



The secret of my success

Elizabeth Noe, Cheryl Saban and Rita Srivastava talk to a number of female partners to find out how to navigate the tricky waters of partnership and motherhood

Can women be successful law firm partners and successful mothers? When we asked female partners at our firm, Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP, whether great partners can also be great mothers, the answer was: “It’s difficult, but worth it.”

We interviewed 20 Paul Hastings’ women partners with children (‘partner-mothers’) about how they manage partnership and motherhood. These 20 partner-mothers work in 11 offices in the US, Asia, and Europe. They have been partners from three months to 30 years.

They are litigators, transactional lawyers and counselors. Their children range from newborns to newlyweds. They gave birth or adopted when junior associates, just before making partner, and several years after making partner. Some are raising their children as single mothers and others are raising their children with significant others, from stay-at-home caretakers to investment bankers to senior executives.

Our partner-mothers reported struggling with common issues regarding partnership and motherhood: How will I be able to spend enough quality time

with my child? How can I be available 24/7 for my children and my clients? How can I give my all to my clients? How will I find time for business development? How can I travel for trials or deals and still be there for my children? How can I avoid missing out on too much at work or at home?

Problem solving

They also reported using remarkably similar tools to solve these issues and we walked away with the following ten helpful hints on how to make it work.

1. Put a support team in place – and use it

Have support at home *and* in the office in order to balance the demands on your time as a partner and mother. London litigation partner Michelle Duncan said: “It is important to have the ability to walk out of the house and be confident that your husband or nanny or grandma will handle issues that your children are having and will call you if there is a problem.”

At home, women partners seek assistance from a partner, a spouse, a nanny, a babysitter, family members, or daycare centers. Hong Kong corporate partner Vivian Lam said: “I am lucky to have people helping me with the housework and chores so that when I get home I can focus on spending quality time with my children.”

In terms of a support team at work, take a close look at how you can depend on people, whether it is your assistant or the people that are staffed on your team. Take the time to develop the associates with whom you work. To the extent that you can delegate, do so. “Part of the beauty of working at a large firm is having resources to spread work around,” said Carla Walworth, a New York litigation partner.

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate

Communicate early and often with those who help you care for your children. One partner sits down with her husband once a week to calendar important events. They ask family, friends, or a nanny for assistance if neither is available for an important commitment. The sooner they reserve these dates on their calendars and the calendars of those who back them up, the easier and less stressful they find it to come up with a plan that works well for everyone.

Communicate with your child’s school. Not all teachers recognise the constraints on a working mum’s schedule. Reaching out to a teacher at the start of and throughout the school year to ask for

advance notice of school events will help avoid scheduling conflicts.

Communicate about schedules with your team at work. Renee Gabbard, an Orange Country tax partner said: “Once I became responsible for two young children I knew I had to make sure that I got everything done – when you have more balls in the air, you have to be more productive. Being organised and communicating with my partners and my team were invaluable to that.”



Be forthright about your needs with yourself, your firm and your colleagues. Propose a plan that meets your needs and those of the practice. Be flexible and be willing to brainstorm with your team to work out an alternate solution if your proposal is rejected. Be candid about your needs and flexible in the way they are met”

Finally, be forthright about your needs with yourself, your firm and your colleagues. Propose a plan that meets your needs and those of the practice, taking into account the nature of your practice, your clients, the size of your team and your role on that team, and those with whom you work. Be flexible and be willing to brainstorm with your team to work out an alternate solution if your proposal is rejected. Be candid about your needs and flexible in the way they are met.

3. Establish your reputation and demand for your services

“Work hard and develop a reputation for excellent legal work and trustworthiness,” said Walworth. “Talented and creative people who work hard are a rare commodity – firms and clients do not want to lose this talent.”

A strong reputation and demand for your services will provide you with more flexibility as you navigate partnership and motherhood. If you are diligent, committed to the firm and practice,

produce an excellent work product, and are a person that your team can trust, you will be able to draw on that goodwill when you may need more flexibility.

An East Coast litigation partner said: “Developing trust with your clients and with the people you work with in the firm is so important. I’m a single parent and not only need to leave the office in time to have dinner and spend time with my son, but have personal commitments that often can’t

be moved on the weekends. My clients and colleagues respect my personal time, but also know that they can reach me whenever they need to while I am out of the office and know that I will get done what they need to get done – even if it requires working well into the night.”

4. Work out what matters most to you and your family, and ‘don’t sweat the small stuff’

Learn to distinguish what is important and what is not. One partner said that attending each of her daughter’s field hockey, fencing, and lacrosse games was important to her. So, she made it a point to attend those, and she cared a little less if the living room was not in perfect shape when they came home.

Another partner said: “I compartmentalised what I believed was best for my children and focused on providing what things were really important, such as their maturity, growth, and development. If I couldn’t make all of the PTA meetings or bake something for every bake sale, it just wasn’t as important.”

Another partner spoke of “red letter days” – days she reserves for her children, on which she will “move heaven and earth” to spend time with them. Her children understood that, on the rare occasion she missed a red letter day, she really did not have a choice.

5. Remain flexible and adapt

Partner after partner advised that the most important factor in balancing work and parenting is being flexible and willing to adapt. One area where flexibility is key is scheduling. Be aware that there will be times when you will go home to be with the kids and then spend a few hours after dinner or early in the morning to get your work done. Meeting client expectations is not negotiable; what is negotiable is where you are and what time of day it is when the work gets done.

“

Realize that on some days there will be no balance. On other days there will be more flexibility. As true professionals we understand this and adapt. It is what we do”

Wireless access has made it possible to work efficiently from almost anywhere. Utilising technology allows you to take advantage of your time and multitask. “Though our work is very demanding, technology allows us to be flexible about when we actually do our work,” one partner noted. “We’re no longer required to be tied to our desks to get things done.”

When working remotely is just not possible, people adapt. A West Coast partner with three young sons staffed on a seven-week trial in Kentucky was in court four days a week and flew back to California every weekend to spend at least two days with her children. “Pre-children, I would have stayed

in Kentucky over the weekend,” she said, “but it was important for me to reconnect with my family.”

Finally, forgive yourself when things do not go as planned. “Realize that on some days there will be no balance. On other days there will be more flexibility. As true professionals we understand this and adapt. It is what we do,” says Donna Melby, an employment law partner in the Los Angeles office and the global chair of the diversity policy and program committee.

6. Involve your children in what you do

Give your children a sense of what you are doing when you are at work so that they do not simply think you are vanishing into a ‘black hole’. They are more likely to realize that your work is important and to

admire and respect you for what you do if they understand it.

Jennifer Yount, Los Angeles corporate partner said: “Before I go on a business trip, I pull out the map and sit down with my children and show them where I am going. They have been to my office and met the people I work with.”

7. Combine work and family where possible

Look for appropriate ways to combine family and work. Not only does this involve your children in what you do, but it may allow you to find time for business development without giving up time off with your children. A New York partner said: “Once in a while, we will do a dinner that involves both my children





and the children of clients. Everyone has a good time and the client relationships are strengthened by the interaction.”

Realise that your role as a mother can be an asset to business development efforts. One partner said: “Many of our clients have children – and love to talk about them. Having kids strengthened my relationship with some clients because I was able to relate to them on another level.”

8. Start your family at the time that works best for you

There is no optimal time to start a family – the time is whatever works best for your particular situation. Nancy Abell, partner and global head of the employment law department, interviewed with firms as a second-year law student and asked firms

how they would react if she were pregnant during the summer program. Some firms told her that it would be “career suicide”. But, a Paul Hastings partner told Abell that law school was a fabulous time to start a family. She was a “very pregnant” summer associate at Paul Hastings and had her second daughter as a third-year associate.

One partner remarked that: “As an associate, I felt it was easier to pass the work to someone for the time you are on maternity leave. When you are a partner, and you have worked to develop those client relationships, it is more difficult to go MIA for three months.” Another partner observed that if you wait until you are a partner to have children you have more control over your schedule than you do when you are an associate using the power to delegate and set deadlines.

9. Think positively and focus on the rewards (we don’t just mean the money...)

Partner-mothers at Paul Hastings universally said you have to love what you do and believe it is possible to successfully juggle partnership and motherhood. They also said you will be making sacrifices every day and you have to believe that it’s worth it. Grace Carter, a San Francisco litigation partner, loves “the combination of really high end, challenging legal work, with an amazing clientele, and people that you really want to work with and enjoy being around. There is a great sense of pride in building the firm over the years, and watching it grow, evolve and change. And that’s what makes it worth it.”

Abell loves “both the litigation and advice work that I do, the clients, my colleagues here, and the way in which our firm is managed. My family understands that I have a passion for what I do, that I love this firm, and that we all are happier because I am happy working – even when that has meant that they made some sacrifices.”

Kristen Chang Winckler, a New York tax partner, finds it rewarding to be a role model for her two daughters. “I want

my daughters to know that they can do anything they set their minds to. So it is important that I show them that women can achieve the professional goals they set for themselves. If my daughters see that I am doing it, hopefully they will feel like they can do anything they want as well.”

“

I want my daughters to know that they can do anything they set their minds to. So it is important that I show them that women can achieve the professional goals they set for themselves. If my daughters see that I am doing it, hopefully they will feel like they can do anything they want as well”

10. Seek advice from others who have ‘made it work’

Today, we have the good fortune of learning from women who have walked the path before us and have combined motherhood and partnership successfully. Take advantage of this – ask how they did it. Not everyone’s strategies will work for you and there is not one recipe for success. The needs of a family and a career change over time, and what works right now may need to be changed down the road. With a little bit of guidance, a positive attitude, a lot of flexibility, and the will to succeed, you will find your own way to ‘make it work’. [WOMENLEGAL](#)

Elizabeth Noe is corporate department chair at law firm Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP, Cheryl Saban is an employment partner and the firm’s personnel partner, and Rita Srivastava is an employment associate and co-chair of Paul Hastings’ New York Women’s Affinity Group