



People Who Have Kids

By Jennifer King, PhD, ELS

A former colleague who managed a graphic arts department once told me, “The worst thing about being a manager is dealing with people who have kids.”

This was before I had a child, and even though I wasn’t a manager, I knew what she meant. The doctor appointments, parent-teacher conferences, Christmas concerts, dance recitals, soccer practices, etc. It seemed that mothers and fathers were always coming in late, leaving early, or taking long lunch breaks. In addition to the scheduled disruptions, there were colds, stomach bugs, and ear infections that would strike at inopportune times. As someone without kids, I was never quite at peace with the allowances that were made for my co-workers. I knew they were working hard, but some days I felt like I was working harder.

Now I too get the calls from teachers and caregivers during work hours. “Erik has pus running out of his ear.” “Erik threw up all over the classroom.” “Erik fell on the playground. He’s OK, but you’ll want a doctor to look at his face. I’ve never seen swelling like that.” These calls come to me and not to my husband, because his workplace is farther away, and his schedule is less flexible. I live—actually, work—in constant fear of these calls, because they usually mean my son is in distress, and they always mean I have to drop whatever I am doing.

The calls are the worst, but the “lists” also get my stress hormones circulating. The lists are where we moms fill in what we will bring to a potluck, holiday party, teacher appreciation day, or when it’s our “child’s turn” to bring a snack. I’ve pulled banana bread out of the oven at midnight and run to the grocery store at 7 AM to get presliced cheese. Usually I have enough time to avoid last-minute shopping and cooking. But sometimes I learn about a commitment the night before.

Then there are the events my husband or I need to attend lest my child think he is unloved and alone in the world. Before the preschool Christmas concert last year, Erik’s teacher sent a note home that said, “Please make sure to have at least 1 parent in attendance. It is very upsetting for children when no one is here to see them.” This was during my busiest time of the year work-wise and just before a 2-and-a-half week school vacation. Of course I wanted to see my son at his first Christmas concert, but I also needed to honor my commitments to clients and earn enough income to keep paying his school tuition. For 2 weeks—even on Saturdays—I got up at 5 AM so that I could give my son and my projects the attention they needed.

That kind of effort is what I didn’t see before I had kids. Many of the parents whom I resented were responding to e-mail and doing line edits in the hours when I was asleep. Sometimes they arrived late or left early from concerts, games, and recitals. Sometimes spouses were arguing about whose job was more or less important.

What I also didn’t understand is that even though parenthood changes your relationship to work, it is not always in negative ways. Now that I am a parent, I am much more efficient than I was before. I have a set number of hours in the day, and I have to use each of them carefully, especially since I could get a phone call regarding a sick or injured child at any time. Being a mom has caused me to shift priorities at work—I write or edit first, then take care of e-mail. The surprising thing is that even though I’m at my computer less than I used to be, I’m more productive when I’m there. And I actually get more done in a day.

Fortunately for me, as long as I’ve had Erik, I’ve been my own boss. I don’t have to account for where I am at a given moment, just whether I get my work done. My hope for parents who work in offices is that they have managers and co-workers who understand that working hard doesn’t necessarily mean sitting at a certain desk for a certain number of hours each day.

I bet this has become true for my former colleague who grouched about working parents. She recently had twins.

Jennifer King, PhD, ELS, is president of August Editorial, Inc. She can be reached at jkking@augusteditorial.com.

