



THE PARALLEL LIVES OF OUR IPS #6

Bridging parenthood and consulting – a guest
article from Karin Hogsander

1. How would you describe your current family situation?

I am married and have three teenage children and a cat. We live in Central London and have a large extended family – none of which lives in the UK, unfortunately. So there's a lot going on – the kids all go to different schools and we tend to go back and see family in Sweden as often as we can. Both my husband and I work full-time, and always have done.

2. What does a typical day look like and what types of family decisions do you make on a daily basis?

I am often away – I've always worked full-time, so the family has to function without me around, and that works very well. The kids get up around 06.30am, wolf down a quick breakfast and leave the house between 7am and 7.15am. My husband and I often walk with one of them to the bus stop/train station when we can. Three times a week, we have help to clean up after breakfast, sort the house out and help with the laundry. The kids get home between 5pm and 8pm, depending on after-school activities. The eldest (16) is responsible for washing all of their clothes and the younger two (14 and 13) are responsible for making dinner. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. My husband gets home between 7pm and 8pm most nights. If I am in London, I often do not get back until later, as I tend to work from a workspace. We do not eat together as a family during the week, and the kids do their own homework and revision without much daily support from us. During the evenings, we often help them with applications for orchestra camps, ordering new school uniform, paying for martial arts lessons, setting up new computers, planning instrument grading exams or revising for major things like GCSEs. Having three teenagers is like helping three slightly lost adults who do not quite know how to organize their very active lives yet.

As I am not around much, it's not really possible for me to make decisions on a daily basis when away from home. We've got different areas of responsibility and I can't really influence what goes on at home on a daily basis. Inevitably, my husband does a lot of what needs to be done there and then, and I am responsible for things that can be done online. I am responsible for ordering all the food for the family and making sure there is enough of everything. This often results in us having ten liters of milk but no butter or cheese. I also do some of the admin that can be done via email, such as dialogue with other parents and shopping for uniforms or sheet music. But I can't say I really make many decisions on a daily basis; decisions need to be made jointly in advance and the rest of the family manages the household.

3. How do you achieve a work–life balance as a parent?

I don't. No parent does to the extent they'd like to. But I try! My husband and I constantly prioritize and talk about how to organize the family. We've set up structures around us that enable everything to function with both of us working, but a lot of compromises are required.

I have learned a lot from others about how to organize a home with two working parents, and I try not to compare myself with others. I accept all the help I can get to make things work at home. Personally, I have not tried to change the way I work much. By being an IP, I can sometimes take time off between projects, which has been a great benefit.

4. What are the biggest challenges you encounter, both at home and at work? And how do you get around them?

I've chosen to take the challenges mainly at home rather than at work. We have set the family up to work without me around and created a flexible support structure that has adapted as the kids have grown.

When it works, it's great, but it doesn't always work. I had prepared myself for the inevitable "Why are you never home like other mummies?" before it came, so it probably hurt less. And it's not been frequent; as the children grow, they see the benefits of having two working parents.

I know that I don't work well in a 9-to-5 environment. I like challenging and complex projects and fast-changing environments. I tried for many years to work less, but I always found it hard. As an IP, I can manage this by either working or not. For me, alternating periods of intense work with time off works better than trying to manage my hours.

5. What advice would you give to IPs with families?

Accept that it requires effort from everyone involved

It can be demanding on everyone to be part of a dual-career family. I have a super-supportive husband who luckily doesn't travel much with work, and the kids are used to me not being around. They have had to take on more responsibility and be more independent than if their parents had been able to be there every day and every evening. When I'm around, I tend to go to all the school events I can, as, for long periods, I can't attend anything and my husband may have to go to four school concerts in one week. I can't recommend highly enough marrying someone who agrees with having a dual-career family if that's what you want. Otherwise, I don't see how it could work.

Prioritize and don't compare yourself with others

It's a matter of prioritizing and accepting that some areas of life will be a mess for part of the time. But that's probably better for me and the family than trying to organize everything perfectly. Most mothers in my area don't work, and there is no way I can do the bake sales, charity fundraisers, coffee mornings and wine tastings that some of the other parents regularly engage in. It just can't happen with my work and travel schedule, so I try not to compare myself with the neighbors. Be honest with yourself and your partner about what you want to achieve and what you're going to have to leave.

Agree expectations

For me, it's been important to be clear with all my family that, when I'm working, I can't expect to be part of all the decisions and everything going on. I don't have to speak to my kids or my husband on a daily basis because I trust them to get on with it and let me know if I'm needed for anything. They don't count on me during the week, and I don't interfere. I have time to focus on the project at hand, and can stay away an extra day if needed without the world falling to pieces. I don't get upset if I miss an important event, unless I have taken



a day off. I don't try to plan anything at the end of the day when I'm working – I rarely make it out on time. On the other hand, I try to limit weekend work as much as I can. In my work life, I've been clear about what my availability is and what travel and working hours are acceptable. However, I've generally taken the approach of creating a support structure that enables me to do whatever I need to do at work rather than impose limits on which projects I can take.

Allow some extra capacity and slack

Work-life balance isn't only about work and daily family routines – it's also about the social structures and planning that comes with family life. I found that setting ourselves up for the predictable demands isn't enough; there's slack needed because, in the middle of it, life happens. Planning holidays, supporting a sick parent-in-law, moving house, changing schools, researching tutors for GCSE revision, planning a 40th birthday party or supporting a friend through a divorce doesn't happen all the time, but there's generally always some sort of crisis brewing. The setup has to provide for some unpredictability and extra capacity, because it is needed more often than not.

Accept all the help you can get/afford

We used to have an au pair when the children were little and we needed someone to walk them to school. We also have a wonderful multitask cleaner who's been with us for 10 years and we send our children to our parents for the school holidays. When the kids were little, we had plan A (a parent home), plan B (an au pair home), plan C (a grandparent/babysitter home) and plan D (an emergency childcare agency already set up to come at a moment's notice). Yes, I used plan D once, handing a baby and house keys over to a stranger to make a flight on time. If you ever think you may need to be able to do this for work, it's a good idea to set the structures up in advance.



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