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Finding A Parent-Friendly Place

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BALANCING ACT

How to find a balance between work and family

As a career adviser for graduate students at a California research university, I heard weekly from at least one doctoral student different versions of the same question:

- Is it really possible to balance children and the tenure track?
- Would a nonfaculty position in academe make it easier to be an involved parent?
- Should I just leave the ivory tower if I want a career and children?

Often, the student posing the question was a 30ish woman trying to figure out if she could have kids and remain in academe. Sometimes, it was a 30ish man tired of spending more time in the lab than with his family.

Sitting across from them last year, my own first child growing rapidly in my belly, I had both a wealth of information to offer and some big questions in my own mind. I looked at my own career thus far -- six years in the nonacademic publishing world, four on the academic track, and two in a university staff position. Which sector, I wondered, offered the most flexibility to raise kids?

My advice to those doctoral students was the same advice I ended up taking after my daughter was born earlier this year. But before I share those details, let me offer the perspective of a career adviser on the larger questions at play.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Parent-friendly can be defined in many ways, but it usually means flexibility -- being able to take advantage of part-time, job-share, or telecommuting arrangements as well as extended leaves and health-care and child-care options. Although an increasing body of research shows that flexible work arrangements lead to increased employee productivity and loyalty, and less absenteeism, employers -- both academic and nonacademic -- are nothing if not inconsistent when it comes to offering such options.

Amid that inconsistency, I offered doctoral students two pieces of advice: First, do some research on the workplace realities of the careers you are considering. And, second, find or create a parent-friendly place in whatever career you want to pursue.

Workplace Realities Inside Academe

The latest research available on parenting and academic careers is the "Do Babies Matter?" study conducted by Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden of the University of California at Berkeley. It shows that women on the tenure track are far less likely than their male counterparts to have intact marriages and children.

But many of us know of success stories of female and male faculty members who have made the academic system work quite well for them as parents, and Mr. Goulden gave me other examples in a telephone interview. Those parents' success has to do with their individual circumstances, the support they have from their partners, and the flexibility of their departments.

Policies and cultures vary, too, for parents who work as campus administrators or staff members. I know of university staff members who have long-term, alternative work arrangements (job shares, part-time positions, daily flex-time, summer furloughs) to spend more time with their children, and feel they are in a great career for balancing work and family.

Others, like myself, assumed that alternative arrangements would be available, as they were on the books, but found out later that the long-term choices in their particular administrative unit were limited to standard full-time hours or nothing.

For both faculty and staff members, a major underlying problem is that it is usually left to the discretion of individual supervisors to decide where and when to be flexible with employees' work arrangements.

Some universities are making strides. Cornell University has been leading the way by training and evaluating managers on their flexibility in dealing with caregiving issues, and challenging denials of alternative work arrangements. Princeton University now automatically adds an extra year to the tenure clock for faculty members who are new parents, eliminating the discomfort and fear that many experience in having to ask for that extra time.

However, any work-life expert will tell you that new policies aren't enough. To make them work takes a real shift in the culture and leadership of an institution. As the tense mix of online reactions to Princeton's new policy illustrates, there are still those in academe who oppose making the profession more parent-friendly, or less cutthroat, while others applaud the change as long overdue.

Workplace Realities Outside Academe

Despite the challenges facing working parents in academe, I always tried to dissuade graduate students from leaving the ivory tower solely because they thought the nonacademic world would offer more guarantees of a happy work-life balance.

While flexible policies were all the rage for U.S. companies 10 years ago, a 2005 article in *USA Today* reported that corporations use those practices significantly less now.

Miriam Peskowitz, a professor who left a tenured job to raise her child, documents in *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* the massive structural obstacles to parent-friendly policies in the American system -- real obstacles disguised as identity crises or as battles between mothers.

Peskowitz cites studies that show part-time work being the optimal choice for the majority of today's mothers (and many fathers), but well-paid, professional part-time jobs are simply not readily available.

Yet some of the most progressive, innovative parent-friendly organizations thrive in corporate America, too. *Working Mother* publishes an annual list of the top 100 parent-friendly companies, and large consulting firms like Ernst & Young offer revolutionary "on-ramp/off-ramp" programs for new mothers, including flexible options (part-time work, freelance work, extended leaves) during the early child-rearing years and smooth re-entry to full-time positions later.

Among my own acquaintances, I continue to hear the theme of inconsistency in corporate policies. One lawyer friend got a solid part-time gig post-baby; another had her part-time offer switched to "full-time or nothing" during her maternity leave. Two schoolteachers in the same county but different districts had drastically different post-baby choices. One friend works for a technology company that is all about flexibility; another friend complains that her high-tech company offers only standard, full-time employment or freelance work with no benefits.

What's a Working Parent To Do?

Here are the tips I offer parents, and parents-to-be, for how to find a family-friendly zone in any given career:

- Set your priorities. That may take some soul-searching and tough discussions with your significant other, if you have one, but make conscious choices about your finances, time, and values, before you go on the job market. Know what you will and will not accept in terms of hours, vacations, leaves, and salary.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're interviewing: What are the parent-friendly policies? Are they used? How many employees have families? Ask to talk to current employees, not just human-resources people. Read between the lines when people answer vaguely, and do not assume because a policy is on the Web site or in a handout that it is applied and accepted.
- Vote with your feet. If an academic department or a company does not seem parent-friendly and you decline a position because of that, *tell them* that is the reason. Managers must understand they are losing future employees because of inflexibility.
- Stay connected. If you leave work for a while, do not lose touch with your professional contacts. Stay involved in an organization, read the trade journals, let former colleagues know how and what you are doing. Trying to restore severed ties after a long absence is one of the most difficult challenges a working parent can face.
- Help create the parent-friendly workplaces you're seeking. Be an advocate at your university, start petitions, suggest training. You can find information about flexible work options at the [College and University Work/Family Association](#), the [Alliance for Work-Life Progress](#), and the [Work & Family Connection](#).

Groups like [Moms Rising](#) and [Take Back Your Time](#) are lobbying for policy and cultural change.

Answering My Own Questions

So, how did I handle my own work-family dilemma? I followed my own advice.

After our daughter was born, my husband and I discussed our priorities and agreed that raising our baby was No. 1 for us. Since I had the long commute, the lower income, the milk supply, and the stronger desire to be home, it was my job we decided to forfeit.

However, that was only after I proposed a job-share arrangement that would allow me to keep working part-time at the university. I was told that my department did not support such arrangements.

When I quit, I respectfully let the powers-that-be know I was disappointed in the absence of alternative work options, which influenced my decision to leave. But I also graciously thanked my department for hiring me in the first place and have stayed friendly with my former supervisors. Just as their decision to ban job-shares was not personal, nor is mine to speak out about the inconsistencies and lack of flexible work at the university and elsewhere.

I am now freelancing, creating my own flexibility working from home. I let all of my contacts know my plans, and four months postpartum I already have offers of consulting work from a professional graduate program and potential assignments from several former colleagues. Now the challenge becomes how much work to take on.

As for getting involved in lobbying for change, I hope this article is a start.

Until there are easier answers to these difficult questions, we will just have to keep asking, talking, and paving our own way.

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