



Claire Johnson is shown at her Mississauga, Ont. home on Friday May 2, 2008 with her children Natalie (right) age 2, Evan (on lap) 8 months, and five-year-old twins Byron (left) and Brock (over her shoulder). THE CANADIAN PRESS/Frank Gunn

Career mom speaks on work-life balance at pilot conference for working moms

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TORONTO — Claire Johnson was yearning for something more after the birth of her twins, but the piano lessons alone just weren't cutting it.

Three months after delivering sons Brock and Byron, the new mother was seeking something to help ease the feelings of claustrophobia at home, but neither tinkling the ivories nor serving on the board at a local nature centre was truly doing the job.

Along with feeling "a little caged up" at home, Johnson was also dealing with the transition from life as an independent career woman to motherhood.

"My girlfriend has a good term for it - she calls it love shackled," Johnson said. "You end up with these wonderful children, but you can't get away from them at times, and so I was really looking for this maternal bliss that wasn't happening."

Now she's a mother of four - the five-year-old twins have been joined by two-year-old Natalie and eight-month-old Evan. And Johnson said she realized the answer for her was balancing time at home with part-time work at CIBC Mellon, where she serves as vice-president of product management and client integration solutions.

She was among the panellists of career moms sharing insights and strategies for success with other working moms and moms-to-be during "Making It Work."

The panel was part of a pilot project half-day conference of the same name aimed at providing expectant moms, women on maternity leave and those heading back to the workplace with information on parenting while also addressing issues of integrating work and home life.

During the hour-long discussion, moderated by pregnancy and parenting author Ann Douglas, panellists shared their experiences while fielding questions from working women in a cross-section of industries, including law firms and the companies ADP Canada and Unilever.

Reflecting modern-day concerns of the work-life balance, the candid discussion shifted effortlessly from the benefits of being plugged in by BlackBerry to the value of a good lactation consultant.

Johnson spoke of her decision to go to her boss to discuss restructuring her work schedule, drawing laughs when sharing she initially asked to work one day a week.

She now works Mondays through Wednesdays, but said there is flexibility to go to the office two days a week and to field conference calls if needed on her off days from home.

Johnson said one of the challenges faced by women wanting to work part-time is that employers aren't used to it and often don't know how to accommodate - factors she said shouldn't be a barrier for working moms seeking to pursue it as an option.

"I think women need to understand they are hugely valuable, and to make sure that what they're asking for is reasonable, but at the same time asserting themselves to say "This is good for you and it's good for me and I'm worth it," she said.

"I think a lot (of women) apologize, they kind of skulk out of the office when they leave right at 5 sort of hoping nobody is too offended. The reality is, somebody has to raise children, and these women have a lot of knowledge to contribute to the workforce, so why not support both?"

The conference was organized by LifeSpeak, which designs customized workshop series for clients to give employees an opportunity to learn from experts on a range of topics from time management to caring for aging parents.

The organization has speaker rosters and team members in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal but from there they also service Halifax, Ottawa, Edmonton and Fort McMurray, Alta., among other cities.

LifeSpeak CEO Aimee Israel said the idea stemmed from a suggestion from one of their law firm clients about a workshop where attendees could learn from panellists about "how they made it all work."

"In this case, it's often around the transition to and from maternity leave where they have highly talented women that they're trying to keep engaged while they go off on leave and help them ease the transition, and it's a difficult demographic to keep connected."

Feedback from the event has been positive, with 93 per cent of respondents ranking their overall experience as "excellent," and one comment describing the panel discussion as "incredible." Some 92 per cent of respondents said they believe that by sending them to the event, their organization has taken an active step towards recognizing and dealing with the challenges faced by working mothers.

Trisha Gaskin, who is expecting a son in June, said even though this is her second go-round with motherhood - she has a three-year-old daughter - the conference was a great refresher.

"It's important to know you're not alone when you face problems because you get so caught up in your own world that you think you're the only one," said Gaskin, a development project manager at CIBC Mellon. "Going into my second pregnancy ... you kind of think you already have everything figured out, but then you need some people to remind you of things."

Johnson said the seminar was a great opportunity to hear other people's stories, while also validating her feeling that parenting works differently for everyone.

"It gives people a whole bunch of different tools they can pull out of their toolbox and try on and see what works for them," she said. "I think that sharing just gives people more choices, but it also validates the fact there's no one solution."