

## COMMENTARY

## Career issues for stay-at-home moms: More than meets the eye

By HILARY BERGER

Many women find the experience of going from being a successful career woman to full-time mothering is like being blindsided in heavy traffic. It is becoming more and more evident that today's highly educated and successful career woman enters parenthood unaware that she will be leaving aspects of her best self behind. Most don't consciously anticipate having to completely reassess their life goals, pursue newly defined career endeavors and engage in deep soul searching to determine how to feel whole and valid again after having children. Yet, this is the typical pattern for many such women. They struggle to recapture the sense of self-worth, the sense of personal power and the sense of their abilities and competencies that they took for

granted prior to having children. No easy task.

We are paving new ground, our generation of women. No other generation of women has achieved the educational and career success that we have prior to becoming mothers. Our experience raising children cannot be compared to our mothers or grandmothers because central to our self-definition is our clear knowledge of our own intellectual capacity and prior success in the workforce. Today's generation of educated women proudly enter into motherhood with a clearly defined professional identity, complete with social, emotional and financial validation for their knowledge, accomplishments and abilities to make significant contributions to their professions. In other words, they know how satisfying a professional life can be. In today's times,

women's self-concepts are shaped and defined largely by these experiences. I do not pretend to speak for all women ...obviously some women have had more satisfying and fulfilling careers than others. Most however are keenly attuned to the part of themselves that knows the intrinsically good feelings resulting from hard work, wrapped in the lining of degrees, salaries, promotions and status among a network of colleagues. In this article I focus on mothers working inside the house ...you know, "*the at-home mom.*" I offer you a fresh approach to a mother's career development and life planning. I speak out to a population of women I believe are facing unique and dangerous struggles of self-definition. Moms have a right and an obligation to parent with their full range of abilities and

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talent. Our daughters will thank us in the future.

In both my professional career counseling work and personal experience as a stay-at-home mother of four children, I have seen a steady trend of moms experiencing a loss of identity, increased feelings of isolation, loss of confidence, and a lack of clarity about their purpose in life. They describe feelings of their efforts not being appreciated by their spouses and feel that their contributions to the family are undervalued. Anyone raising children knows the full-time commitment of your heart and soul and anything else you've got to do this job well. We somehow know it is the "most important job" we will ever do. It is certainly the most demanding job physically and emotionally we will ever do. It is 24 hours a day, seven days a week, offers few breaks and tests us in ways we never quite imagined. It requires mastery in skills of organization, nurturing, administration, counseling, political savvy, spiritual adviser, educating, chauffeuring, event planning, chef,

clothing manager, "home order keeper," and more, more, more. Moms work tirelessly as dedicated caregivers, whereby most of her activities are for her family members' benefit. What then is the effect of peers who tell a woman, "*Oh you're not working now*" or asking "*What do you do with all your time?*" Perhaps it is the unspoken effect of not contributing enough, if anything, financially. Money talks and value is often associated with dollars. We need no reminder that being a good mother does not pay us a salary. Any mother at home could give countless examples of the subtle cues they receive in their everyday life where their self-esteem takes a hit because they "*don't work.*" Coupled with this is general lack of expectations which society has for mothers at home to be productive, informed and balanced people.

Many moms at home in search of connectedness and a sense of belonging immerse themselves in volunteer and community activities, take up tennis or focus on personal fitness. Less healthy outlets include

too much wine in the afternoon, shopping and spending excessively and self-medicating with over the counter and prescription drugs.

Is there a way for us to be devoted to our family while also being devoted to ourselves? Must mothers lose so much of themselves, their goals, their sense of identity in order to be good mothers? We have little research on the unique issues facing today's mothers and few models to guide us through this cognitive dissonance of being absolutely essential to our families, yet absolutely un-validated beyond that role.

Can we be devoted caregivers but also demand that our larger self-concept be nourished and validated as well? Maybe. How?

### **Some suggestions...**

- We need to become aware of our feelings. Recognize that there might be a way to have more of our own identity without compromising our parenting choices. Perhaps you are fully satisfied. If so, great. If not,

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acknowledge it and move into an action mode. Discomfort serves a purpose. Rather than filling up our time with random commitments, we need to allow ourselves to feel discomfort. Identify what about ourselves needs more attention. It can move us into an action mode to take an important step forward.

- We need to do an inventory of goals in various aspects of our lives to ascertain what we would like to personally get out of our years at home with our children. Examine the following areas: Career Activities, Local Volunteer Activities, Political Interests, Health Related Goals, Relationship Related Goals, Creating a Home Related Goals, Creative Outlets, Reading Goals, Skills you always wanted to learn, etc. ...This can be done with friends or a spouse or with a professional. If you don't set a goal it usually won't happen. Make your goal small and attainable. Set it to a time frame and go after it. Relish in your

success when you achieve it.

- We need to celebrate motherhood as a legitimate stage of a woman's career development. Why not embrace these years at home as a period of self and career exploration, whereby we partake in an organized process designed to have us positioned for our next career when we are ready? Don't wait until your youngest goes on the bus to start considering your future life and career planning goals. It is never too early or too late to begin. The journey of self-assessment and investigation of various options is integral to your sense of purpose and maintaining your professional sense of yourself. It increases self-esteem and gives you your own personal life work to do. When you possess awareness about your own interests, skill sets, personality style and values, you will be able to go out there and research future educational or professional opportunities with a clear sense of mission. (We might

parallel this with waiting until senior year to think about what type of job you would apply for ...bad idea.) A professional career counselor or college counseling service can assist you with this.

- We need to be purposeful about the time commitments we take on. Carve out whatever amount of time you can and get involved in meaningful volunteer projects, small professional projects, freelance work, taking a course, exploring new creative outlets and other meaningful activities. Continue to subscribe to your professional journals and maintain periodic contact with professional networks. Read the newspaper and talk with others. Gain support from women similar to you. Doing a little bit of the work you enjoy now can be life changing. Those who sabotage you or discourage you do not deserve to be a major part of your life.

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- We need to ask ourselves a hard question, then answer it: If you were being headlined in the newspaper at the pinnacle of your life and career, what would this article say about you? Write this article to the best of your ability.

It is a myth and a cliché that when your child goes on the school bus you will “*have your life back.*” Yes, you will have the hours between 9 and 3 back yet without goals and a plan to achieve them not much is going to change. The truth is that with each year that passes we lose touch with our educational and professional identity and in the belief in ourselves to go out there and take risks. Our skills become outdated, our contacts often no longer exist, and our interest in doing similar work may no longer exist. But worst of all is the tremendous sense of being an outsider to the world of work, lacking a sense of confidence in our marketability (often, rightly so), not having any idea how to translate many years of raising our children into a resume. Many women at this point turn to quick fix training options for careers that may not suit them. Waiting for that school bus to give our lives back is not an option.

The mothering our children receive from us is no doubt the most important influence in their life. The pleasures, joys and rewards we get from our children are indescribable. What is also indescribable is the experience of a child having a mother who feels content and vital in her own existence. I could not think of a greater gift and role model to offer our children.

**Hilary S. Berger, Ed.D., a Weston resident and mother of four children, has her doctoral degree from Columbia University’s Teachers College, is a licensed and certified professional counselor and specializes in career/transition counseling for women. Presently she is in private practice as a career counselor serving people in transition and works with individuals ranging from high school age through retirement. She will be presenting a seminar focused on career and life planning for mothers on May 30 at 9:30 a.m. at the Weston Library.**

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