

Smart Talk

Carolyn Creswell: Home and work

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Carolyn Creswell on finding the time and energy for family demands, despite a busy work schedule

I recently attended a business function and was introduced to the chief executive of one of Australia's most well-known, billion-dollar-plus companies. Star-struck and slightly stumbling to make intelligent conversation, all of a sudden he recognised my name and said, "I know who you are. I was in bed reading your opinion piece in *BRW* last night. I really liked what you had to say." I was blown away! What could I possibly impart to a business icon like him?

The conversation flowed and I asked if he had any suggestions as to what I could write about. What he suggested was something close to my heart. "What I'd love to read about is how we can be great at work and give our all, but also be great parents and give our all to our families too. How can we juggle both and not feel like either side is suffering?"

As a mother of four kids under eight, I completely understand the challenge but feel like I genuinely do live a good work-life balance. So Mr CEO, here goes.

Be in the moment at work. Try to jam as much into your day as you can, so you can get away on time. Sometimes I think back to how I would behave if I were leaving the office to go overseas at 5.30pm that day. I would power through my work and have less time for lunch out or for general chat. I would go, go, go, so I could get out of the door on time.

In saying that, you may need to allocate one night a week or fortnight as your late night, when you stay back and get on top of everything.

Get yourself organised. Clear your inbox to zero (yes, it is possible), tidy your desk, car and briefcase so you can be on your 'A' game. When you are organised you will find that your mind is clearer and you can prioritise better and get through your work more efficiently.

Do not be embarrassed or hide it when you have family commitments. Treat these like you would work commitments. At the start of the year, ask your school what dates should be in your diary. Announce these proudly when you are leaving the office to attend them.

I think a lot of business people try to hide going to a special school assembly by disguising it as a work appointment. However, choose which ones are really important. In our family, my husband attends most sports days and if I can't go, records them for me. I watch it when I get home with my little sports star and relive the events. If you cannot go to every event, this does not mean you cannot celebrate it together later.

Be in the moment at home. Walk in the door and be there for your family. Resist the temptation to collapse in front of the TV and zone out. I knew after I had my fourth child that I needed to give up TV totally for a few years.

People often ask me, "how do you do what you do?", and I honestly think that not watching TV gives me an extra 10 hours a week. You can get to bed earlier too and by getting enough sleep and early morning exercise means you have more energy to give everybody.

Work out what rituals you want in your family to connect more as a group. Each January we plan what family things we'd like to do, that is, camping or skiing, and we choose a weekend and mark it on the calendar. It is amazing how that weekend comes around.

At our family dinners, we decide which child is "the chair" of our family meeting that night. We all have to answer what the high point of our day was and what we did that was kind for someone else. The chair chooses the order in which people speak.

My children love being the chair, as they see it as an important role. Not only does it give them a sense of purpose, it also brings interesting conversation to the table. It is amazing what you learn about each other's day.

We also have one special day each year when I will take one school-age child by themselves to do whatever they want for the whole day. They have to plan the day. Finally, the Creswell family favourite: every Saturday night we have a disco at home. These inexpensive things bring you together as a family.

I think my kids will remember Saturday night discos far more than any of the other more expensive things we have done together.

It is not the number of hours you spend together as a family, but the quality of time together. I believe it is not the total hours you spend at your desk that mean you have done a good job, but the quality of your output.

When you are lying on your death bed, few people would say, I wish I had spent more hours at the office.

What we do today is creating the memories for us and for our children to look back on for the rest of our lives. So Mr CEO, as parents, we are responsible for making them great ones.

Next week: Virgin Group founder Richard Branson

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