

THE MUMPRENEUR

myth



MORE TIME WITH THE KIDS, BEING YOUR OWN BOSS... THAT'S THE DREAM OF MUMS GOING INTO BUSINESS. BUT IT'S A FAR CRY FROM THE REALITY, REPORTS CARRIE HUTCHINSON

The image of a mum working from home is idyllic: she has the laptop on one knee and the baby on the other while she watches the cash roll in. Delve a little deeper, though, and the reality of being a mumpreneur is a little different.

"The best way I can explain being a work-from-home mum is that I feel like a fridge," says Eleni Mitakos. "I constantly have a low buzz - also known as nonstop anxiety - and people are always emptying me out, but no one seems to go to the shop to refill me."

Mitakos, 40, runs Galmatic, a company that offers car-care workshops and defensive driving courses for women.

Having worked as a trainer for a number of large organisations, she knew that's where her skills lay and decided to combine that with her love of cars. Initial ideas for Galmatic were sketched out while she was pregnant with Zoe, now 5, and Mitakos eventually left the corporate world in 2007.

"When you first start your business, you're open 24/7," she says. "You end up getting cranky with the kids because they're talking to you when you're trying to concentrate. Of course, they haven't done anything wrong."

Although she employs help when she can't take Zoe and her sister Ava, 3, to a workshop or a meeting, early on, Mitakos made the decision not to use full-time childcare. >

(above) Jen McKinney has her hands full running her consultancy company from home while raising five boys.



Working mum Alexandra Wardle with her sons.

But that means Mitakos spends three to four hours each night working after the kids go to bed. "It makes for a very long day," she confesses.

Not all mumpreneurs choose this route. Jen McKinney, 42, who launched Hearsay Language Learning Downunder a week or so after she'd had her fourth son, soon realised she needed to use daycare. "It becomes harder as the kids get older," she explains. "Once they hit the one- to four-year-old age bracket, you can't leave them on their own. You're hoping they're constructing something with Lego, but they're actually flushing things down the toilet while you're taking a phone call. You can't run a business from home with small children running all over the house."

Even with childcare, McKinney has to put in extra hours. "Four days out of seven, I'll work after they go to bed, and sometimes I'm up at 5am if I have preparation to do" in the weeks before the school holidays, she works day and night to ensure she can take the time off.

Mandi Gunsberger, 35, knows all about the late hours. "I work until 11 or 12 at night and then I'm up at six with the kids."

When her first daughter, Hayley, was 14 months old and Gunsberger was pregnant with her second, Polly, she decided to start an online magazine called *Babyology*. Four years later, she has 14 staff working for her. She's lauded as a mumpreneur success story,

but while that's certainly true, she doesn't believe the realities of working from home with a couple of small kids demanding your attention are always portrayed accurately.

"I've done so many media stories where you're shown with a baby in one arm, you're stirring a pot and you're answering a work call," she says. "That's not the way it happens in the real world. I do get time with the kids, but the downside is that I don't have any time to myself. If they're having a nap, I'm on my computer or on the phone. Then they go to bed and my work hours are 7pm to 11pm."

Despite talking about these challenges, Gunsberger has found those comments tend to be edited out. Dr Sara Charlesworth, associate professor and principal research fellow at the University of South Australia's Centre for Work + Life, suspects this is a reflection of a recent shift in society's attitude. She points to a 2010 study that shows two startling changes: a growing proportion of both men and women support a more "traditional" division of labour between husbands and wives; and there's an increasingly popular belief that women who work full-time

aren't as good at being mothers as stay-at-home mums.

"I think it portrays a lack of ease with seeing women in a more typical full-time workplace role," Charlesworth explains.

"If people said, 'This is really tough,' it wouldn't fit into that nice stereotype [of a mother being at home and caring for her children]. We're happier with the idea of a woman working from home because it seems she's as available for her children as if she weren't doing paid work."

This glossing over of the facts means Gunsberger often receives emails from other women saying, "Wow, it looks so easy!" - a misconception that's echoed by a recent survey commissioned by Huggies. It showed 66 per cent of mothers consider starting their own business and 63 per cent want to pursue a business idea so they can work in a manner that suits having small children. Gunsberger says it's time for a reality check.

"You're up seven days a week until all hours, catching up on work because you can't do it if the kids are around," she says. "Well, you could, but only if you don't mind them sitting in front of the TV all day."

Mentor and business adviser Jennifer Dalitz, 39, of Sphnixx, an organisation focused on achieving gender balance in leadership roles, has seen some women manage to do it all, but warns there are limitations. "It's OK if you have a small, service-based business with a few clients," she says. "But you have to put in care arrangements so you can operate undistracted." >

"YOU'RE HOPING THEY'RE CONSTRUCTING WITH LEGO, BUT THEY'RE FLUSHING THINGS DOWN THE TOILET WHILE YOU'RE ON THE PHONE"



Mother-of-two Mandi Gunsberger says being a mumpreneur isn't as easy as it looks.



Business owner Eleni Mitakos with her daughters, Zoe and Ava.

"I'LL HAVE A BRILLIANT IDEA I WANT TO BRAINSTORM, BUT I ONLY HAVE A THREE-YEAR-OLD TO DO THAT WITH"

That's something Alexandra Wardle learnt the hard way. "I was on the phone to a customer and Tyler was yelling, 'Mummy, I've done a poo. Come and wipe my bottom,'" says Wardle, who developed Cubies, an IoT tray for freezing breast milk and baby food, in 2008. "I was trying to cover the phone so she couldn't hear him, but I had to say, 'I'm so sorry, I've got the kids at the office today.'"

Having worked as a drug rep for a pharmaceutical company, Wardle had no idea what she was letting herself in for when she set out to put Cubies into the marketplace. "I started researching and going to factories with Tyler in his pram," she says of the 12 months of development. "As you can imagine, they didn't take me seriously because I looked exhausted. I had a baby in a pram and I was trying to learn about injection moulding."

According to Dalitz, Wardle's story is quite common. "For anyone starting a business, it's a minefield," she explains. "A lot of the women I work with are very good at what they do. The challenge, when they become a small-business owner, is that they have to be the general manager. Suddenly, they're the IT help desk, the procurement manager, the customer relations officer and the expert who delivers the product. And if you're combining all this with young children at home, it can be a recipe for disaster."

These mumpreneurs have implemented structures to help make life easier for them and their kids, including setting strict work hours, enforcing no-email Sundays and teaching their kids signals that indicate whether a phone call is related to work (so silence is required) or one they can continue to chatter through. But there are bigger hurdles to tackle, from having to take toddlers to meetings to overcoming a sense of isolation.

"I miss the interaction of working with other people when I'm trying to generate ideas," says Mitakos. "We have trainers, but they're not always here. I'll have a brilliant idea I want to brainstorm and I only have a three-year-old to do that with."

And yet every one of these women still loves what she does. After all, there's no commute, there are far fewer office politics, and they can be there to watch their children grow, day in, day out.

"It can be fun and it's rewarding, but it has its challenges," says Gunsberger. "You need the right personality. I'm a workaholic, so I can't wait to check my email at night. But if you want to relax and watch TV with a glass of wine, you might as well forget about it." ■