

BALANCING ACT

This month, we've spoken to Belfast mum, Debra McVicker, about the challenges of running her own internet supply business while caring for a growing family.



Tell us a little about your family.

My name is Debra McVicker and I live in Belfast with my husband Matt and our two children, Nia (8) and Luan who is almost 3.

What job do you do and what time commitment is involved?

My sister and I recently launched a website called www.hamptonblue.co.uk. It's an online boutique for jewellery, accessories and gifts. We stock everything from costume and semi-precious jewellery to occasion bags, scarves, photo albums, candles, gifts for children, soft toys – the list goes on.

I have two mornings a week when my little boy goes to day care and my daughter is in school, so that's when I get the bulk of my work done and meet people regarding the business if I have too. Then once the kids go to bed I'm usually on the computer for a couple of hours and for a while at the weekend. My husband is also self-employed, so he can be flexible and helps out if I need extra time and my family are very supportive and step in when needed.

What are the positive aspects of

your job and why did you choose it as a career?

I used to work as a Training and Events Coordinator for a major charity, which I really enjoyed. However, when I had my son we were faced with the prospect of having to pay childcare for two children and juggling family and work commitments like so many other people. I'd always thought of setting up some kind of business and it was a case of now or never!

Now, I can work from home and pretty much fit the business in and around family commitments and appointments and I get to pick my kids up from school and spend more time with them. It's been difficult and its very much early days for us, but I'm extremely proud of what myself and my sister have achieved in such a short space of time.

What sort of problems does being a working mum create for you?

The fact that I'm self-employed means that if I don't do the work, no one else will and if I don't work extremely hard then the business will fail and I won't get paid

– that's not an option!

It's difficult to balance it all right now, as there is so much to do and only so many hours in the day. I feel that sometimes when I should be paying attention to the kids, I'm dealing with a work issue or vice versa, but I'm hoping that balance will come in time.

Do you feel that you've got your work/life balance right, or do you sometimes feel that it's all a bit much?

I generally have a better work/life balance now than when I was employed by an organisation; however, I think I could improve on this in time. Also, the fact that I am trying to build my own business is so satisfying.

What effect does your career have on your partner's life?

It's a new business, so financially it's tough going right now and the fact that we launched the website in the middle of a recession has been a challenge, so I suppose this puts more pressure on my husband to be the main earner in the family.

However, the fact that my working hours are really flexible means that we can help each other out and juggle family commitments more easily than when we were both employed by other companies/organisations.

What effect has your career choice had on your children?

My son is too young to understand, but I think my daughter likes the fact that I can pick her up from school, do her homework with her and she doesn't have to go to after school care anymore. It means that she can also participate in after school activities, such as swimming and gymnastics and she has me as her taxi driver!

Will there be a time in the future when you might decide to not work?

I'm in the fortunate position now to have best of both worlds and a job that is challenging, but allows me to be really flexible. As much as I love being with my children, I really need to have something for myself and running Hampton Blue



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Beat the bugs

With the cold and flu season well underway, it's definitely time to give our immune systems a little care and attention, writes Ali Fell.

Surrounded by a cacophony of sneezes and wheezles, there's no doubt in my mind that there are lots of bugs around. At this time of year, there's always a wealth of germs to choose from, as classrooms across the country serve as great big Petri dishes. The average healthy adult will succumb to two common colds a year, children can expect between three and eight, and babies may even pick up 10 in their first year, but in my house, it seems, the streaming noses begin in September, and, if we're lucky, dry up about April.

As children's immune systems develop, infections are inevitable and contagious diseases spread easily around a household. However, bolstering your immune system can help limit the effects and duration of an illness, and it's worth taking a

few steps to build up your family's immunity to help ease all your sneezes over the months ahead.

- Five-a-day: Fruit and vegetables of any description are a good beginning, but if you want an extra boost, remember the brighter the colour, the greater the health benefits, and aim for a traffic light of fruit and veg every day - some red, some yellow and some green. And there are some fruit and veg that are especially useful - try Vitamin C-rich kiwi fruit and Vitamin A-rich Chinese cabbage. Add garlic and ginger whenever you can - they are full of anti-bacterial, anti-inflammatory and anti-fungal properties. Bananas and carrots are full of Vitamin B6, which helps in the production of antibodies to fight infection. Also keep up your protein intake with healthy options like white meat, fish, nuts and seeds.

- Sleep deep: A good night's sleep allows the body time to recharge, renew and repair, so try and make sure you get a good six to eight hours a night.

- Move it: Exercise helps boost the immune system. Aim for 30 minutes, three or four times a week. However, be warned, excessive exercise can hinder the body's ability to fight infection. If you're ill, it's important to take a break from exercise to allow your body to concentrate on healing.

- A little extra: If you maintain healthy habits and a good diet, you shouldn't really need dietary supplements, but when we're busy, feeling under the weather and nursing a houseful of invalids it's easy to let things slip, so a good multi-vitamin can be useful. And at the first sign of a cough or cold, supplements like Echinacea and Goldenseal can help to minimise the infection. Vitamin C won't stop you catching bugs, but can help deal with the symptoms of colds and flus. And a teaspoon of bug-busting Manuka honey every day will help fight off all sorts of nasties.

