

Top litigators to get advice on potty training

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At the Toronto offices of Borden Ladner Gervais next month, some of the country's top litigators will listen to a seminar on how to resolve power struggles with their children. The month after, they may get a lecture on how to avoid the perils of overscheduling their children, or choosing the right school.

The program is a recognition that even the most accomplished experts in the profession are often ill-equipped to deal with the daily demands of parenting.

So, they'll hear lunchtime sessions featuring a range of experts: a parenting coach talking about power struggles, a nutritionist talking about how to win over picky eaters -- not the usual subject matter in the firm's boardroom.

It is one of the latest innovations in the struggle to balance work and family among the most time-crunched professions. Just as other family-friendly workplace initiatives such as on-site dry cleaning, concierge service and take-home meals are aimed at alleviating the stress of getting chores done with limited time, these on-site parenting sessions are designed to save research time that working parents would otherwise have to spend at night.

The Parents At Work project, being launched this week by a company specializing in parent education programs, is being spearheaded by Aimee Israel, a lawyer who left corporate law after she had children because the hours weren't compatible with her family life.

"People aren't just leaving when they have kids, some are leaving in anticipation of having a family," she said. "We can't change the work -- there will always be clients, always be exacting deadlines. But this is a way for employers to offer a program that meets the needs of working parents by bringing the information they need directly to them."

The topic of work-life balance in the law profession is also to be addressed in a Canadian survey by the research firm Catalyst, which later this fall will release its findings on how lawyers across the country are juggling the competing demands of their careers and family.

In an earlier survey of lawyers in the United States, the research firm found that 67% of women cited commitment to personal and family responsibility as a barrier to advancement in the profession.

Robert Bell, a senior litigation partner with Borden Ladner Gervais, says he doesn't think his firm has ever been family unfriendly, but concedes the demands of the job can leave little time to accomplish much on the home front.

"It isn't just professional services firms, everybody's life just seems to get busier and busier ... It does become difficult to find the time for everything in the day," he said. "This helps us too, because people are more productive when they're not stressed out trying to find information and it's right before them."

The Parents At Work program is also being introduced at the accounting firm Ernst & Young this fall.