

## Style Plus

# When Stay-at-Home Moms Want a Second Job

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**L**ike many women, Susan Koehn, 38, has always liked jewelry. But the former environmental lawyer at the high-powered D.C. firm of Crowell & Moring never expected to develop a successful career as a bead stringer.

In 1996, two years after the birth of her second child, she began designing and selling jewelry. Today she markets her products to local stores and has a Web site along with a busy schedule of showings in private homes in the Washington area.

Though she may not have the title of partner or a corner office overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue, Koehn says she's "much happier" working at home, enjoying the creativity of the work and the flexibility of her schedule.

"My kids come first," she says. "They are why I quit working in the first place. My children will not be kids forever and I do not want to miss out."

Many moms of young children don't have the luxury of contemplating whether to take time off from the workplace, much less which career to choose when they return. They need the income to feed and clothe their children, and they will accept any job that pays enough to cover basic needs.

Yet for those women who have made the choice to stay home with their children beyond the time provided by a maternity leave, deciding when to reenter the workforce and finding the right career can be challenging.

"Women who have been home with their children may do a reevaluation of their priorities and may have a different fix on the world," says Judy Mueller, president and executive director of the Women's Center in Vienna. Many women return to their previous employers, but a surprising number try something new.

Some, like Koehn, use their time at home to reinvent themselves, unleash their creative side, or to pursue new interests. Then the notion of returning to their prior work becomes unthinkable.

"It can be a productive time to think about what to do next," says Peggy Orenstein, author of "Flux: Women On Sex, Work, Love, Kids, and Life in a Half-Changed World" (Knopf, \$14). "Men can do this too, but it is more so-



cially acceptable for women to stop and take a breather, though it comes with some downsides, such as losing retirement benefits."

Carol Kaplun, 45, already knew she would look for a different career when she left her job as a research assistant at the International Monetary Fund in 1989, when her oldest child was 2. After a mom in her son's play group provided tips on finding time to study and on courses available at the University of Maryland, Kaplun took part-time classes in pursuit of a nursing degree, fitting her school schedule around that of her family's. Eight years after enrolling in her first course and 12 years after leaving the IMF, she graduated with honors from Maryland's School of Nursing in Baltimore and got a job as

a clinical research nurse at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda.

Whether moms have a particular career field in mind when they decide to return to the workforce, they need to navigate a series of challenges.

Topping the list is often a mom's desire to work around her children's schedules, not only so she can still attend the school Valentine's Day party or chaperon a class field trip, but also so she can be available to help with homework and not have to seek last-minute baby-sitting coverage on snow or vacation days.

This might mean finding work with a short commute. It also means finding an employer with a progressive attitude toward working

women in general and toward moms in particular.

“Many women out of the workforce decide they never want to go back to a job with a boss who gives them no autonomy,” says Laraine Zappert, a clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University.

There is some measure of acceptance of parental responsibilities and of the needs of working parents that didn’t exist a generation ago, including many more part-time job opportunities for professionals.

“The workforce has changed dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years, and has come to include so many women with children,” says Marcia Brumit Kropf, vice president for research and information services at Catalyst, a New York-based research and advisory organization. “So it comes as less of a surprise to employers when women want to return after having been away for a couple of years.”

Yet a 2001 Catalyst study of women born between 1964 and 1975 revealed that 68 percent said commitment to personal and family responsibilities is a barrier to women’s advancement in their careers. And while the concept of a part-time attorney or executive is not so aberrant today, employers often pay less or offer fewer benefits to part-timers than to full-time employees.

A second obstacle is employers’ general attitudes toward unpaid work experience. The hiring committee typically wants to know about an applicant’s recent experience, so the longer a mom is out of the workforce, the harder it can be to return.

“Employers have a difficult time understanding volunteer work,” says Jill Miller, executive director of the D.C.-based Women Work! The National Network for Women’s Employment.

A third hurdle women face is their own lack of confidence or insecurity about the career world. Kaplun, the nurse, admits she was “scared to death” about returning to work. “I kept imagining the worst scenarios, such as sick kids, husband on a business trip, staying up all night to study, and being too tired all the time,” she says.

Similarly, Koehn, the jewelry maker, says she was initially her own biggest obstacle. Despite much support from family and friends, “I felt silly not taking full advantage of my education and experience as a lawyer” when considering a career to pursue. “For years I hesitated in expanding my business, thinking that I should return to law.”

Many stay-at-home moms wonder if they can still accomplish much in the professional world and question their capabilities. In fact, author Orenstein found in her research that low self-esteem is chronic among mothers who don’t work outside the home.

“It’s almost like an amnesia of the fact that they were once professionals and always will be professionals,” says Zappert, author of “Getting It Right: How Working Mothers Successfully Take Up the Challenge of Life, Family, and Career” (Simon & Schuster, \$25.95).

Zappert attributes some of the anxiety of moms returning to the workforce to the fact that they are for the most part in uncharted territory.

“They can’t just look at senior women in the firm and say, ‘Oh, there’s the model that I will follow.’”

Moms reentering the labor market may also have to cope with the psychological issue of what constitutes a good mother and wife.

Many women who stay home with children hesitate to make any demands on their spouses or children when it comes to housework. Yet their return to the workforce requires a whole family effort, including a redelegation of household issues.

“It’s tough for moms to let go of control because there is a certain satisfaction of thinking you’re the center of your family’s world. That is still what it means to be a mom in our culture,” says Orenstein.

To make a successful transition back to the workforce in any career field, a mom needs to maintain or build new skills and networks and possibly seek out career guidance. Locally, the Information and Career Advisory Network sponsored by the Women’s Center matches individuals seeking to research their career choices with established professionals in more than 100 career fields.

Moms can network and research jobs on their own as well. Laurie Horvitz, 42, left her position as a lawyer with the federal government in 1991 while pregnant with her second child. In the six years she stayed home to be with her children, she did some pro bono legal work and served as a volunteer on the Montgomery County Ethics Commission. Knowing she wanted to eventually return to some kind of legal practice, she monitored legal job listings and wrote a résumé that emphasized the intellectual aspects of her volunteer work. She also took a bar review class in preparation for the Maryland bar exam, to be better qualified for suburban jobs that would not entail a long commute.

“I remember studying in the bathroom while my kids took really long baths,” Horvitz says.

Gaining a Maryland law license proved to be an excellent move; she was hired as a contract attorney at a small Bethesda firm. Though she still works part time, she proved to be a valuable asset and was recently made a partner.

Today’s economy is more sluggish than that of a few years ago, making the job market more difficult to enter and reenter. Once a mom has stepped out to stay home with her children, it can take much work and great determination to get back to the professional level that she reached or to redefine and restart her career.

Experts offer some suggestions to moms considering a return to the workforce:

- Define your parameters and assess your caregiving options. Do you need to be home when your child gets home from school? Do you want to be available to take your child to a doctor’s appointment? Do you have a partner, another relative, or paid help who can assist in

taking care of your child?

- Know your own bottom line when it comes to on-the-job flexibility. What would you wish for? What would you settle for?
- Get your family on board with you. Think of your job hunt as a challenge for the family rather than just for the mom. In a family meeting, list all you do and figure out ways to share the burden with other family members.
- Don’t be apologetic or embarrassed to admit to potential employers that you have a life outside of work. While you may not want to ask questions relating to family-friendly policies in the initial interview, you should seek out other employees in the organization who have children and talk to them about how they juggle work and family life. Check magazines for lists of companies that have won awards for their family-friendliness.
- When developing your résumé and during interviews, capture the value of your activities and volunteer experiences during your job hiatus rather than apologizing for or belittling them.
- Stay active in professional organizations and keep up with trends in the industries that interest you. Do some freelancing or consulting work in your field.

## Resources

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- 9to5, National Association of Working Women — [www.9to5.org](http://www.9to5.org); 800-522-0925.
- National Partnership For Women and Families — [www.nationalpartnership.org](http://www.nationalpartnership.org); 202-986-2600.
- Women Work! The National Network for Women’s Employment — [www.womenwork.org](http://www.womenwork.org); 202-467-6346.
- The Women’s Center — [www.thewomenscenter.org](http://www.thewomenscenter.org); 703-281-2657.
- Catalyst — [www.catalystwomen.org](http://www.catalystwomen.org); 212-514-7600.
- Career-Intelligence — [www.career-intelligence.com](http://www.career-intelligence.com)

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