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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: PARENTING AND WORK OBLIGATIONS

Adults say the darnedest things - about having children

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a teacher who has been at the same public high school for more than 15 years. Prior to having children, I volunteered for many committees, coached sports teams, and was involved in district and provincial committees. I love my job and I am dedicated. However, the moment we teachers become parents, things break down in our school. Since our new principal arrived, many have been asked to stay on as department heads during their maternity leaves. Others have experienced outright rejection - the principal hardly speaks to them. One colleague who is a mother was told: "Well, some of us chose not to have children," which suggested that, as a parent, she doesn't take her job seriously. My husband, who works in health care, has also experienced this attitude. When he advised his manager that he wouldn't be able to attend a professional development evening because he had to pick up the children from daycare, he was told: "Well, you chose to have children." No alternatives were offered. We are officially protected by our unions but there doesn't seem to be enough to lodge a grievance; it's more an attitude of hostility. The irony is obvious. If people don't have children, my principal would soon be out of a job. Please comment.

-- Baffled


Print Edition - Section Front

Globe Careers

Why are they asking me this?

You've come a long way, baby, but you're not there yet

BOART LONGYEAR

MANAGER, HUMAN RESOURCES - DRILLING SERVICES

HEAD OF TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT - DRILLING SERVICES

THE CALDWELL PARTNERS

Dear Baffled,

Your confusion stems from the expectation that someone who educates children will be sympathetic to parents. Most kids know a more shaded truth: Some teachers and administrators have hearts as big as a house; others are enforcers - getting through the curriculum, getting the job "done" and hewing to the rules trump all else.

The gap between our assumptions about educators and the range of personalities encountered in schools leaves plenty of room for satire. In his novel Matilda, Roald Dahl's sadistic Mrs. Trunchbull locks kids in a cupboard called "the chokey," while Judi Dench's acid portrayal of Barbara Covett in Notes on a Scandal shows there's as much exploitation in the staff room as there is in the classroom.

People who work in schools - or in health care for that matter - don't always act in loco parentis, with kids' and parents' interests at heart, primarily because their own interests often conflict with their charges.

The reality is that your boss is a manager. She's under pressure to meet her staffing and extracurricular commitments. She's also human and influenced by her own emotions and her own goals.

In that respect, she may be like the 20 to 25 per cent of women (and the 60 per cent of men) who have a laser focus on their careers. They don't make adjustments for children - many can't see why anyone would - and, therefore, have more energy to devote to their jobs.

These ratios are what the British sociologist Catherine Hakim discovered when she looked closely at census and survey data from the United States and Europe. Women, especially, are not a monolith. While about a fifth of them are exclusively "work-centred," and another group about the same size are "home-centred," most are like you and me - somewhere in the middle, trying to balance demands from both sides.

"The vast majority of women who claim to be career-oriented discover that their priorities change after they have children," according to Prof. Hakim, who teaches at the London School of Economics.

Although she says she wrote six books in 10 years precisely because her energies were not diverted by childrearing, she is sympathetic to parents. She understands that forming the next generation takes time and effort, time that may conflict with evening courses or pushing your career to its limits.

Not so for New Zealand opera star Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, who, commenting on how she could inspire young opera singers, said: "Just watch what I did and follow the pattern if you want to do it. If you don't want to do it, go home and make babies. Don't bother me."

Like your principal's prickliness, defensive statements like these point to your principal's emotional life. Whether people are childless by choice or by circumstance, they can feel resentful about picking up the slack for the parents around them - who, let's face it, may be envied and scorned by them in equal measure.

My advice is to do what you can do outside the classroom for now, and add extracurricular duties bit by bit as your family life allows. In the meantime, don't rub your principal's nose in your children's exploits or your work-family conflicts. She clearly has plenty of her own.

Dear Susan,

I work in the funeral industry and I'm getting tired of people wisecracking about it in social situations. How do I deal with people's stupid comments? This work is isolating enough, but people's attitudes make it worse.

-- A Working Stiff

Dear Working,

Yours is one of a few jobs that make people uneasy. Exterminators, proctologists, prison guards, funeral directors - all of them provoke a built-in disgust or fear response that once served an evolutionary purpose: keeping death, contamination and lawlessness at a safe distance.

Given the stigma - and the fact that society depends on highly trained people to do these jobs - these careers often pay well. Still, as you point out, being the target of awkward jokes erodes morale unless you've established good defences.

Blake Ashforth, a business professor at Arizona State University, is one of the world's few experts in "dirty work." His 2007 study of 54 careers, such as exotic dancer, pawnbroker, bill collector and prison guard, shows how successful people in these jobs protect their egos. They think of their work as important, requiring specialized, knowledge. For some, joining a professional association allows them to spend time with other people who share their experience - and can perhaps share broader categories they've invented for their occupation that might fend off inappropriate remarks.

So proctologists and gynecologists who work in abortion clinics might simply say they're physicians, while an administrator or owner of a funeral home might say he or she is in management or business, or works with grieving families. By creating a separation between the dirty work and its purpose to society, or what Prof. Ashforth calls "buffering," is a useful way to keep disgust reactions and stereotypes at bay.

Being cagey is fine when people don't know you that well. I know someone who works in "scrap metal" who now calls his business "recycling" and this is not a lie. In psychology we call it reframing; in business it's called branding. Whatever it's called, it works.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap, to be published in February.
