

Home and away

WHAT'S THE BEST CAREER OPTION AFTER YOU HAVE A BABY – FULL-TIME, PART-TIME OR NO WORK AT ALL? Jacinta Tynan INVESTIGATES.

Without giving too much away, Julie Rafter has a slight chip on her shoulder about being a stay-at-home mum. In an upcoming episode of the drama *Packed to the Rafters*, Julie, a new mum again after a 20-year gap, has an argument with her 26-year-old daughter, Rachel, about priorities.

"It's not all about a husband and kids for me ... I want more than that," Rachel says pointedly.

"There's nothing wrong with being a wife and mum," Julie snaps back, a little too defensively after being up all night with her new baby.

Rebecca Gibney, who has played the likeable suburban mum for two years, can relate. Apart from bit parts, she did not work for four years after the birth of her son, Zac, in 2004. "I had waited so long to have a child that I didn't want to give up those precious hours with him," says Gibney, who gave birth at 39.

Then came the Rafter family. "It was synchronicity," says Gibney. "My agent called and said, 'It's a page turner,' and it was. It was perfect timing."

It was also family-friendly. *Packed to the Rafters* producer Jo Porter co-ordinates the production schedule around the parenting commitments of the cast and crew: weekends and school holidays off, and a break every 10 weeks. "To get the very best actors to commit to a long-running series, we need to help them juggle the demands of raising a family with those of the show," Porter says.

Gibney and I are standing on the lawn of the Rafters' house, sharing photos of our sons on our iPhones as she waits for her scene. Since I became a mum eight months ago, this whole work-life quandary has been of particular interest to me, and I am intrigued by how other mothers pull it off.

Gibney feels grateful for the benefits her position as an in-demand actor affords her, and says having a "great husband" also helps. Richard Bell, an artist, has a studio near Zac's school, handy for school

pick-ups. However, like any mum, she finds it a constant juggle, and some things have to give. "Some days I'm gone before Zac wakes up and get home after he's gone to bed and that's very difficult," Gibney says. "The other day he said, 'I don't want you to be my mummy any more,' because I couldn't make it to his sports carnival. It's heartbreaking. But then I brought home some crickets for his praying mantis and all was forgiven. I explain to him, 'Mummy has to work. I am a working mum.'"

As are the majority of mothers in this country. Some 60 per cent return to work before their child is one, primarily for financial reasons. Career satisfaction is another one: making good use of the skills they have amassed. But not everyone has that luxury. Jobs are not easy to find for people trying to look after small children, and many mothers leave the workforce rather than stick it out full-time. It leaves Australia with one of the lowest rates of employed mothers with children under five in the OECD.

It is this exodus of talent that the government's new Fair Work laws, which took effect on January 1 this year, are meant to redress. Employees with children under school age now have the right to request flexible work arrangements, as well as the right to request an additional 12 months' parental leave on top of the standard 12 months' maternity leave. But six months since the Fair Work laws kicked in, have they made a difference?

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, herself a full-time working mother of two, admits that when the laws took effect she was

expecting an influx of complaints to her department – the only recourse for parents who feel their requests for childcare-compliant work hours are being ignored.

But so far, she says, there has been nothing. As much as she'd like to think it's because employers around the country are embracing the flexible working-hours legislation, she says it's more likely because the laws "lack teeth". If employers do say no, it has to be for "good business reasons", she says. "It's ill-defined and you have no right of review. The government's view is, 'Let's use this standard as an educational tool for business.' We have made submissions that it should be strengthened."

Part of the problem, Broderick says, is that most Australians have a deeply held cultural belief that a good mother is someone who is always with her children. "When you bring that belief into the workplace, it's no wonder we are where we are."

When I returned to work, I was able to negotiate my hours as a news presenter around the availability of childcare, and was given the day shift instead of →

Photography by NICK LEARY



"THE OTHER DAY MY SON SAID, 'I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE MY MUMMY ANY MORE' BECAUSE I COULDN'T MAKE IT TO HIS SPORTS CARNIVAL. IT'S HEARTBREAKING."

Family affair
Actress and
working mother
Rebecca Gibney.

Styling by Aleksandra Beare and Amanda Mahoney. Hair and make-up by Charlie Kielty. Rebecca Gibney wears vintage Toni Maticevski dress, pink kunzite and diamond ring and stack of silver bracelets from Jan Logan. Background is Porter's Paints wallpaper

late nights. But working mothers are often regarded as a nuisance who must be tolerated, creating rostering nightmares for the boss. As one mother told me, “Make no mistake. We are being punished for having a baby.”

Ilana Crawford, 31, had to leave her job because her boss insisted she work full-time after she’d had her baby. So when she was offered another job, as a sales assistant at an electronics retailer, she didn’t take any chances, and read up on the Fair Work laws. “The boss knew I was up to scratch with what I’m entitled to and my rights,” she says. “I told him I couldn’t work a full day because daycare shuts at 6pm, so he offered me 10 till four, three days a week.”

“There’s fear around employing mums because of a false belief that they’re too demanding,” says Professor Marian Baird, head of Sydney University’s Women & Work Research Group. “Yet [research shows] mothers are very committed at work, productive and dedicated. At work they work because they have to leave on time to get the kids. It’s called ‘precision parenting, precision working’. They’re not slack.”

While many mothers are rethinking their careers because working full-time is too difficult, there are a reassuring number who are doing it their way. Eloise Aschberger, 31, is mother to eight-month-old Zane, and works three days a week in her job as a sustainability manager at Lend Lease. She says the property group has “upped the ante” in recent years, offering 14 weeks’ maternity leave on full pay in a deliberate move to attract and retain women. “I ended up swapping [my full-time role] to something I felt would be manageable within a three-day, nine-to-five time frame, but still be stimulating enough to justify leaving my little man.”

What makes it even easier for Aschberger is that her baby boy is just metres away, in the on-site, company-sponsored childcare centre. “If I want a cuddle throughout the day I can just go and visit him,” she says. Aschberger’s partner runs his own business and so is able to manage his schedule around their child, too.

Mother-of-two Annie Mendelson, 35, also thinks she has it good. After leaving her role as a sales director for a hospitality company to have her second baby, she was rehired by the same company six months later with an offer that was too good to refuse. “I work from home when Holly sleeps and on weekends, so long as I do the equivalent of three days,” she says. “I start work earlier than I wanted to but the role is as rare as hen’s teeth so I had to grab it.” Her husband works from home one day a week to enable her to make sales calls.

The dearth of quality part-time work is one of the biggest obstacles to mothers returning to work. Those who do often find themselves on the so-called “mummy track”, accepting a dead-end job beneath their abilities because the jobs they used to have are full-time or non-existent. It’s the reason Emma Walsh founded *mums@work*, an advisory service for parents and employers: “There’s a skills shortage in this country. Yet there are skilled mums at home looking for employment, but who just want some flexibility.”

“Mothers are de-skilling to get back into the labour market,” says Broderick. “Women who used to be lawyers will sometimes do retail or hospitality because of the family-friendly hours. That has a significant cost to society. It makes good business sense to redesign the job rather than allow your best talent to walk away.”

Annie Mendelson accepted a lesser role – from director to sales manager – but says it is worth it. “I lost a title and shot down the hierarchical chain but I’m delighted because I can do the job easily. I’ll go back to being a career woman in a few years, but for now this is the right balance.”

The other huge impediment is a lack of affordable childcare. For many parents, it is just not worth their while to work. Diana Asato, 33, who works full-time in IT, says if her mother didn’t look after her eight-month-old daughter, she simply couldn’t do it. Asato would have preferred part-time work, but when she returned to her job after five months she didn’t feel it was an option: “There had been lots of retrenchments so I was grateful to have a job. I was not in a position to negotiate.” Adding to the pressure, her husband, a contractor, wasn’t working at the time.

As much as affordable childcare and flexibility might solve the dilemma for career mums, there will always be roles that simply can’t be pulled off a few days a week. When Kelly Doust, 33, became pregnant with her now 21-month-old daughter, Olive, she saw the writing on the wall. Although the publishing company she worked for wanted her to stay on, she knew her full-time job (as a publicist) could not be squeezed into less time.

“I had watched colleagues struggle to manage and I didn’t want to be checking my watch when I walked out the door,” she says. “I didn’t want to feel I wasn’t good at both jobs. The thought of it exhausted me.” Instead, Doust has forged



Time is precious
Kelly Doust and her
daughter Olive.

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a new career as a blogger and author, who has penned a craft book, *The Crafty Minx*. It helps that her husband works full-time and can support the family until her business takes off.

But what if your passion remains your original job? “Runaway mums”, one friend calls them – mums who can’t wait to bolt back to the office, far away from baby talk and changing nappies. Jacqui Vanzella, 38, is one of them. She was back at her investment banking desk within 14 weeks of each of her two children’s births, working 11 hours a day, five days a week. And she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“There was a degree of boredom when I was at home with the kids, but I knew there was light at the end of the tunnel because I was going back to work and could use my brain again,” she says candidly. “I’m happy at work. I find it motivating and stimulating. I don’t think I’d be reaching my full

potential or contributing what I have to contribute if I was at home. It works for our family that I’m at work, my husband’s at work and we have a great nanny.”

While full-time working mothers have to dodge perceptions that there is something shameful about maintaining a career, no mum is immune from copping judgements. “Every working mum has the nagging question of, ‘Is this working and is this worth it?’” says Emma Walsh. Mums become expert at cutting corners. A lawyer friend confesses to leaving her jacket on her chair so her colleagues won’t notice she’s left for the day to collect the kids from day care. *Sunday Life* columnist Mia Freedman writes in her memoir, *Mama Mia*, of doing The Afternoon Walk of Shame, past her mostly male Channel Nine colleagues still beavering away at 6pm. No wonder she bailed to blog.

But we working mums are yet to get the formula right. As Jacqui Vanzella puts it: “You just get used to that slightly out-of-control feeling.” ●

working dads

Men are also covered by the Fair Work laws: a major reform has just been introduced to the Sex Discrimination Act, giving men increased protection for family responsibilities. “It sends a strong signal that caring is everyone’s business,” says Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick. But she says fathers are still up against it when it comes to shifting their work arrangements. “When he says, ‘I’m coming in late on Wednesday because I’m dropping Tommy off,’ he might be seen as a supportive dad but he’s not [considered] a serious player. If you’re serious about changing the corporate culture, don’t focus on women, focus on men, because that leads to strong attitudinal change.”

Still, some men are bucking expectations.

Matthew Holland, 35, is a brand manager at BT Financial and father to 22-month-old Emily, with another baby on the way. He gets 60 days’ parental leave over two years, which he uses to take one day off a week. “I want to spend time with my daughter while I can,” he says.

Tim Foster, 48, CFO at Stockland property group, gets two consecutive afternoons off a fortnight to collect his two daughters from school, and starts late the following days. “When I joined, I told the MD about my situation [Foster is separated] and that it was important for me to have quality time with the girls. He said, ‘You’ll be a terrific role model.’ I believe work flexibility is critical ... If your employees feel supported they pay you back in spades.”