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Excerpt: Balancing work and family

In 'Ask the Children,' kids tell working parents how to improve family life

By Ellen Galinsky

Sept. 15 — Anyone who has ever anguished over how to earn a living while devoting quality time to his or her children will appreciate a new book by Ellen Galinsky, titled "Ask the Children: What America's Children Really Think About Working Parents." The book is based on a comprehensive scientific study of a thousand children and its aim is to help working parents break free of the guilt and stress that often accompanies childraising. Below, read an excerpt.

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HOW DO CHILDREN SEE WORKING PARENTS?

WHY HAS a book that asks the children how they see their working parents never been written? Why has a comprehensive and in-depth study that pursues this question never been conducted? Because we have been afraid to ask, afraid to know.

Having spent many years exploring the worlds of work and family life at the Families and Work Institute, I feel that we are ready to listen to children. Why? Because their answers are illuminating, not frightening. And because their answers reveal that many of our assumptions about their ideas are at odds with reality. Thus, we need to know what they really think.

CHILDREN'S VIEWS WILL CHANGE HOW WE THINK ABOUT WORK AND FAMILY

In the five years that I spent studying children's — and parents' — views for my book, "Ask the Children," it became clear to me that many of the debates we've been having about work and family miss the mark.

Take the debate about whether mothers' working is "good or bad" for children. Numerous studies have found that having a working mother doesn't harm children, yet the debate refuses to die. In my "Ask the Children" study of a representative group of more than 1,000 children in the 3rd through the 12th grades, having a working mother is never once predictive of how children assess their mothers' parenting skills on a series of 12 items that are strongly linked to children's healthy development,

school readiness and school success. Other characteristics of their mothers' — and their fathers' — lives are very important in predicting how children assess their parent's parenting skills, but whether their mother works is not one of them.

If the findings in this book are simply read and reported as another study that weighs in on whether mothers should or shouldn't work, it would be a terrible misreading, a black-and-white rendering of a full color portrait. This study, as well as many others, shows that the impact of parental employment on children depends on a number of factors, including whether the parent is doing what he or she thinks is right.

In "Ask the Children" I went even further. I looked at why parental guilt is so deeply embedded in us when the research indicates that it need not be. My study revealed that the reason we have been stuck in the "should she/or shouldn't she work" debate is that there is a problem, but we have put the wrong label on that problem. The problem isn't THAT mothers — and fathers — work. It is HOW we work.

For example, I asked the children in this study: "If you were granted one wish to change the way that your mother's/your father's work affects your life, what would that wish be?" I also asked a representative group of more than 600 parents to guess what their child's response would be. Taken together, 56 percent of parents assume that their children would wish for more time together and less time at work.

But TIME is not on the top of children's lists. The largest proportion of children wish that their parents would be less stressed or less tired by work, 35 percent make this wish for their mothers and 27.5 percent make this wish for their fathers. In contrast, only 10 percent of children wish that their mothers would spend more time with them and 15.5 percent say the same thing about their fathers. Interestingly, only 1 percent of parents guess that their child would want them to be less stressed and 1 percent guess that their child would want them to be less tired. Thus it is not that working is good OR bad for children.

Another debate that is off the mark is the "quality time/quantity time" debate. First, I find that it is older children — more than younger children — who are yearning for more time, and they are yearning for more time with their fathers more than their mothers. Furthermore, I find that the quantity of time does matter, but so does the content of the time.

A very special contribution of the "Ask the Children" study is that I have been able to identify those aspects of togetherness that affect children's development in positive or negative ways. One of those factors is focus: our ability to really focus on our child when we are together. In contrast to the idyllic (and often exhausting) notion of "quality time," focusing on our child can involve grappling with tough situations as well as having fun together doing any number of everyday activities.

CHILDREN'S VIEWS WILL CHANGE THE WAY WE TALK ABOUT WORK AND FAMILY

It clear that the language we have been using to describe everyday realities of employed parents and their children is out of synch with what really matters. For example we need new non-dichotomous, non EITHER/OR terms to replace the

quality/quantity time conundrum. I suggest we use “focused time” AND “hang-around time.”

We also need to replace the notion of “balancing” work and family life.” Balancing implies an EITHER/OR situation — a scale where if one side of the scale is up, the other side is down. It is thus a win/lose seesaw. Yet the research conducted for this book reveals that if work life is “up” or family life is “up,” the other side is very likely to be up as well. This is not a “zero sum game” in which giving to one side takes away from the other.

I suggest the phrase “navigating” work and family life. I make this suggestion on the basis of developing and testing a theory of how work affects how we parent. There is a flow between work and home, a dynamic interrelationship in which positive — or negative — aspects of one area can spill over, enhancing or impairing the other.

This study has made it possible to identify those aspects of work and of family life that help us be the kind of parents and employees we want to be. These include: support, autonomy, focus, and having home and work demands better aligned with our priorities.

CHILDREN’S VIEWS HOLD MANY SURPRISES

Among the many surprises in my study is the fact that children learn more about the world of work from their mothers than from their fathers. I also found that many children don’t think we like our work as much as we really do. That’s probably because many of us have said to our kids, “I have to go to work.” Or “I wish I didn’t have to leave.”

I found that parents talk around children rather than with them about our jobs. As a result, many children “play detective” to figure out what is going on in our jobs that upset or elate us. For example, listen to several children:

You can tell [if your parent is in a bad mood] because you get a short and simple answer.

If they had a bad day, they won’t talk. Or they will just go off by themselves... I guess to try to think about their day rather than blowing up.

Some children even call their parents at work to get a reading on how they are feeling. Children told us that knowing about their parents’ mood will help them figure out whether to clean up the house before their parents come home! Other children look for “mood clues” in the way that their parents open the door and walk into the house, and they adjust their behavior accordingly.

Of course, children would try to read our moods whether we were at home all day with them or at work. The point is that our reluctance to talk to our children about our work has meant that children are getting haphazard rather than intentional information about our lives at work. This study finds that such information frames how children feel about their place in the world of work in the future.

Children have many wise things to say to us. In fact, the last question of my survey asks children: “What would you like to tell the working parents of America?” Listen to one child:

If you are trying as a parent, if you are leading by example, if you are following what you preach, then your kids will turn out pretty good.

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*For further information on the book, "Ask the Children," or on
holding Ask the Children events, contact the Families and Work
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