

For Baby and Me - the Question of Work

By Alison Edwards

What is work? Work is what you do. It's not who you are, but its part of the description that many give when asked about their lives. Until last April, I would have said that I'm a language arts teacher and work in a junior high. I might have added that I have my masters and do work with gender in my school. I'd include the fact that I'm aiming to write a book on Newfoundland history and perhaps, depending on the conversation, talk about my time as an Internet educator.

I am currently on maternity leave. In Canada, we receive a year in leave - 15 weeks maternity and 35 weeks parental leave. For the parental leave, either parent can take the leave, as long as they are eligible. To be eligible, you need to have worked a certain number of hours. The program is not run through an employer, but instead through Human Resources, so if you're eligible for unemployment, you're eligible for this. And your employer has to give you the time off and guarantee your job - or an equal position - when you return. This means that for the first year of your child's life you're home with them and your definition of work changes. For me, it also means that the idea of working outside of the home gets harder with which to deal.

I love being home with my child. I love seeing him develop, taking naps with him, seeing him walk around the room holding onto the furniture, having a whole day to hug him. I love being able to run errands in the morning, learn to do new things such as baking bread, knitting and using Linux. We have our routine down now, from my morning exercise to his afternoon playtime. I'm doing my job and doing it fairly well. Like any jobs, we have our bad days, but in general, it's a great job. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

However, I do have to trade it. Eventually my fifty weeks will run out and I will return to work outside of my home. I'll hand the care of my child over to someone else and give up my chances to hug him whenever I feel the urge, to whisper 'I love you' to his sleeping form. I'll go back to my classroom and impart knowledge to junior high school students. I'll have evenings and weekends with him, along with holidays and summers. I'll become one of the mothers I talk to in the staff room, desperately trying to find balance between professional and personal life, between taking care of children in the classroom and taking care of my child at home.

Where is that balance? When I work outside of the home I give it my all. When I work at home I do the same. How do I find the balance between the two so that I'm giving what I can to both and not feeling like I'm letting anyone down?

Do others have this inner query? Do they wonder if they can do both their work and their parenting? And, more specifically, do men have this worry? Even though the majority of this time is parental leave, I know very few males who take

this time. We considered having my husband stay home, but decided that for us it would not work - not because he's a male but because he can't drive and we didn't want him unable to bring our son places or react in an emergency. I know one dad who split the time with his wife because his wife made more. In my mommy and me travels - exercise class, breastfeeding clinic, and so on - I've only spoken to one mom who planned to go back to work and have her husband take the time as his salary would be topped up. That makes two couples, out of all the couples that I know who had children who chose to have the partner who didn't give birth to the child stay home to take care of the child. There must be many more couples that do split the time, but in my experience, the woman is working at home and the man is working outside of the home. American statistics show that only 500,000 men take paternity leave annually, versus the 1.4 million women that take maternity leave. It seems that my experience is representative of the reality - there is a division between genders in taking leave with their newborns.

I'm not sure why there's such a division. Perhaps breastfeeding and not wanting to introduce bottles kept the mother at home. Perhaps the parents have a similar situation to mine and for health reasons the mother stayed home. Perhaps all the men involved make more and financially it made more sense for them to keep working (which is another issue all together!). Or perhaps, traditional attitudes keep the mothers home with their child until they are left wondering how to make the balance work for them. Does this worry - this guilt - have a gender?

A study in the US looked at men, children and work. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, ninety-one percent of men with school age children are employed as opposed to sixty-seven percent of women. The Families and Work institute states that twenty-six percent of men with children thirteen years old and under would sacrifice career advancement for a more flexible work schedule. The FWI also states that sixty percent of working parents - both moms and dads - felt a conflict between their work and their home life. These statistics are supposed to show us that men want to be more involved, but really - 74 percent would have career advancement over flex time to spend with their kids. More fathers are employed over mothers, so when the choice is made to have one parent work, more often it's the father. Yet, the National center for Fathering found that fifty seven percent of Americans feel that businesses don't take into account demands of family life for fathers. When statistically men are choosing their career over their family, how can we expect companies to choose their family over their career? Or, as a culture, do we teach men to feel guilt about providing, making career ambition their own version of guilt?

What about moms? In trying to find a balance, how do they deal with guilt - or do they have it? Talking to other moms, they talk about the need they have and the struggle they feel in finding their own personal balance. In a recent article - 'Mommy Madness', mothers discussed their loss of identity and their pursuit of balance. The author found that motherhood was not the piece of identity that it

once was - often it becomes the whole pie. Mothers in the article talked about losing their sexuality, losing their fashion sense and losing their time for themselves - and choosing it that way to do 'the best they could' for their kids. As the author Judith Warner put it "My brain might have been fried, but my baby's was thriving." The author, discussing her new book '*Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*' talked about moms who spent their time getting the 'right' ballet class, hand painting paper plates for class parties and who supplemented what their children were missing in school. She talked of moms who left their jobs to ensure the kids were brought up correctly - or worked part time at night, while their child slept, so they could ensure being there in the mornings. So for them the guilt was there - but the balance wasn't.

An accompanying article, 'A Slacker Moms Manifesto' discussed a book put out by Muffy Mead-Ferro entitled '*Confessions of a Slacker Mom*'. Mead-Ferro kept her day job, hasn't signed her kids up for lessons upon lessons and gets them to play in the yard and do chores. Her hope is that her kids grow up "to tolerate frustration and setbacks, to be self-reliant and conscious of the needs of others, and above all to grow up to think for themselves". She sounded happy and healthy, and her goal for her kids sounded admirable. I know that's my goal for my son.

So if she's happy and healthy, what about the findings of Warner? She concludes with the same message that Mead-Ferro did - lay off. Stay sane in parenting. Don't mask the problems of exhaustion and depression with drugs and continue on your merry way just because you have the choice to do so. If you don't enjoy it - or feel so pressured you are crying over not having pieces of felt cut correctly - then don't do it. Let yourself live and be the person you were before kids. Warner found that 70% of American moms find being a mother "incredibly stressful". 30% are depressed and 909 Texans find as much fun in taking care of their kids as they do cleaning their house. Why do that to ourselves? Has the guilt taken over to the point that we are ignoring ourselves in our quest to be balanced?

In my observations and conversations, the females in the staff room are the ones talking about getting their kids to lessons, clubs and play dates. Rarely did I hear the men talking about their weekend obligations to family - not to say it didn't happen, but more often it was the females in the staff room talking about schedules and committees and homework. More men seemed to be aiming for the administration positions. How much of this is social-traditional and how much is personal? How much of this stems from being a parent, and how much stems from the guilt they feel working outside of the home? And, if that's the case, how did they - and millions of others - obtain this guilt and why has it genderized itself so?

I don't have the answers. I just know that I love my jobs - both outside and inside the home. I'll work through my guilt and just as I worked to earn my right to educate and work as a teacher, as well as my mommy work of establishing a

bedtime routine, I'll work through this and find one more definition of work. The fact that I'm returning to work might help stave off the mommy madness. And I know that more than once I'll feel like a slacker. I can only make choices for me and for my family. And hope that I've made the right ones. However, with that, only time will tell. And I want to spend that time able to enjoy my son.

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Alison lives with her husband, cat and baby boy Patrick on an Island in Canada. She's supposed to go back to work outside the home very soon.