

Mom entrepreneurs share secrets of family, business mix

Running a business while raising young children is tricky but worthwhile

By Carol Neshevich, Special to [CBC News](#)

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Owning and operating a small business while raising young children isn't easy, but the rewards can make it all worthwhile.

Seven years ago, Karen McCauley left a demanding consumer-research job to launch her own market research company called Fresh Squeezed Ideas. As the mother of two young children, ages three and six at the time, she hoped running a business out of her Toronto home could be the best of both worlds: she would be her own boss in a professional field that she loved, and she would also get to spend more quality time with her family.

For the most part, this turned out to be true. McCauley's business thrived, and she was still able to walk the kids to school, see them at lunchtime and occasionally volunteer in the classroom — things she likely wouldn't be doing if she worked for someone else. She admits, however, that she was initially a bit naive when it came to the challenges involved.



Karen McCauley runs her own market-research company, called Fresh Squeezed Ideas, out of her Toronto home. David Wohlfahrt

"The flip side of having your own business, especially when you're working from home, is that there are no boundaries," she said.

In the beginning, McCauley had a tough time delineating work time and family time. So, although she was able to see the kids at lunch, she would often find herself up in her office working on the computer all evening.

"It can be difficult trying to be a business professional while at the same time having your kids run into your office asking you to be a mom," she said. "I used to have to put a note on the door that said, 'Do not come into my office right now. I'm on a call with a client,' and I would think, I have to try to live these two personas at the same time, and it's really hard."

Manage expectations

The authors of a new book called *Mom Inc.: How to Raise Your Family and Your Business Without Losing Your Mind or Your Shirt* are very familiar with these challenges. Torontonians Amy Ballon and Danielle Botterell are MBA graduates who left the fast-track of Bay Street to open their own custom baby-blanket business called Admiral Road Designs in 2002. They decided to write the book, published earlier this year by HarperCollins, to address misperceptions about what it's like to run a business with young kids at home.

"It felt like the media coverage of mompreneurship was a bit too glossy," explains Ballon. "Every magazine article we flipped open featured a perfectly coiffed mom with perfectly tailored children playing at her feet while she worked at the computer. And we thought, wait a minute, that's not what it's like!"

"We wanted to paint a realistic picture of what it's like to work for yourself when you're trying to raise young kids as well."

When it comes to balancing family needs with business needs, it's all about communication, says Botterell.

"We still have to talk about it all the time," she says. "There's a lot of managing the kids' expectations. They'll say, 'Why can't you come to the assembly today?' I'll say, 'I can't come to the assembly because I'm working. But I can pick you up and drop you off, and that's the deal that we've made.'"

McCauley agrees that communication is key. As her own kids have gotten older and she's become more established in her business, she's figured out new ways to make everything run more smoothly. Now that her children are 10 and 13, for instance, they all do their "homework" together.

So, if she has work to do in the evening, she'll bring her laptop downstairs, and she and the kids will all work in the same room. When the kids are finished their homework, McCauley unplugs, too.

Include kids in business

Paula McNamara runs her own talent agency, Playgroup Enterprises, out of her Toronto home. Her daughter is younger than McCauley's children, but McNamara still has a similar strategy of "working" side by side with five-year-old Madison when there's a deadline to meet while her daughter is at home.

"I'll let her sit next to me in my office and quietly colour, because some things do have to get done in a certain time limit, and there's no getting around that," says McNamara. "It's also nice to try to make the kids feel involved with the business."

McNamara, who has been a talent agent for 15 years, started her own agency in 2005. A month later, she became pregnant. She wasn't able to take any maternity leave, which is often the case for small business owners. But the upside of a home-based business was that she didn't have to be away from her infant all day. She hired some part-time help with the baby and was still able to spend a great deal of time with Madison.

Now that her daughter is in school, McNamara makes it a priority to work around her school schedule. Whenever possible, she puts work on hold after school so she can fully engage with her daughter.

Work around school schedules

Eva Cooper of Wakefield, Que., also sings the praises of working around your children's schedule. She opened her own retail business — a clothing store called Boutique Burro Borracho in Wakefield — in 2005 when her daughter, Delilah, was three. Since she has staff, Cooper has always been able to leave the store in time for the end of school, and then she'll just pick up the laptop and start working again after her daughter has gone to sleep.

"And Delilah's always been an early riser, so I just start my day early," she said. "Even now, she's on the bus at 7:30 a.m., so I go to work at 7:30 a.m. If you can mirror their schedule with yours, it works really well."

Now that Delilah is 10 years old, Cooper felt the time was right to expand. So this fall, she opened up a second store in Ottawa's Glebe neighbourhood. Much to her daughter's delight, she called the new boutique Delilah.

"Growth is good," Cooper said. "After you do something for several years, and it works well and you've got the system in place, why not? I think it's good to think about the future as well."

As children get older and become increasingly independent, there's more time to focus on the business.

"With young children, it all goes by pretty quickly," she said.