



Daddy-Tracked: Men Punished at Work for Child Duties

Women Aren't the Only Ones Whose Career Growth Can Get Sidelined by Parenthood

COLUMN

By MICHELLE GOODMAN

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We've all heard about how becoming a mother can be the kiss of career death for some women.

Tell an unsympathetic employer that you need to duck out early to schlep a sick kid to the doctor one time too many and you can say goodbye to that high-profile project you were hoping to land. Try to return to full-time work after a several years home with the kids and you could find picking up where you left off -- and collecting a comparable salary -- about as easy as getting your kids to bed after they've downed a couple cans of Red Bull. Factor in the airtight job market the recent recession has left us with and you're doubly damned.

But it's not just moms who have to contend with their career growth being sidelined by parenthood. There's a daddy track, too.

Kent, a Web advertising professional from Seattle, has been on it. He lost his job of 10 years in 2007, when the family-friendly company he worked for shipped his department to another state. As a single dad with a developmentally disabled teenager, Kent was reluctant to move away from his son's school, not to mention the extended family he relied on for moral support.

But replacing the lost job has been difficult. One company let him go after four months because his son's medical appointments made him miss too much work. ("When you work in a high-pressure corporate environment, people aren't always as cool about that stuff," Kent said). Another job with more flexible hours was strictly temporary and came with a substantial drop in pay and responsibility ("I was essentially a clerk," he said).

Sure, some work is better than none these days. But this single father says he can't help feeling that he's been involuntarily daddy-tracked -- and that he's facing a bit of a double-standard.

"Obviously, women are forced into gender roles," he said. "But men are forced into gender roles, too. There's a lot of pressure on men that the job comes first. I feel like a strange bird as a single father who's dedicated all this time and energy raising my son. That's unfortunate."

More Men Voluntarily Staying Home

Between the recession and the rise in women who outearn their husbands, more men continue to step up

to the primary caregiver plate.

A new survey from the Center for Work-Life Policy, a non-profit think tank, found that 26 percent of men polled had voluntarily left their job to care for a child or an aging relative -- more than double the number of men who did so just five years ago.

Sadly, some employers have yet to wrap their heads around the fact that men can be primary caregivers and women primary breadwinners.

Because stay-at-home dads remain a minority, men returning to work after an extended caregiving hiatus traditionally have elicited more raised eyebrows than their female counterparts, said economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett, president of the Center for Work-Life Policy.

"All of a sudden that gap in your resume is questioned by employers," Hewlett said. "Men who take time off to caregive are even more stigmatized than women going back in."

"You just don't get a lot of respect for it," said a professor in Houston I'll call "Joel."

Joel left his tenured position five years ago to teach part-time and stay at home with his infant son while his wife worked full-time. Now that Joel's ready to return to full-time work, he's having a hard time restarting his academic career.

"There's a real serious social role that people expect you to play and that does not include you staying home to take care of the kids," Joel said. "You're juggling a budget and you're dealing with time constraints. You sit there and work with a baby on your knee while you're trying to prepare for a lecture the next day and find slides on the Web. That's tough."

Banishing Men to the Daddy Track Hurts Women, Too

Unfortunately, Hewlett said, employers are far more likely to value a man taking a break in full-time employment to launch a business or return to school, presumably because such pursuits are seen as furthering one's career.

Keeping a toe in the employment pool by volunteering, consulting or attending the occasional networking event certainly can help an at-home dad convince future employers that he does take his career seriously. But depending on the family-friendliness of the companies you interview with, that may not completely erase the stigma.

"The rap is that you can't trust women to be professionals because they're going to run off and do family stuff," said MIT lecturer Donald Unger, author of "Men *Can*: The Changing Image and Reality of Fatherhood in America."

"But men who do that sort of thing are being unreliable in a non-traditional sort of way." As a result, Unger said, "Men are discouraged even more than women and are punished even more harshly than women."

This isn't just a matter of equal opportunity discrimination. Stereotyping fathers as career-first meal tickets doesn't just hurt men, it also hurts women.

And if we ever hope to completely shelve the notion that only women can be primary caregivers, employers need to recognize that men can change a diaper and chaperone a carful of tweens to soccer

practice, too.

This work is the opinion of the columnist and in no way reflects the opinion of ABC News.

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