

Life in LAMORINDA

Returning to the Workforce: Former Stay-at-Home Moms Rise to the Challenge

By Yvonne Lefort, M.A.



Lynne Wilkins with her daughter Elena and their dog
Photo by Andy Scheck

Like many stay-at-home mothers, Moraga mom and attorney Renata Sos had to decide when the ideal time was for her to go back to work. Although she loved being a mom to her twin daughters, Kate and Jenna, and was actively involved with their activities, she missed the professional world. After almost 6 years of being a stay-at-home mom, she decided to return to work when her daughters were in first grade.

For many moms who have opted to stay at home to raise families, the beginning of a new school year may prompt the question of whether it's time to go back to work. Some decide to resume working for financial reasons. Others go back because they're bored or miss feeling a sense of accomplishment. Many mothers also enjoy having a personal identity outside of motherhood.

Tasha Ziegenbein Rasilla of Moraga decided to go back to work because she missed her job and needed more intellectual stimulation. "I look forward to going to work—doing things other than laundry, dishes, and kids' stuff," she says. After staying home with her children, Max and Haley, until they were in preschool, she returned to work in construction project management.

Being at home gives moth-

ers the opportunity to rethink their priorities and decide what they want and need in their next work situation. Many, in fact, do not want to go back the same type of work they had before children but aren't sure what they want to do. However, the majority of mothers report that their number one priority is job flexibility, such as the ability to telecommute and to set flexible hours.

Sos, for example, works from home once a week and can do her job anywhere although she mostly commutes to San Francisco. She gets up very early in the morning to work 2-3 hours before her daughters get up. "It's worth it," she says, "because I can be home by 6:00 p.m." Rasilla works part-time and has a flexible schedule, only working when her children are in school.

So, are these mothers happy with their decision to return to work? The answer, for the most part, is "yes." For Lafayette mother Lynne Wilkins, the decision was a mixed bag. For her, having a job that was meaningful and fulfilling was most important. She took a full-time position doing program administration and teaching English to immigrants when her daughter Elena was 2. Ideally, she would have stayed home longer but the right job presented itself at the right organization. Although she has some flexibility, she wishes she could have been home more and been more involved with her daughter's first years of school.

What advice do these mothers have for other mothers who are thinking about going back to work? Rasilla says, "If you're worried or don't feel self-confident, it's like riding a bike—your skills will come back." Sos encouragingly states, "The years you spend at home are valuable years—they give you wisdom, perspective, and a track record of being able to multi-task. Go into the job market with a positive outlook. You will find you have

a receptive audience." Wilkins advises, "Try to get fulfilling work. It helps in moments when you can't be with your kids."

If you're a stay-at-home mom thinking about going back to work, here are some tips:

1. Stay in contact with former employers. Rasilla made sure that hers knew that she eventually wanted to return to her job. Years later, when they asked her if she would come back, she jumped at the opportunity—but asked for the flexibility she wanted.

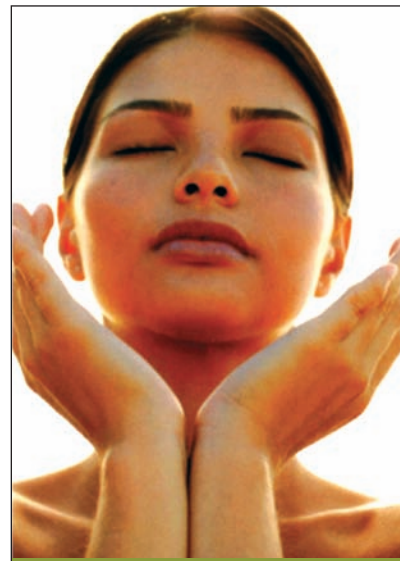
2. Do volunteer work, ideally something that will help you professionally down the road when you're ready to go back to work. While a stay-at-home mom, Sos remained professionally active by working as a board member with the California Board of Accountancy. Later, when an in-house counsel position opened at one of the big accounting firms, they recruited her.

3. Even if you eventually want full-time work, consider taking a part-time or temporary job to start out. Wilkins taught one night a week at a community college before landing her current position with a non-profit agency.

4. Make sure your skills are up-to-date or learn new skills. Take classes through adult education centers, community colleges, university extension programs or online.

5. Network, network, network! Join a professional organization, send emails to people in your field, go out to lunch with former colleagues. Talk to all your friends, even those who are stay-at-home mothers. You never know whom they might know.

Yvonne Lefort, M.A., is the mother of a 4th-grader and a career counselor in Moraga who specializes in helping re-entry mothers. Her website is www.mothersinbalance.com.



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