a lot of input from others.

So she decided to try to write children’s books from home instead. “Now I write every day and it fulfills me spiritually,” Gordon notes. And because she schedules some regular lunch dates with other mothers, Gordon says she is often in the company of people she enjoys.

**CHALLENGE: You feel like you never get away from your work.** “You can’t very well forget about the business—not when you work at home,” says Susan Raab, who knows this not only from her own experience, but because her father was a home-based worker, too.

**SOLUTION: Compartmentalize.** Especially when children are little, there are no easy answers to combining work and family. So just do your best to focus on your priority of the moment, whether

it’s your job or your child, says Ellen Galinsky, co-president of the Families & Work Institute in New York City. Or as Gordon puts it, “When I’m with my son, I don’t think about my writing.” Rebecca Bostick, 35, an Annandale, Virginia-based architect and mother of Taylor, 7, and Patrick, 4, finds that a timer helps her to separate business from family. “I used to look at the clock and constantly worry about being late to pick up my kids,” Bostick says. “But now I keep focused on my work until the alarm goes off. *Then* I stop.”

When you work at home, it also helps to stay focused on the advantages of your situation, rather than on such possible drawbacks as more stress than you expected, slower professional advancement, or lower pay. “When working at home goes right, you can mix your two lives and get the best of both worlds,” says David Hania, the White Plains, New York-based founder of the Home Business Institute, a national support network.

There are advantages for your children, too. When you work at home, they get to see you in action all the time, modeling important life skills like organizing, planning, and prioritizing. Best of all, they get to see more of *you*. And they get to grow up seeing work in a family-friendly light, which definitely changes their perspective. “One day we pointed out an office building to our kids, explaining that people worked there,” Susan Raab recalls, “and one of them asked, ‘But where do the children play?’” ■

*Melinda Blau is a contributing editor to Child as well as a home-based writer and parent in Northampton, Massachusetts.*



“I couldn’t stand how little I used to see my son,” says talent manager Joannie Burstein Besser, pictured here with her assistant.

### Where to Turn for Home-Working Support

#### Groups

● **At Home Dad** allows fathers to plug into a network of home-based dads with a quarterly newsletter, \$12 (the first issue is free). Write: 61 Brightwood Ave., North Andover, MA 01845. (e-mail: athomedad@aol.com).

● **MATCH** (Mothers Access to Careers at Home) is a networking and support group for women who combine motherhood and home working. A \$40 membership includes 10 meetings and a newsletter; for information, call (703) 205-9664.

#### Books

● **Working From Home and Best Home Businesses for the 90s**, both by Paul and

Sarah Edwards.

● **Working Solo** by Terri Lonier.

#### On-line

● **SoHo Central** contains legal information, advice on how to raise capital, and home office start-up ideas (<http://www.hoaa.com>).

● **Home Office Computing Online** offers advice on buying computers and chat sessions with other home workers; it’s on America Online; call (800) 827-6364.

● **Compuserve’s Working From Home Forum** has libraries of information on accounting, taxes, and more. Although not as extensive as America Online’s service, this is still a solid resource. Call (800) 524-3388.