Families and Work Institute

Findings from Ask the Children with Tips for Parents

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The genesis for my book, *Ask the Children*, was actually in 1985. Then, I and some colleagues from Bank Street College of Education, conducted a study of employees in three small companies in the New York metropolitan area. In that study, we also interviewed the employee's husband, wife or partner and the employee's children. In those interviews, I found that what parents think that children think about their parents' work and what children actually think can be quite different.

At the time, I wondered if those differences were a function of those times? Was it those particular employees? In those particular jobs? In those locations? I continued to ponder these questions, but I didn't feel we knew enough about adults and how they manage their work and family lives at the time. So I spent the next 10 years first at Bank Street and then at Families and Work Institute, learning about work and personal family life from the perspective of adults.

In 1995, I was ready to widen the lens to include children. The first step for me was to assemble a group of experts who study the impact of parental employment on children. I asked them what they had learned, what had surprised them, and what they hadn't asked, but wished they had.

Second, I turned to the literature and staff at Families and Work Institute, and I conducted an extensive review of the literature on the impact of parental employment on children. It was conducted for the American Academy of Pediatrics, but certainly helped inform my thinking.

Third, wanting a fresh perspective, I asked my then 21-year-old daughter, who was a senior at Wesleyan University, to interview children for an independent study course she was taking.

Then, as a fourth step, I and a research team conducted in person interviews with parents and their children in 15 communities around the country.

And fifth, using all of this information, I framed a study conducted by Harris Interactive with nationally representative groups of 1023 children, ages 8 through 18 and 605 employed parents with children birth through 18.

What did I find?

I found that what was true 15 years before is true today: that what adults think that children think and what they actually think can be two different stories.

The best example of this is a question I call "the one wish question:" "if you were granted one wish that would change the way that your mother's/your father's work affects your life, what would that wish be?"

I also asked parents to guess what their children would wish. Most parents (56 percent) guessed that their children would wish for more time with them.

Perhaps surprisingly, more time was not at the top of children's wish lists. Only 10 percent of children made that wish about their mothers and 15.5 percent made that wish about their fathers.

Most children wished that their mothers (34 percent) and their fathers (27.5 percent) would be less stressed and tired. By contrast, only 2 percent of parents guessed that their children would make that wish.

Does this finding mean that children don't care about time? No, not at all. Children wouldn't care about parents being less stressed and less tired if they didn't care about the time they spend together. Furthermore, I found in this study that the more time children spent with their parents, the more positively they felt about the way that they were being parented.

The fact that many people interpreted my finding that wishing for more time is not at the top of children's wish lists as revealing that time is unimportant to children sends a signal that we as a country are stuck in the wrong debates.

We tend to think in either/or terms: It's quality OR quantity time. It's work OR family. Even the word "balance" we use indicates an either/or mentality. If you give to one side of your life (work or family), then you are taking away from the other.

But my data and the data of other researchers don't fit these either/or frameworks. It is my strong hope that the results of the *Ask The Children* study will push us out of the box, challenging us to **reframe** how we:

- **think** about work and family life;
- **talk** about work and family life;
- **behave** with children; and
- **communicate** with children.

Here I share eight findings and the implications of those findings for parents.

Finding 1: Working is neither good NOR bad for children; it is how children are parented that makes the difference.

In the national conversation we've been having about work and family life, having a working mother alternates between being seen as either good OR bad for children.

The way that this study probed this issue was to ask children to assess how they were being parented on 12 parenting skills that research indicates are linked to children's healthy development and school success. These include "raising me with good values;" "being someone I can go to when I am upset;" "spends time talking with me;" "appreciates me for who I am;" "provides family traditions and rituals;" "encourages me to want to learn and to enjoy learning;" "is involved with my school or child care;" and so forth. The study found no differences in the assessment given by children who have employed mothers and mothers at home.

This result confirms several decades of research that indicates that you can't tell very much about how a child will turn out **simply** because his or her mother works. As Lois Hoffman and her colleagues at the University of Michigan point out on the basis of the longitudinal study they conducted: maternal employment per se doesn't affect children. It is the context in which maternal employment takes place that makes the difference. Likewise, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) study which has been following approximately 1,200 children from 10 communities from birth through their elementary school years has found that mothers' employment does not affect the bond between mother and child.

Overall, the research reveals that what matters most is how children are parented—what values their parents have, whether the parents practice what they preach, how they connect to their children, and whether the children are priorities in their parents' lives.

Despite this research, the debate about whether maternal employment is good OR bad for children rages on. I often tell the story of being called in to mediate a "mommy war" at a school. In order to address this conflict, I first talked separately to the at-home and employed mothers. I found that the mothers at home felt put down. They felt like they were the mop-up-act at school, being called on to work with the schools, pick up sick children, and arrange the play dates. Yet when they went to the proverbial party and were asked what they did, the guest turned away to talk with someone more interesting when the mother said that she was staying at home with her children. The employed mothers also felt put down. They felt that they were seen as sacrificing their children at the altar of their own materialism and success, and that they were missing the important moments with their children. At a subsequent school meeting, when the parents heard each others' stories and realized that mothers felt put down no matter how they were living, the two groups of mothers decided that perhaps they were **not** each others' enemies. Perhaps the enemy was a society that does not value mothering—and I would add fathering—as much as it should.

Tips

- *Manage your guilt—don't let it manage you.* I think that guilt is, in fact, a useful emotion when it first appears because it tells us that there is a discrepancy between what we expect and what is happening. It is like a fever that tells us that something is wrong. Parents' decisions about whether or not to work and how much to work are important personal decisions, but not the providence of societal

edicts. I have found that guilt can become destructive, when like a fever, it rages untreated. That's when parents try to make up for working by buying their children presents, or not disciplining them because they don't want to rock the boat in the time they have together.

- *Use guilt as a prompt to figure out where there is a disconnect between what you expect and what is happening and either change your expectations or behavior.* Don't fall into the guilt trap.
- *Don't play into the tension between parents.* Furthermore, surround yourself with people who support you, not put you down.
- *Work toward increasing respect for parents.* Studies, like those conducted by Public Agenda, show that the public sees most parents negatively. My study reveals that while **most** parents are trying to do well by their children and are doing a good job, there is a small group of parents who are not "there for their children." According to their children, this percentage ranges from 10 to 40 percent, depending on the parenting skill I was assessing. We should differentiate these two groups, working toward ensuring that parents who are raising their children well are respected—whatever their work status and lifestyle—and that those who are not doing a good job get very respectful and supportive help so that they can improve.

Finding 2: It is not just mothering that's important; fathering is very important too.

The national conversation that we've been having about work and family life focuses on mothers. Yet in finding after finding in my study, the importance of fathers to children is very evident. For example, children were asked if they had too little, enough, or too much time with their mothers and fathers. Children were more likely to say that they had too little time with their fathers (35 percent) than their mothers (28 percent).

Tip

- *Think of parenting as mothers and fathers.*
- *Also, learn to agree to agree and agree to disagree.* Figure out what are your most important values as a parent and ask your spouse to support you on these values and likewise, support your spouse. On the less important issues, agree that it is okay to do things differently.

Finding 3: It's neither quality time NOR quantity time; both make a difference.

In the debate we've been having about work and family life, people argue about which is most important: quality time OR quantity time. In this study, I looked at how much time children report spending with their parents as well as what happens in that time—the activities that parents and children do together, whether the time is rushed or calm, and whether children feel that their parents can really focus on them when they

are together. I found that BOTH are important to how children assess their parents' parenting skills and how successful they feel their parents are in managing work and family life.

Tips

- *Change the language you use.* In the interviews I conducted with parents, I found that many parents don't like the notion of quality time. It connotes perfection—everyone having an idyllic time, no parent ever dealing with a difficult situation, no children ever fighting across the dining room table. To emphasize that both the amount of time and the content of the time are important and to emphasize the need to grapple with the difficult moments in parenting (because that's how both parents and children grow and change), I suggest using the words that parents and children use when they are feeling connected. Think about "hang around time," and "focused time."
- *Know that small moments make a big difference.* When children describe the best times they have with parents, they are typically the everyday moments.
- *Create family traditions and sustain them.* When asked what they would remember from this time in their childhood, most children spoke of family traditions. In one family, it was always singing in the car. In another, it was a bedtime story they told every night about a "cow, a pig, and a chicken." The children would say a sentence to start the story and the mother would make up the rest. In still another family, it was each child talking about his or her day during dinner time.

Finding 4: Parents' jobs affect how they parent.

When the public thinks about how parents' work affects children, they talk about how old the child was when the mother went back to work or how much time parents spend working each day. Yet research finds that these factors are relatively unimportant in children's development. To adapt the phrase that was used in the presidential election of 1992 ("it's the economy, stupid"), studies find that "it's the job, stupid."

In the *Ask the Children* study, I developed a model to identify those aspects of jobs that matter. I found that four factors make a difference: 1) having a reasonably demanding job; 2) having a job that permits parents to focus on their work; 3) having a job that is meaningful, challenging, provides opportunities to learn, and job autonomy; and 4) having a workplace environment with good interpersonal and supportive relationships where parents feel supported to succeed at work and at home. Parents who work in these environments are in better moods and have more energy for parenting that, in turn, affects their interactions with their children, and children's development. The chain of effects, however, don't stop with home life. Parents with good situations at work, who come home in better moods and with more energy for their children, and who have children who are developing well, reinvest this energy back at work.

Tip

- *Change the language you use.* In the interviews I conducted, I found that many parents did not like the word balance because it is an either/or word that implies a scale. You are always supposed to be seeking the mid-point and if one side (work OR home life) is up, then the other side is seen as down. My study shows that it is not a zero sum game. If work life is up, then family life is likely to be up as well. I suggests we use the term “navigating.” With navigating you are always in process. With navigating, there can be good days and bad days, but if you know where you are going, you are more likely to get there. And think about being dual-centric.

Finding 5: Children worry about parents because of the stress they bring home.

This study reveals that one third of children (32 percent) worry about their parents often or very often. If one includes the children who say they sometimes worry about their parents, the percent goes up to two-thirds of children who worry. One of the major reasons that children worry about their parents is because parents feel tired and stressed.

Tips

- *Think about what aspect of working is causing you the most stress and change what you can change.*
- *Develop techniques for managing stress, especially transitions from work to home.* This includes ways to “turn off work,” such as meditating before leaving work, listening to music, or changing clothes when you get home.
- *Create hello traditions with your children.* Understand that the end of the day can be “arsenic hour”—you are not sure whether you want to take it or give it to the children. Children save up their concerns for the people that they feel the safest with—their parents. So have a homecoming routine, and if your children are hungry give them a healthy snack that you consider a part of dinner.
- *Set realistic expectations about what you can accomplish at home.* Having two or three expectations where you are sure to succeed is a lot more helpful than having dozens that are doomed to failure.

Finding 6: Children don’t think that their parents like their jobs as much as parents do.

The *Ask the Children* study found that while three in five parents like their jobs a lot, only two in five children think that their parents like their jobs a lot. Many parents see work as competitive with their children, so they don’t share very much about their jobs. In addition, parents often come home and complain about work, without realizing that their actions are a living laboratory for children to learn about the world of work.

Tips

- *Your children are more likely to want to model themselves on you if they know and hear about the good things at work, not just the bad thing.* Don't think of work as competing with your children. As one child put it, "I want my mother to like her work, just not more than she loves me."
- *Share the many reasons you work.* Obviously, money is an important reason, but there are other reasons as well. Introduce your children to the world of work through everyday moments.

Finding 7: It's neither child care NOR parent care; child care is a support to the family and children.

Whenever I testify in the US Congress about child care research, the debate often veers into the assumption that child care supplants parental care. In these debates, child care is referred to as "stranger care" and children in child care are described as "day-care reared." This stance couldn't' be further from reality. No study has ever found that child care supplants parental care.

In the model I designed for looking at how work and parenting fit together, I found that having supportive coworkers and supervisors, having family and friends to turn to, and feeling that the non-parental child care they use has been "very positive" for their child's development make a very significant difference. These factors are like the bedrock, the essential support parents need for navigating work and family life.

Tips

- *Find care that feels like an extended family.* My studies find that this can be the best kind of care.
- *Deal with any tension between your provider and you.* Know that it is normal and find ways to agree to agree and agree to disagree.

Finding 8: A number of parents don't know what is going on in their children's lives.

Older children did not give their parents very high marks for knowing what is really going on in their lives.

Tip

- *Keep the channels of communication open with your children.* There are many techniques to open the channels of communication. These include asking children specific questions rather than general ones, or setting up traditions where families talk together, such as sharing one good thing about the day at dinnertime.

Ellen Galinsky is the co-founder and President of the Families and Work Institute, a non-profit center for the study of the changing workforce, changing family, and changing community. She is the author of *Ask the Children: The Breakthough Study That Reveals How To Succeed At Work and Parenting* (Quill, 2000).