

## TOP WOMEN IN THE LAW

# Five Tips for Working Moms To Maintain a Work-Life Balance

By **Jennifer B. Zourigui**

In late 2013, I gave birth to my first daughter. It was during my maternity leave that I learned I was to become a partner at my firm. Just a few weeks after I returned from maternity leave, it became official. I was back to work with a new sense of responsibility in the office and a whole new set of responsibilities at home. Less than a year and a half later, I gave birth to my second daughter. The responsibilities and obligations at home grew and so did the pressure. I have been on a journey the last three years to find that delicate balance between being super-lawyer and super-mom. And it's still a work in progress! I am far from an expert—and I doubt there is anyone out there with all the answers. But as I continue to work on my own work-life balance, I have five tips to share that should help any mom and lawyer as she navigates motherhood and the legal profession.

**Tip 1: Do consider a firm's culture when you join, even if you don't have kids yet.**

There is a lot to consider when you join a firm—salary, benefits, billable



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hour requirements just to name a few. Even if you are not a mother now or planning imminently to become a mother, if it is something you are considering for the future, you should always think ahead and look at a firm's culture and attitude towards family when you are interviewing for a job. When I interviewed at my firm, I was years away from marriage and motherhood, yet I appreciated not only what I perceived as a collegial atmosphere but also an attitude of appreciation and respect towards family. For example, I learned during the interview process that the firm holds a holiday party every

year for everyone at the firm and their families. Both attorneys and support staff attend this event each year with their spouses or significant others, as well as their children and grandchildren. That inclusion was a sign to me of the importance of family to the firm's partners. Now, after years of attending such events and watching others' families grow and their children grow up, I am able to bring my daughters with me to join in the festivities. Pay attention to things like this when you are picking a firm to join—it can often be just as telling about the attitude towards family and motherhood as information about the firm's maternity leave policy.

**Tip 2: Do not try to plan a pregnancy around your workload or partnership track.**

Let's face it—we are lawyers, we are strategic, and, yes, we are planners. Naturally many of us would be inclined to plan a pregnancy for the most optimal time in both our personal and professional lives. But given the nature of our profession, if this is your plan, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment. How many times have you scheduled a

vacation around a deal closing or a briefing schedule for a motion only to have things get shifted or adjourned? You could have gone after all! Don't try to do the same with having children. When I was pregnant with my first daughter, I had been working for several years on a case that was gearing up towards a federal trial. Ultimately, the trial was scheduled to begin just days before my due date. Despite the judge's effort to schedule the trial before my due date so I could be there given how long I had worked on this case, it was the best we could do at the time. I spent months preparing for a trial that I knew I might not ever get to see even a day of. Ultimately, the trial did not go forward as planned and I returned after my maternity leave (and motion practice that had gone on in my absence) to prepare for our new trial date. For me, the timing worked out but if I had tried to delay my pregnancy until after the trial, that delay would have been a lot longer than I anticipated. When it comes to work and motherhood, it may never seem like the right time. You might be up for partnership this year, for example, but then the economics shift at the firm and you are told you will be up again for consideration next year. Do you wait another year? This could go on for years! When it comes to parenthood, plan your life around you—and have faith that work will work itself out.

**Tip 3: Do try to disconnect from work from time to time.**

Thanks to our smartphones and laptops, we are connected to our colleagues and clients around the

clock. It is important though to have time to focus on your family without constantly picking up and checking your iPhone. Doctors will often have an on-call system where they are assigned certain dates and time to be “on call” for their patients. Lawyers, however, often feel they must be on call to clients (or partners at their firm) virtually 24/7. But it's OK to go a few hours in the evening or on the weekend without checking your email. Waiting two hours for a response to an email most likely will not mean life or death to that partner or client who is emailing you—but it may mean the world to your child to have your undivided attention for those two hours.

**Tip 4: Do not feel guilty.**

There can be an incredible amount of guilt for working moms whether about not spending enough face time in the office or needing to spend more time at home with their children. Don't feel guilty. As long as you are getting that contract drafted or that brief written—and doing a good job at it—it ultimately won't matter if you completed your task while you were physically at the office or finished it at home later at night after the kids go to bed. Focus more on working efficiently and producing quality work on a timely basis and worry less on how you fit it into your “office” schedule. Billable hours are billable at any time of the night or day. And try not to feel guilty about being away from your children for long days or late evenings. You are being a great role model for them. Whether illustrating to your daughter that she can

be a successful career woman or teaching your son to respect women in the workplace—you are a great role model for them every day.

**Tip 5: Do ask for help.**

As the saying goes, it really does take a village. So don't be afraid to ask for help. At home—ask your spouse, family members, or friends for help with pickups, carpools, grocery shopping, or anything else you can't cover. You don't always have to be super mom. Simplify things for yourself whenever possible. Can't get to the store? Online shopping will be your new best friend. At work—don't be afraid to ask another associate or partner for help. It's not, as some may fear, a sign of weakness. It's about using good judgment to ensure you meet your obligations. Whether you ask for help with specific tasks such as research or someone to cover a court appearance (which someone might need from you from time to time as well) or a change in your working arrangement such as asking for part-time, flex time, or a work from home arrangement, you might be surprised what the firm may be willing to do to accommodate. Figure out what you need and ask. As lawyers we are great advocates for our clients, but we need to be great advocates for ourselves as well!