



Undercover parents in the workplace

BY LISA LINTERN

Recently I made a difficult decision to knock back an amazing job in an amazing company. While all the spoils of a corporate high-flying job tempted me, I just couldn't reconcile in my mind how I would balance the pressures of the job against the pressures of being a mum to young children.

The company persisted, declaring itself family friendly. "We can be flexible. We don't mind how you work, as long as you get the job done," they said. But I wasn't convinced, because my own experience tells me that no matter how hard it tries, big business is incompatible with parenting. Like mercury and water, milk and orange juice, sandals and socks – they just don't mix well together.

In fact, the gap between these two worlds is so wide, some professionals feel compelled to hide the fact they are parents in the workplace.

This lesson was first served up to me when I returned to work fulltime after having my first child. A few weeks back behind the desk, I received one of 'those calls' from the daycare centre to inform me my son had a temperature.

With my 'nervous-new-mother' heart in my mouth I quickly blurted to my colleagues that my baby was sick, grabbed my bag and hurried to collect him.

The next day a female colleague inquired after my son and then whispered her advice over the partition: "Next time, don't say your son is sick. Trust me. Never tell anyone you have to leave because of your children. Make something up – you, your partner, your dog – but never say it's your kids."

I was stunned. I was even more stunned when I asked other female colleagues whether I should refrain from referring to my children at work, and the majority of them agreed with firm silent nods.

Think about it. If you work in a corporate environment how often do you hear people openly talk about leaving early because they have to take their child to the doctors? The dentist? The specialist? These things, these guaranteed features of parenting happen all the time, but are often disguised as something else.

And admit it, the ones that do openly declare they have to leave early to listen to little Johnny sing his heart out in the school choir are sometimes branded the 'switched off' or 'disengaged'. I know, because I've dished out this attitude to other working mums when I was a 'before-child' ambitious

corporate bitch. Because I just didn't get it what it was like to be a parent trying to hold down a fulltime job, while being the best parent possible.

Another piece of confusing workplace advice once came to me from a male executive who suggested ambitious women shouldn't try to be 'one of the boys' and instead be proud of their femininity. This was the same person who dropped me from a project because I couldn't commit to daily meetings at the rather un-motherly hour of 5pm. Perhaps maternal mothering wasn't the kind of femininity he meant?

I've also heard stories (on the grapevine, picked up at the local park where us once-brilliant career women congregate with kids, coffees and dark circled eyes) of women who have concealed their motherhood entirely, leading a double life: corporate dominatrix by day, nurturer by night.

Today I'm lucky I have a choice, with skills that transferred into my own business that I have full control over. But there are many women who don't have this choice. For them it's not merely a case of adjusting their lifestyle so they can stay home with the kids, if that's what they really want to do. For some there is no fat to trim. They have to work, and it's tough.

But it's also tough for the women who choose to keep their career alive, refusing to let it peter out because they now have children. Many of these women deliberately shy away from the label 'working mum' because as one senior female executive once explained to me: "it suggests she might be prone to slacking off, because she has kids."

And of course, even more silent are the 'working dads', especially those who are more hands-on than the generations before them. These guys are yet to even find their voice – wary that if they speak up they might be branded soft or less serious about their career.

'Healthy parenting' (or lack of) is often cited as critical for a positive society. If we are to progress this notion we need to question why so many of us are fearful to be open about the demands of parenthood in the workplace.

So, where is this fear coming from? Is it because the rules of business have been historically shaped by men, leaving no room for talk of the challenges that come with being a parent? Is it because we don't want to irritate our colleagues without children as we run out the door early to do the school run? Or is it simply our own insecurities?