

Combining Family Work and Paid Employment: The “Mother” of All Remodeling Projects

an interview with Kristin Maschka by Kathy A. Johnson



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After a four-and-a-half year process, Kristin Maschka's book *This Is Not How I Thought It Would Be*, hits bookstores Oct. 6. Subtitled "Remodeling motherhood to get the lives we want today," Maschka's book examines the interconnected assumptions, or "mental maps," that plague our society and make it harder for us to create lives that include family and paid employment in any workable way. Maschka proposes a set of new beliefs we can begin to act upon, and at the end of each chapter, lists "remodeling tools," things to do and books to read in order to make changes. (For more information or to read an excerpt, visit [our website](#).)

Maschka, a long-time Mothers & More member and past president, spoke with us just prior to the launch of the book.

Why did you decide to write this book?

(Laughs.) I'd always wanted to write a book, even since I was a child, but I didn't know what I would write about, what I had to say. The experience of motherhood was so life-changing on so many levels that I decided to write about it.

For one thing, I thought I was a modern woman, my husband was a modern man. I thought we were a modern couple, but after Kate was born we reverted to the 50s and couldn't seem to create the life we wanted to have. I wanted to write about why that happens to mothers and couples. There's a disconnect between how we want it to be and how it really is.

Also, when I was the president of Mothers & More, we got tired of seeing people who we didn't necessarily agree with, or who didn't quite get it covered in the press. It seemed like the only people who got attention were authors of books. Some were stridently for working moms, some stridently supported stay-at-home moms, some were memoirs, some were very academic. I didn't feel like anything out there spoke to the perspective I gained through Mothers & More, nothing treated the challenges mothers, fathers and families face today as the collection of interconnected issues that it really is, and nothing provided the practical tools to do something about it.

What are some of the “mental maps,” or underlying assumptions, we have that are related to parenting and paid employment?

Here are two examples we talk about a lot in Mothers & More. First, the assumption that *mothers are the ones responsible for and naturally better at children and family* shows up in our daily lives all the time—don't in-laws and friends always talk to mom about things like play dates, for example? Or hearing people refer to fathers as “babysitting” their own kids. Underneath those things is the assumption that mothers are responsible for kids.

Another assumption is that *jobs are one-size-fits-all, 50 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, for 50 years of our lives*. I bumped into that when I was pregnant and proposed going part time. My boss couldn't even consider it because of his requirements to have a certain number of full-time employees. If he gave me a part-time position, it would be like him losing half an employee. When I did find a part-time position, I felt lucky, even though it had no benefits at all because even I assumed a "real job" was full time. This assumption that jobs are one-size-fits-all is in our own heads and the heads of those in the world around us.

How are mothers affected by the old "mental maps"? How are fathers affected?

In our family, before we remodeled our lives, I lost my career, identity, time for myself and a paycheck, but had a great relationship with my daughter. My husband kept his career, paycheck and time, but didn't have time with his daughter and quite frankly was in danger of losing his marriage because I was so frustrated. Every family is different, but some form of this happens to many of them.

In addition, mothers tend to beat themselves up for not doing more for their children. Fathers tend to be looked at and think of themselves as heroes for spending any time with their families because they spend more time than their fathers did.

How do those assumptions hurt mothers, fathers and children?

Because these are imbedded in workplaces and the way things work, it makes it really tough to make life like we want it, so we blame ourselves when we can't have the lives that we want.

One of my favorite examples is that lots of families beat themselves up about not being further ahead financially compared with past generations. So many families don't realize that even though they have more employed hours, they have less disposable income. The fixed costs of housing, health care and child care have gone up so much. They really do have less disposable income, but not because they are frittering their money away.

What happens when we as a society combine the relationship of mother with the role of caring for the family, the actual work involved?

When we talk about "motherhood" as a job or profession, or "mothering," we confuse the relationship with the work of caring for our families. Unintentionally we imply that mothers are the only ones who can and should do the work, and the work disappears. That makes it harder to share with spouses. If it's not really work, and it doesn't take any time, what's to share? That assumption keeps him away from doing the work that would help him build a relationship with his kids.

Another thing, this confusion of the role and the work devalues both mothers and the work of caring for family. If caring for family is not really a productive activity, then the ones doing it aren't very bright and aren't doing much at all. There's an assumption that mothers are kind of dull and boring. And if caring for family doesn't take time, workplaces don't have to make time for it.

What are some of the new "mental maps" you encourage parents to have in your book?

I'll take one that is straight out of our Mothers & More beliefs: *A mother is more than any single role she plays at any given moment in her lifetime*. This is all about really believing that mothers as women have every right to have a full life that includes a relationship with children, work, any other interests they have. We're weighed down by the assumption that mothers are completely fulfilled by caring for family. It's important to state that we are more than mothers.

Here's another example: *mothers and fathers share the responsibility and are equally capable of caring for children and home*. That doesn't necessarily mean splitting the work 50/50, but means that both share the responsibility no matter how the tasks are divided. I really wasn't acting like I believed that early on. I acted as if I was more capable because I simply had more practice. It took conscious effort on our part to change that and ask ourselves, if we really believed this, how would we be acting, what would we be doing differently?

You mention that you're not crazy about the term "work/life balance." Why not? What term(s) do you prefer? Why?

Work/life balance is a good example of how mental maps creep into our language and stay there unexamined. Work/life balance implies that work and family are separate and should stay that way. In the book, I use the example of a teeter-totter with the work on one end and family on the other and the crazy idea that all we need are enough tips and tricks to find a perfect equilibrium and then keep it there forever. The term also makes mothers feel that if they can't stay balanced it's their fault.

For many of us, family and employment are both parts of our lives and they ebb and flow each week and each year. I like the terms work/family integration, work/family flow, or career/life fit. We underestimate how much language reinforces old assumptions. For example, I never refer to myself as a working mother anymore. I use the word employed. I've also struck stay-at-home mom from my vocabulary, too. Until we change language, it's hard to change our thinking.

You note that one of the last "remodels" of societal structures occurred in the 1930s and 40s, with, for example, the creation of Social Security in such a way to codify assumptions about men, women and money, and the Fair Labor Standards Act which established the 40-hour work week and overtime laws. What would you like to see remodeled now? How can we do this?

There's a lot of remodeling I'd like to do! But I'll give you one example. One that is front and center right now: health care reform. The way health insurance is now really reinforces the idea that jobs are one-size-fits-all, full time. I'd really like to see health insurance be both portable and proportional as a way of supporting changes in the workplace. Portable means I can take my health insurance if I change jobs or go out on my own. Families today find themselves changing jobs a lot, especially when making changes to take care of family. Proportional means being able to have access to health insurance in a way that is proportional to the job. If you're part time at least you have access to some insurance, maybe your employer can pay half of what they would normally pay for your premiums. This could help employers and employees consider changing job structures, because one of the biggest barriers to taking a job with a different structure is completely losing health insurance benefits.

If we want to remodel, what we can do first is to learn to see all these issues through the lens of the assumptions about mothers, fathers and families. When we speak up about issues we care about, we can state the beliefs we want supported. The second thing to do is not to underestimate the power of the small things we do locally. Changing minds, having conversations locally is what adds up to very large change.

In the book, you say that "...mental maps are the connection between the personal and the political." Can you give some examples of this to our readers?

One example of that connection is the assumption that *caring for family isn't really work, it's just what mothers do*. This assumption leads to things in our personal lives, like the very annoying question,

“What did you do all day?” And politically, this same assumption is why there is no Social Security credit for time and years caring for family because it’s not considered work.

Another example is the “jobs are one-size-fits-all” assumption. In our personal experience, this makes both mothers and fathers feel like square pegs in round holes at work. On the political side, it gives us a wage gap between mothers and everyone else because it’s so hard for mothers to fit that one-size-fits-all job.

How do you think the current economic climate will affect families’ abilities to find more work/family integration?

The current economic climate presents new challenges and new opportunities. On one hand, it feels even riskier for either mothers or fathers to ask employers for what is fair in terms of compensation or benefits or for an alternative job arrangement. On the other hand, there can be opportunities. Any time there is a lot of change, there is room for new ideas and new ways of doing things. I’ve heard of some workplaces offering alternative job arrangements to save money so they don’t have to lay anyone off.

Currently the data tells us fathers are losing jobs more than mothers. As shifts occur in families, that almost forces those families and those around them to shift assumptions about who does what, and can accelerate the rate at which we challenge the assumptions about how families share both family work and paid work.

Do you have any advice for those of us seeking change in the way our family and paid work is structured?

One of the important things is to change the conversation with our spouses by stopping the blame game and the finger pointing. Take a step back. I call this “building a balcony” in the book. Step far enough back to see our lives in the bigger picture and tell each other, “It’s not our fault we can’t make this work, but if we understand what’s going on, we can work together to get a better fit.”

On the employment side, have conversations with your spouse so you know what your ideal is in terms of employment. What are the combined employed hours that make sense for your family? You may not be able to get to that right way, but at least be on the same page as far as what will be a good fit.

On the family work side, have a conversation with your spouse about how family work is being shared. Use a concrete list. If this is a regular conversation you have, it won’t blow up when somebody’s frustrated.

How did Mothers & More members help inspire and contribute to the book?

There are so many ways both the members and the organization contributed to and inspired this book. Members will see the Mothers & More voices in the book. About 80 percent of mothers quoted were past or current members. I used a lot of quotes from the POWER loop, and from members who responded to my surveys when I was looking for stories to illustrate something. We should have a contest—how many members can you identify as you read the book?

Personally, Mothers & More continues to be my own lifesaver. Members, both in my chapter and online, over the past nine years, are always the ones who have been there when I need to talk with people, and understand what is happening with me as a mother. All the conversations I’ve had and

work I've done as a member and as president have contributed to the book and inspired me to want to write it.

Kathy A. Johnson is Forum's features editor. She is unchaptered, and lives in Lithia, FL.