

# WE GOT A WORK-LIFE BALANCE

It can be hard work juggling a job and kids. **Jane Yettram** finds out how four families have managed just that and changed their lives for the better



Amanda and Chris earn less but are happier now they see more of Max

**F**orget the latest trainers or must-have toy. The best thing you can give your child is time – which is why more and more parents are ditching the nine-to-five in favour of family-friendly flexibility. In 2003, many parents gained the legal right to request flexible working. Now, 47 per cent of mums and 31 per cent of dads vary their hours doing flexi-time, and others work part-time or from home. With UK dads still working the longest hours in Europe (an average 46.9 hours per week – over 11 hours more than French fathers), there's still some way to go. But there's no doubt that a good work-life balance benefits everyone. It means parents are more productive, less stressed, more healthy and – crucially – have more time for their children.

**Case Study 1** Amanda Alexander, 36, is married to Chris and is mum to their son Max, 4. She used to be a project manager and is now a life coach. “Being a project manager meant lots of travel – 18 months in Zimbabwe and projects in the Netherlands and Ireland. Even when I was UK-based, I’d sometimes spend the week away from home. So once I became pregnant, I worried how I would manage. I tried to negotiate part-time working and was told, ‘There is no such thing as a part-time project manager!’ “After Max was born, combining work and motherhood was tough. I remember being called to meetings hundreds of miles away with less than a day’s notice. It was hard on my husband Chris too. I tried to find alternative work without success and my confidence tumbled.

“ We stopped the rollercoaster and got off, and we are very glad we did! ”

“In the end, I called a life coach. She asked me to write down the things I’d love to do if I had the choice. I wanted to run my own business, help people, write, be creative and work from home. The obvious career move was life-coaching. “From thinking ‘I can’t’, my attitude changed to ‘I can’ and I did some training. I planned to save for six months, then leave and set up my coaching practice – but I was made redundant, so while building the business, I took a part-time sales job. “Setting up Coaching Mums ([www.coachingmums.co.uk](http://www.coachingmums.co.uk)) has been fulfilling and I can help mothers build confidence and make a plan to achieve success. “Although I don’t earn as much as I did, I love what I do. This makes me a happy mummy and you know what they say: happy mummy equals happy family! I can take a day off when I want, take Max to swimming lessons and cook healthy meals. I’m proof that you can do whatever you set out to achieve if you are positive and don’t give up.”

**Case Study 2** Eddie Noel, 42, is married to Sandra and is dad to the couple’s daughter Emma, 4. Eddie, a trust-company director, went part-time and started working from home after Emma’s arrival. Sandra left her job to become a part-time accountant and breastfeeding counsellor. “We waited ten years for a baby and when Emma was born, I took three months off work to support Sandra. We immediately bonded as a family, even getting up together for night-feeds. “As I had previously practised as a chartered accountant, we decided to set up a company doing accounts for small businesses. After the three months, I worked from home on our business and returned to doing trust work for 20 hours a week. “Sandra gave up her job as an accounts manager and, when Emma was a few months old, began working on our business during nap times. Then when Emma was 18 months old, Sandra trained as a breastfeeding counsellor. “Initially, working part-time meant I was able to meet Sandra and Emma for lunch or at a playgroup. But as the trust company grew, my part-time role began to be more than part-time. So, from next month I’m going to work purely on our business. I don’t want our quality of



Eddie and Sandra laugh lots now they spend more time with Emma

lifestyle to suffer – plus I’ll be able to walk Emma to school from September. “Emma’s had a balance of time between Mummy and Daddy and we’ve been able to fully take part in her early development. Each day has brought something exciting – new words, new experiences and, most of all, lots of laughs. We’ve never laughed so much in all our lives!” “We stopped the rollercoaster and got off, and we are very glad we did!”



Debbie says husband Gary has supported her change of career wholeheartedly

**Case Study 3** Former IT manager Debbie Beckwith, 37, is married to Gary and is mum to sons Nathan, 4, and Edward, 2. She now teaches evening classes and is training to be an antenatal teacher. “Working in IT had been very challenging and enjoyable – I never imagined I’d do anything else. But when Nathan was five months old and I went back full-time, things were different. Nothing was said but I felt I was being tested as to whether my priority was work or family. “I was pulled in both directions. I could have put in more time at work, but I was restricted by childcare hours. And I thought 8am to 6pm was long enough for someone else to look after my child. “Six months into my maternity leave with my second son, Edward, I decided not to go back. Maternity leave had given me time to think. Before, I’d been too busy working to figure out what I wanted to do.

“I came up with the idea of evening work, so I could be with the children during the day and my husband could look after them while I worked. “As I’d been in IT for nine years, teaching IT evening classes to adults seemed a good step. I contacted my local college and was lucky enough to get a contract. Having done voluntary work for the NCT in the past, I also decided to train as an antenatal teacher. Once I’m qualified, I will be able to schedule classes around family life. “My husband has backed me completely, even changing his hours to be home in time for me to go to work. When someone believes in you, you can turn dreams into reality. “We benefit in so many ways. We know our children are being brought up in the way we want. If one child is unwell, I can be there for him. And there’s a calmness and stability that wasn’t there before.”



Rachael's new career is much more compatible with family life...



**Case Study 4** Rachael Taplin, 36, is married to John and is mum to their daughter Annabel, 5. Rachael used to run an advertising agency and now publishes an online magazine.

“Setting up the advertising agency with my husband John had been brilliant but once I had Annabel, it was no longer my main focus in life.

“I went back to work full-time when Annabel was just six weeks old. Juggling everything became too much – the guilt was tremendous and work wasn’t fun any more, but I was on that treadmill and couldn’t get off. I became ill with terrible postnatal depression and finally realised what was most important in my life – my family.

“Annabel was two when we closed the business. Although it was daunting, I knew the only thing that mattered was that work should be on my terms.

“Coming from an advertising background, setting up a community magazine seemed a great idea. The response was brilliant but I needed lots of advertisers to cover print and paper costs. So I decided to put it online and create a community website, developed with the help of a friend (who now works for me from home whilst caring for his baby son!).

“Lack of confidence and fear of failing

were my biggest obstacles, but I realised that the product really worked. Within my first month, I made over £2,000 from advertisers who wanted their details on the site. Now I’m franchising the idea so other parents can do the same thing (see [www.mumsincontrol.co.uk](http://www.mumsincontrol.co.uk)).

“The whole family is much happier and relaxed now. I work around Annabel and her school time and I don’t have to apologise for wanting to be a mum first and a business woman second. I can be at my daughter’s assemblies and pick her up from school. And I even get time to bake (terrible!) cakes instead of buying them!”

**find out more**

- **Citizens’ Advice Bureaux (CAB)** can give advice on employment rights. To find your local CAB, look in your phone book or visit [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk), where advice is also available.
- **Department of Trade and Industry (DTI)** has information on your rights, the law on flexible working, part-time work and parental leave on its website at [www.dti.gov.uk/employment/workandfamilies](http://www.dti.gov.uk/employment/workandfamilies).
- **Family-friendly part-time jobs** for mothers can be found at [www.mumandworking.co.uk](http://www.mumandworking.co.uk), along with advice. You can link to jobs in your area, find out about setting up your own business and discover franchising opportunities.
- **Mother at Work** is an online magazine for working mums with news and features on fitting work around family. Visit [www.motheratwork.co.uk](http://www.motheratwork.co.uk).
- **Working Families** offers information and advice on flexible working and your rights. Call the free helpline on 0800 013 0313 or visit [www.workingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk), which also has forums so you can share experiences with other parents.

**Angela Baron** is an employment expert with The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, and is mum to three girls aged 10, 8 and 4



**EXPERT TIPS**

It’s usually easier to negotiate flexible working in your current job than to find alternatives. To give your request for flexibility the best chance of success:

- 1 Think in advance** about any negatives for your employer and how you’d overcome them.
- 2 Make suggestions** about how the job could be changed to accommodate your request.
- 3 Do research** so you can quote statistics on how flexible working hours improves performance and productivity.
- 4 Be prepared** to negotiate a compromise with your superiors.

However, if a career change is a better option, consider:

- What new skills you might need. You will then need to find a recognised training course or study from home.
- Whether freelance work or self-employment is an option.
- Whether you can negotiate a career break, allowing you to leave the door back into your old career open while you try out a new one.