

Raising children serves up a chance to sample sweet business success

Women are going it alone to balance work and family, **Debra Cleveland** writes.

IT'S THE classic dilemma for many families: how to structure careers to fit around having children. But for some women - and a growing number of men - it's a challenge that's not only joyfully embraced but even opens doors to new income streams.

Former accountant Sonia Williams is such a woman. Determined to spend as much time as possible with her two children - Thomas, 3, and Ethan, 2 - she left accounting to start her own wedding photography business, and is now on to phase three of her paid working life, as an author.

Having spent so much time researching her own business, she felt well qualified to write *Share Money: The Money - How You Can Do As At-Home Mom And Make Money* (pp \$29.95).

The book is aimed at women who want to continue working, but from home. (House husbands could pick up some handy hints too.)

Why go back?
Williams feels strongly there are more than just the usual two-choices after children - to give up work or to go back to the same job (part-time or full-time). Starting your own business, she feels, is the best way to combine work with family.

She's in good company. Making use of her accounting background, financial planner Laura Mervish, a founder of Millersham Financial Services (now known as WLM Financial Services), was able to work school hours when her children were much younger by doing bookkeeping for a number of small businesses.

"I was able to go in from 10am till 3pm and be back at school to pick the kids up," she says. "If the kids were sick I could rearrange my schedule." She later went on to found her own financial planning business.

How to choose
So what business to start? In her book, Williams works through a number of steps in terms of coming up with ideas, and then evaluates the possibilities in terms of target market, competitors, marketing and strategy.

Once you think you're on to an idea with potential, the book focuses on developing the business and getting it off to the best start.

"A lot of mums fall pregnant and are so focused on the birth they don't think about how they'll feel when they're holding their baby and faced with the decision of 'Do I want to work or not,'" says Williams.

"I knew I wanted to be with my kids for every moment. My dad died when I was 25 and I realised then just how precious life is, it can be taken away from you in an instant. But I also knew I wanted something for myself."

Natural talents
She argues that women's networking skills make them natural at home-based businesses.



idea, it gets round like wildfire. The key to success in business is getting the word out - and mums have so many networks through mothers' groups, school, sports etc."

Of course, running your own business is not for everyone. And it can be difficult rethinking your skills if returning to the same sort of work is not an option. For example, if you work as a private client adviser, returning to work part-time is probably not feasible.

Talking to others in the same boat can help. The Australian Businesswomen's Network, for instance,

might sound offerring to those who've been out of the workforce for a while. But consider this - 45 per cent of the network's members have children and 50 per cent work from home. Membership is \$295 a year and there are regular events across Australia at which there's advice and mentoring.

One of its members is Karen Houghton, who runs her own bookkeeping business called Money Perms and heads the network's finance committee. She started out on her own when her son, Joe, now 10, was little. When her business expanded she began hiring other mums.



KYLIE ROBINSON

Mother's Milkbar inspiration

HAVING just sold the day-to-day running of her breastfeeding pillow business, The Milkbar, mother-of-three Kylie Robinson is already "scribbling on bits of paper", planning the next project.

She worked as a computer systems and procedural trainer in law firms before children, but came up with The Milkbar project when nursing her firstborn, Angus, now nine.

"I bought everything on the market and wasn't satisfied," Robinson says.

CHRISTINE KININMONT

Baby sparks a fertile idea

WHEN newsreader Christine Kininmont was pregnant with her first child 10 years ago, being visible on screen - even from the waist up - led her to think about adapting her clothes.

Four children later, her company Fertile Mind, which she runs with business partner Peter Hooker, she came up with the BellyBelt, an elastic panel inserted with buttons into the top of jeans or trousers.

Not only did she solve her initial dilemma - how to wear existing clothes as her tummy expanded - but the business it started led her away from full-time work in television to a career that allows her to pick her own hours and be her own boss.

Ask yourself what you're good at, and ask people what your strengths are

"The beauty" she advises women starting out on their own and using their skills in another way. "Women are not great with self-confidence. When men go to networking events, there is lots of testosterone, whereas women do things in a very measured,

controlled way. Ask yourself what you're good at, and ask people you've worked with what your strengths are."

Where to begin
As a guide to start-ups or already established small businesses, Houghton is setting up an online learning and research tool, at www.motherbusinessmatters.com. Based around online learning and podcasts, the site offers downloadable business plans, tips with Mind Your



TRACEY COPPELL

Women jump to car course

TRACEY Coppel started Motoring Women when her son, Blake, was two. Having worked in customer relations for large car dealerships for many years, she wanted to break down barriers.

"Women customers were very intimidated by the male-dominated car trade," she says. "So we ran workshops teaching them how to change wheels, jump-start a car, check tyre pressure, under the

bonnet for oil and water and what to do in a breakdown situation. The workshops were run in car and tyre dealerships. It was great marketing for the dealerships where, in each workshop, 50 new women would come in, learn the basics and meet someone they trusted with their car," Coppel says. "And for the women it was a free community service." Although running Motoring Women meant a fair bit of interstate travel, it enabled her to work around her son's school hours. Nine years on, though, she's said goodbye to her business and is enjoying working for someone else instead.

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Seeking the advice of a business coach can also help clarify things. In terms of cost, one would be looking at \$250-\$300 for a two-hour meeting.

Mortgage broker and business coach Kable Grant of Visionworks says "There's a really big gap between being an employee and being self-employed, so it's worth spending time exploring whether it's right for you. And if you decide to go the next step, a coach can accompany you by

helping to set up really clear benchmarks so you don't get overwhelmed by everything you have to do when you first start."

Lastly, she adds, if you decide you'd rather be an employee, don't tell yourself that - many employees are desperate to find people like you.

"I have so many clients who would love to employ mums between the hours of 10am and 3pm but they don't know where to find them," she adds. "Mums are usually mums, they know how to multi-task, they know how to negotiate time and they're usually flexible."