

The all-or-nothing decision ^[1]

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Source: YourOttawaRegion.com

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Jan 2013

EXCERPTS:

A friend sent me an email recently. Within days of turning over the calendar, she finds herself in the unenviable position of making a big decision: do I pack in my home business and return to work full-time or do I continue the daily grind, working on ad hoc assignments, trying to make ends meet and being a dedicated mother-of-two at the same time?

Either way, she's looking at a huge fiscal hit. Daycare for two pre-schoolers is certain to set her back more than her mortgage (approximately \$1,900 per month in Ottawa). If she stays home, she faces the prospect of a smaller and relatively unsteady income - not to mention the guilt that inevitably comes with shifting one's focus back and forth constantly from children to work ventures.

Certainly, there's no easy answer. A big part of the problem is the decision framework that exists in Canada, pitting career against family. Too often, the return-to-work decision tends to be an all-or-nothing venture. You either work full-time and put the kids in full-time care (if you can find it and afford it) or you stay home full-time and risk setting your career back for an indefinite period of time.

For those who would like to work, it becomes quickly evident that society doesn't truly support working mothers, no matter how committed you may be to your career. In December, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development released a study showing that women's salaries continue to lag those of men, particularly after women have children.

Before children, women in OECD countries earn 17 per cent less than their male counterparts for the same position. After the birth of a child, a woman typically earns 22 per cent less than a man for the same work. The OECD report cites lack of affordable daycare options as one of the biggest deterrents to women increasing their work hours.

Even those who are able to find daycare are frequently criticized for institutionalizing children at a young age - "throwing the baby out with the bath water," as a couple of Quebec doctors pitched it a few years ago.

Those, like my friend, who would be quite happy to shelve or downshift their careers temporarily to get through the pre-school years discover relatively quickly that society doesn't offer a lot of support for the stay-at-home or part-time-working parent either. Women who choose to stay home for an extended maternity leave are often criticized for halting feminism in its tracks. And there are few childcare options for the woman who would like to have the best of both worlds - working part-time, or full-time during anti-social hours, for example.

Canada is among a handful of OECD countries that has no national childcare strategy. But while the New Democratic Party and other left-wing groups frequently advocate for a national standard in childcare, there is little discussion on how to help women - who continue to be the primary caregivers of young children - find care solutions that would fit the true complexity of their lives.

One of the biggest hurdles to the creation of a national childcare strategy is that most of us are only in the system for a handful of years. Once we get our kids into school, we stop thinking about childcare, let alone talking about it. And in an aging society, many of us come to see that our precious taxpayer dollars may be better spent on health care and home care for the elderly, rather than on kindergartens.

But it's time to change the decision framework concerning mothers and work in this country. We need women to work in order to drive the economy. We also need men and women to have children who will grow up, work, drive the economy and support our aging population. Surely we can do better than we currently are as a society. We can work to find childcare solutions and build supports into our workplace policies that would allow men and women to make choices for their families without making it seem like one has to directly trade work time for family time or vice versa.

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