Faculty Members With Young Children Need More Flexible Schedules

By Jennifer Freyd

On Monday, my colleague looks guilty and embarrassed as she sneaks out of a faculty meeting at 5:10—a meeting that ends, after a crucial vote has been taken, at 5:45. On Tuesday, she attends the first 40 minutes of a colloquium that begins at 4:30. On Wednesday evening, she misses a research seminar altogether. On Thursday, she sits through the first half of a university committee meeting. By Friday, it seems almost normal when she cannot attend the department party from 5:00 to 7:00.

I recognize the anxiety my colleague experienced on Monday—she had only 20 minutes to get her young daughter from the child-care center before its 5:30 closing. I recognize her embarrassment—she senses the effect her departure has on her reputation. I understand her frustration at not being able to stay long enough at the meetings to participate fully, giving up position and influence in faculty governance. And I recognize her deep feelings of loss on Tuesday and Wednesday—when she was deprived of the stimulation and excitement of participating in the intellectual exchange at the colloquium and seminar.

Although late-afternoon and evening events are fine for most professors I know, they are just awful for most mothers and many fathers of young children. Child-care centers typically end their day at 5:30, with stiff fines or charges for late pick-ups.

More important, children usually are hungry, tired, and keyed up in the late afternoon, and their needs are not easily met by anyone but their parents. And between parental responsibilities and meeting times as matters to be resolved by majority preference misses the crucial role that the conflict plays in discouraging working parents, especially mothers, from practicing their professions. I have seen some of my most talented colleagues abandon their careers when confronted with the conflicts imposed by trying to be both a good parent and a good professional. As Arlie Hochschild states in her book *The society through work. Rather, both desires are fundamental aspects of our humanity. They may compete for our time (especially in our current society), but the need to love and the need to work should never be considered to be in competition for our passions.*

When I was pregnant with my first child, I was told by a colleague: "You have just made the worst career decision of your
Second Shift: "The career system inhibits women, not so much by malevolent disobedience to good rules as by making up rules to suit the male half of the population in the first place. . . . [Women] find that their late twenties and mid-thirties, the prime childbearing years, are also a peak period of career demands. Seeing that the game is devised for family-free people, some women lose heart."

If working parents and women lose status in the work force or drop out altogether because of structural conflicts such as late meeting times, how will they ever increase their numbers to the point where they can change the rules by a democratic vote?

Saying that a working parent need only "juggle" his or her schedule and that "others manage it" conveys a strong message. It implies that parental responsibilities are comparable to activities that are inherently flexible, less important than work, or even dispensable—an athletic hobby, say, or a trip to Bermuda. It also implies that if the faculty member only had his or her priorities straight (like the "others" who manage to juggle their schedules), parental responsibilities would not get in the way of professional commitments. Both implications reflect pervasive and destructive values about children's needs, parents' roles, and what it means to be committed to work.

Where did we ever get the idea that dedication to family is indicative of a lack of commitment to work? For most of us, the desire to rear children is not felt instead of a desire to contribute to life by getting pregnant before getting tenure." I've noticed, in contrast, that male colleagues contemplating raising a family are typically encouraged to do so.

Yet there is a sad logic to the advice so often given to women: Avoid having children until your career goals are largely met. Compared with their husbands, employed women are likely to have significantly more responsibility at home—a national situation well-documented by sociologists. This leaves most fathers much freer than mothers to compete in a working world that rewards commitment to career over family and then measures that commitment in terms of time.

For the few men I know who more fully share domestic responsibilities with their wives, the conflict between employment and family tends to be severe. Their professional commitment, like those of working mothers, is doubted. These fathers may be under more acute strain than even working mothers, because at least mothers' contributions to their families are acknowledged (although undervalued) by society. The greatest tragedy here is that children pay much of the price of our society's insistence on putting commitment to work against family responsibilities, no matter how family responsibilities are divided between the mother and the father.

Constraints and to respond flexibly. For example, mothers of infants may need to leave the campus frequently during the day to nurse their babies; teaching and committee meeting times should be adjusted to make this possible. Fortunately, academic jobs typically afford more scheduling flexibility than do many others.

We can, at the least, schedule meetings, colloquia, and seminars when there is a good chance that parents can attend. For instance, in many cases simply scheduling a regular afternoon meeting at 3:15 or 3:30 instead of 4:00 or 4:30 would allow parents to participate. In other cases, moving afternoon or evening meetings to the noon hour would increase parents' ability to participate.

Such changes would be inexpensive to implement; administrators just need to take the initiative. If we are committed to equal opportunity for women in the work force, we will make those changes. If we are "pro-family," we will make those changes very soon. If we are concerned about our greatest resource, our children, we will make those changes immediately.

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