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Law firm's luncheon meetings hit the high points – on parenting

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The topic was so vital that almost 50 lawyers came to the meeting, the New York office was tied in by teleconference and other people were linked by speakerphones from home.

Under discussion for the noon meeting at Kirkland & Ellis LLP was how to get your children to sleep properly.

Partner Jocelyn A. Hirsch said that after she announced the meeting topic by e-mail, "People said, 'Oh, thank God' [and] 'We never sleep.'"

The event last week was the regular meeting of what is probably a unique law firm group, "K & E Parenting Link."

It was formed last fall by a partner in commercial litigation, Anne M. Sidrys, and by David K. Callahan, a partner in intellectual property litigation.

The group provides lunch and speakers at the law firm's expense. Its written purpose is to "respond to questions and issues raised by parents at Kirkland."

"This is nothing to do with the quality of parenting," Sidrys explained in an interview. "People here are wonderful parents."

But they nevertheless face challenges, she said.

"People are so busy, they are having a hard time having access to ... standard information," Sidrys said.

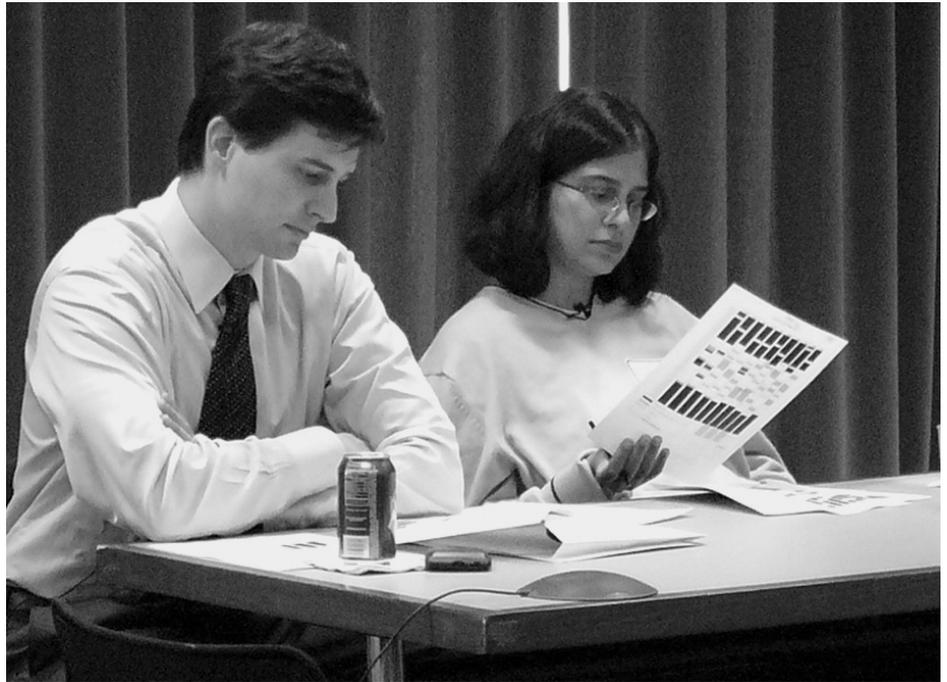
Attorneys with intense schedules need a way to get information on child-rearing delivered in a concise manner "like the express lane at Jewel," she said.

They need advice on schools, nannies, financial planning, child discipline and similar topics.

At Thursday's meeting of K & E Parenting Link, some spouses and babies attended. Other spouses listened on the phones. Baby cries from home could be heard over the speakerphone, and the audience chuckled.

One key issue: Could the baby stay up late to be with mom and/or dad if the parents regularly work late?

The lecturer, Chicago pediatrician and author Dr. Marc Weissbluth, said men will sometimes tell him, "I didn't become a father to never see my son at night."



Paul McGrath

Kirkland & Ellis partner Gabor Balassa and associate Mala Adiga show how their children's sleep patterns have been improved as they participate in a parenting education session sponsored by Kirkland & Ellis LLP. The lunchtime program is meant to give busy lawyers the benefit of expert advice as they try to balance the needs of work and family.

A young female attorney, in a statement meant to serve as a question, told Weissbluth, "For me it's really difficult. I feel like I need to be with my son at the end of the day."

She said her son was 19 months old and goes to bed at 8 p.m.

Weissbluth said mothers particularly want to be with their children after work and are torn between family and job.

But putting a 19-month old to bed at 8 p.m. "is harming him," Weissbluth said. "He seems OK now," but sleep deprivation "impairs cognitive development in children."

Sleep deprived children may "sing, dance, read, write, learn their colors, be charming," the doctor said.

But they may start to have trouble in school in the upper grades, trouble writing essays, trouble with "executive" skills.

Weissbluth is author of "Healthy Sleep

Habits, Happy Child," published in 1999 by Ballantine Books.

Gabor Balassa, a litigation partner, told the meeting that his second child, Alek, who is 6 months old, had been cranky in the afternoon and used to wake up once or twice every night.

He and his wife "were both, obviously, as everyone in this room knows, exhausted all the time," Balassa said.

This form of exhaustion is common for a number of Kirkland lawyers, said Hirsch, a partner in corporate law.

Callahan and Hirsch guessed that 70 percent of Kirkland & Ellis lawyers have or will have children.

Inability to sleep at night because the children are awake "can't be good for the practice of law," Hirsch opined.

Balassa, the litigation partner whose son Alek had trouble sleeping at night, and

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another lawyer, associate Mala Adiga, whose baby had nap problems, had volunteered before the meeting to work with Weissbluth and track the results.

Computer charts with hour-by-hour records of their babies' sleep before and after the doctor's advice were distributed to the meeting. Sure enough, the charts indicated impressive improvement.

Balassa's son now goes to bed earlier in the evening. Balassa said he is content to see him in the morning. His baby's nap times are also more regular.

The idea for K & E Parenting Link came to Sidrys last summer on her last maternity leave.

She said she received frequent e-mail messages from people in the office who asked her how to find a "safe nanny," how much to pay, how to interview nannies; how to set up a will and trust — "Who was your lawyer?" — and where should the children go to school?

"More and more attorneys live in the city," Sidrys said. In her opinion, the demand for good preschools and regular schools exceeds the supply.

Sidrys decided that a program should be started where experts would give talks in the office on hot topics for parents, talks that lasted "59 minutes or less."

Spouses would be invited; lunch would be included. The meetings would build collegiality, and the program would be "gender neutral."

"I didn't want it to be women issues," she said.

She sent out a mass e-mail. She got responses even from senior partners and older parents who said, "Gosh, I think this is wonderful. What I wouldn't have done for this when my kids were 4, 5 and 6."

"So I set up a committee," Sidrys explained.

The committee is half male, half female, half partners and half associates, and is drawn from a wide spectrum of practice groups.

The committee met physically once and now communicates by e-mail, according to Hirsch. The members set up the schedule of lectures and topics. Different members organize different lectures.

In lawyer-like fashion, the first meeting

last September was about wills and trusts.

Sidrys chose that for the kickoff because it was gender-neutral, and it was close to the top parenting issue cited in her informal surveys of Kirkland lawyers.

Between 50 and 80 lawyers attend each lecture.

The meetings are limited to lawyers in the firm and their spouses, Sidrys said, to keep the group to a manageable size.

The New York office just got involved, and Brian Pitts, a spokesman for the firm, said Kirkland is "rolling out [the program] to our other offices in the U.S."

Friends working at other law firms and businesses, Sidrys said, ask her "what we did and how it works. They'd like to set one up."

Hirsch, 36, who organized Thursday's meeting, has four children, ages 13, 11, 5 and 3. She said she works for K & E about 80 percent of what a full-time lawyer works.

Callahan, 30, has a son, age 8.

Sidrys, the partner who conceived K & E Parenting Link and sold it to the firm and to the lawyers, is 42 and has two children, the youngest a year old.