

MOMS DO KNOW BEST

When Cara Mullin had to choose between her children and a career, she chose both, writes **Alice Rhodes**

CARA Mullin is not the first woman to find her working life turned upside down by motherhood — but in her case it has been the route to independence and her own business.

The successful “mom entrepreneur” of Hillcrest, Durban, used to be a travel consultant with Seekers Travel. She moved to its online business when that was launched, ending up managing it.

HOME OFFICE

Then her first child, a daughter, was born in 2002, and Cara, now 37, began to work from home for the travel website.

That was when she first got the idea of a “parenting hub” website.

“I remember when my daughter was about one year old; I didn’t know anyone with babies, and I wanted somewhere to take her for a fun day — actually, I wanted an animal petting farm, but I did not know where to look, and I got the idea for this website.”

But she was earning a salary at the time, and had working conditions that suited her, so she didn’t act on her hunch that a go-to site for parents could be a winner.

A few years after this, her second child, a son, was born — and at about the same time, the travel.co.za people decided they wanted her to work from the office, for the same salary.

TIME TO QUIT

But her flexible hours with her children were not negotiable for Cara, so, with a little capital and her hunch, she quit her job and, in December 2004, launched kidzworld.co.za from her dining-room table at home.

She designed and developed the website herself, a site “where parents can find businesses, shops, classes, crèches, schools and parenting advice to help raise their children”.

Today, it offers an exhaustive list of services to do with parenting — everything from where to buy good used maternity clothes to who to contact when you suddenly realise that your exceptional offspring has a future in showbusiness.

Having started as a place for young mothers to find advice about parenting, kidzworld operates as a business hub as well, where people in the baby and child-care business can make business-to-business contact.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

The site is divided into four zones: Parent Hub, Business Hub, News Portal and Directory.

Not that the parents will ever be left behind — in fact, Cara, in a joint venture with Carla Resnick, a client and fellow mom entrepreneur, is planning a series of online parenting videos for those who can’t get to parenting classes because of where they live or the hours they work. These will include things like baby massage and baby sign language. Motherhood can be a lonely business — for the stay-at-home mother and those who need to work outside the home.

“Even if you’re living in a city, you can still feel lonely. You might have a full-time job, and the only



SELF-EMPLOYED: Cara Mullin quit her day job to start her own Internet-based business, working from home. Her business has grown so big that she has taken offices and employs four people
Picture: TEBOGO LETSIE

time you can get advice about parenting is when you get home. We want to make it possible for parents to download a video or two about bringing up a healthy baby.”

Kidzworld will be the first parenting website in South Africa to offer this unique way of communicating with parents and growing their parenting community.

“Parents’ lives are hectic and complicated. With kidzworld we strive to simplify their search for information by always implementing new ideas and new ways to talk to parents. We aim to provide all

the information parents need under one roof so that parents don’t need to spend their time searching on other websites,” says Cara.

NEW HORIZONS

As for Cara, far from limiting her horizons, her job has taken her out of her shell, she says.

“I have so much more confidence that I never had before. I was always quite shy, now I have to network, promoting myself and my brand.

“I used to be reluctant to talk about my business — I didn’t want

to seem pushy; now it’s the first thing I mention when I meet someone new.”

The business outgrew Cara’s house two years ago, and she took offices about 4km away. There are now four people employed by the business — Cara, a programmer, a content manager and a general admin and sales worker. The site has more than 50 000 unique visitors and more than 270 000 page impressions per month.

She works at home from 7am until 9am — while her husband, who also owns his own business, in



PARENTING MANUAL: The website that Cara Mullin runs. But it’s hard work, she warns

the travel sector, does the school run; she will go into the office most mornings, and reserves her afternoons for her family.

She recognises that hers was an idea whose time had come, happening as it did at a time when there “was a boom in products for babies and the family environment — I contacted those new businesses and put them on my website”.

Cara also believes that the success of the website has been due to how easy it is to use, and how easily it talks to search engines, ensuring a high hit rate — plus the fact that it is designed to be extremely “content rich”.

Having been at the receiving end of less than flexible working conditions as a young mother, she is determined to build a better model for her business, and negotiates the working hours for the kidzworld team to ensure that they suit both the business and the staff member.

Her business philosophy includes working with clients to make sure that their advertising on kidzworld “helps us to be the top parenting website” — and, of course, to help ensure they are successful so that they keep advertising with her site.

“We give our clients stats on their adverts when requested and we give them feedback on their advertising offering and make suggestions where we feel it can be improved.

“We also e-mail them on a monthly basis on how they can improve their online advertising and optimise their advertising spend with us. We also offer advice, tips and encouragement through the use of social media.”

As for the media, social and otherwise, if kidzworld was a ripe idea, it has only been helped by advances in electronic offerings. Cara tweets on Twitter, and has a blog. All of this is designed to drive traffic to the site. She has experimented with a sister site, a retail online toy shop, but has reservations about the business model and its economies of scale “unless you have a massive budget”.

As for the image of the stay-at-home mom running a little business on the side, Cara has news for anyone who characterises her business as such: “I have never worked such long hours in my life! And running your own business is much more stressful.

“But it’s worth it to be able to be there for my children.”

