

PARENTAL LEAVE

When baby means 'bye-bye'

Entrepreneurs find creative ways to cope with maternity leaves, which can throw a wrench into the works of small operations

BY DIANNE RINEHART

When Annabel Fitzsimmons's daughter was two and a half weeks old, the young mother and owner of a Toronto yoga and stress-management company, OmZone, found herself sitting in an interview for a contract. "I was hired, which was great," says Ms. Fitzsimmons, 35, who returned to teaching part-time when Elizabeth was only three months old. "But I can't believe I was sitting in an interview when she was that little!"

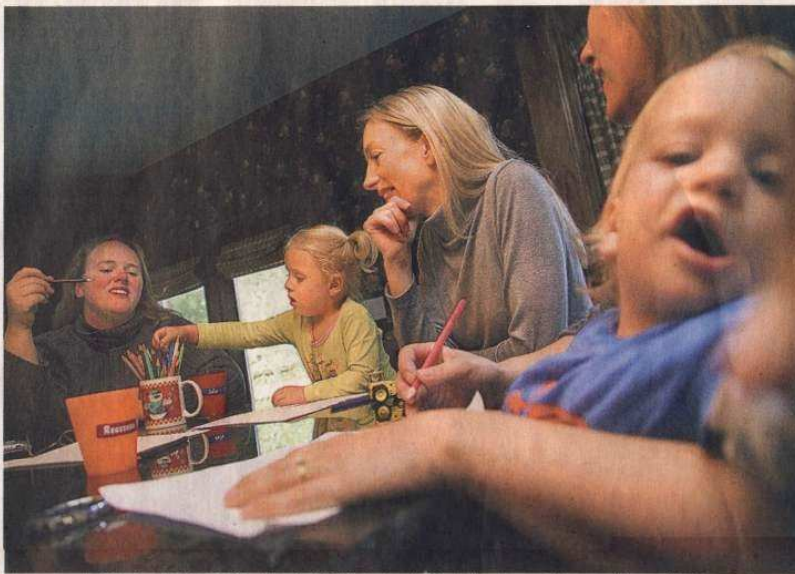
Meanwhile, Tricia Mumby, 34, one of four co-owners of Mabel's Labels, a baby-accessories business based in Hamilton, fit her maternity leave into exactly 10 days — the time between when she gave birth and when one of her co-partners did. "I got the call she had her baby and my mat leave was over."

Welcome to the world of maternity leave for small business owners. They aren't eligible for benefits themselves and often can't afford to take leave, yet they are obliged to work around their employees' leaves and keep their jobs open for their return, no matter how important those positions are to the company's success.

Lee-Anne Arkell, founder of Peekaboo Child Care Centres, with 15 owner-operated and franchised facilities in southern Ontario, knows the challenges of losing workers to maternity leave. Ms. Arkell, who founded the operation in 1999, now employs 450 people, 90 per cent of whom are younger than 30. And all but five are female.

Ms. Arkell, who had her second child after she founded the company — "I had her on a Saturday and went back to work on the Tuesday" — says she's feeling the stress of maternity leaves in her management team.

"They're in their late 20s and early 30s, and out of nine su-



The co-owners of Mabel's Labels in Hamilton bring their kids to the home office, where a nanny takes care of them while the partners work. From left are Tricia Mumby with her daughter Ruby Lyons, Julie Cole, her son Clancy O'Keefe, and Julie Ellis.

supervisors, three are on mat leave or ready to go," she says. "That's one-third of my supervisor staff, so it makes it interesting."

To cope, the company created assistant supervisor positions at every centre. "We do a lot of training so they're ready to take over for the year while my supervisors are on mat leave."

And because so many employees aren't ready to come back after one year, Peekaboo will hold their jobs for a second year, to encourage them to come back when they're ready rather than go somewhere else down the road. Otherwise, all the "work you've put into training staff is gone," says Ms. Arkell.

That said, small business owners could benefit from government help with staff training, she says.

Government assistance for small businesses whose workers are on maternity, sick, or elder-care leave is something the Canadian Federation of Independent Business has been demanding for years, says president Catherine Swift.

"Everyone supports people being able to take care of their babies, but can't [they] give some relief somewhere else?" she says. Ottawa should "help them bring someone else in for a year, or give them a holiday on paying employment insurance premiums."

"Show an olive branch," she says she has urged the government. "So far there's been nothing, of course."

Sick and elder-care leaves can take a toll on small businesses, but maternity leave really throws a wrench into the works simply because of its duration, she says.

"The doubling of parental leave was devastating to many businesses," she says. One small business owner she knows had five employees — and three went on maternity leave the same year.

Also, women who operate small businesses — like Ms. Fitzsimmons, Ms. Mumby and Ms. Arkell — aren't eligible, Ms. Swift says.

"Increasingly, women own businesses," she says but aren't eligible for any income replacement for time they manage to take off. Ms. Swift says there should be another system entirely for social programs such as maternity leave, elder care and sick leave that would allow entrepreneurs to take leave, too.

That's a notion Ms. Fitzsimmons supports. In the months before her daughter's birth, she was working as much as possible to generate savings to carry the family through. She worked until her seventh

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Tricia Mumby, one of four co-owners of Mabel's Labels

month, then started back in growing increments three months after giving birth, taking on early morning and evening classes for the first year, so she could baby sit while her husband was at work.

"When she napped, I did all my administration and writing," says Ms. Fitzsimmons, who is also a playwright. "It was the biggest juggling act I've ever had to do."

She found it upsetting to have to choose between taking care of her baby and taking care of the family finances. "If I was working for a corporation I would have had mat leave."

In addition, the lack of maternity leave discourages female entrepreneurs from going into business if they're thinking of having a family, she says.

"I know countless people who take a job to qualify for mat leave," she says. "If there was a program the government could set up for women in small business, that they could contribute to, I would be happy to," she says. "It seems counterintuitive that someone who makes money and supports themselves all of a sudden doesn't have support."

In the end, Ms. Fitzsimmons and her husband went into debt so she could take four and a half months off. "So now I have to work, work, work, even more, and if we want another one, it will be the same cycle."

While Ms. Mumby knows that drill, she gets support from her partners, Julie Cole, Julie Ellis and Cynthia Esp, who have 11 children among them. The four mums, in fact, work from the basement of one of their homes, hiring two babysitters to care for the children upstairs. That means the kids are entertained while they work, but they can go upstairs to deal with problems — and breastfeed.

Sometimes the four work through the entire weekend, and have cots and cribs set up so they can put the kids to bed, and hold meetings at night. "You nap when you can, feed your people, play with the kids, and go back and do the work," she says.

"There's no such thing as a mat leave when it's a small business and you're so involved in management," says Ms. Mumby. "We can't afford to hire marketing or production managers. To replace us would be expensive and difficult." Even during their almost non-existent maternity leaves, there was an understanding that if there was an emergency — such as the Internet going down — the person whose responsibility that was would fix it, on baby leave or not.

"A small business is another baby," she says. "You don't want to miss its first years, any more than your child's."

In fact, babies haven't stood in the way of the growth of Mabel's Labels to date, and likely won't down the road. The four mums have taken their babies on the road to Ottawa and trade shows across the land, breast-feeding them all the way.

And through it all, as the babies have grown, so has the business: launched in 2002 it now sells its product line worldwide, with one third of sales in the United States, and employs 10.

"It was pretty crazy when they were babies and we were dragging them all over the continent," says Ms. Mumby. "But it was fun."

Special to The Globe and Mail