

## Articles

### "Quality, Not Quantity"

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Texas Lawyer  
May 31, 1999

Originally appeared in **TEXAS LAWYER**

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#### **The Crucial Determiner of a Child's Well-being**

The buzz among working mommies these days (as if we have time to buzz) is a recent study showing that children of working mothers suffer no lasting harm from their mother's absence.

When I saw the story on the front page of the newspaper a few weeks ago, I clutched it gratefully. Finally, I thought to myself, some validation from the outside world.

I knew before my son was born that I was going to return to my full-time job, and I've never regretted my decision. Sure, there are times when I feel overwhelmed and I long for a little more time with my family. But in the long run I feel that my son will actually benefit from having a mother who works outside the home.

In case you didn't read about it, the upshot of the study, by the University of Massachusetts, was that the quality of time parents spend with their children, not the quantity, is the crucial determiner of a child's well-being.

Though it's heartening news—and I'm glad to have an academic imprimatur on my decision to be a working mom—I could have saved those researchers a lot of money.

I know from my own experience, and I bet that most of the working mothers reading this will agree, that we're better parents because of, not in spite of, our work. Spending all day in an office among adults, almost none of whom require my assistance to cut their food, primes me for the sheer silliness of an evening with my four-year-old. And because I haven't spent all day with him, it's a treat, not a chore, to read him the same story five times or help him organize his dinosaur collection.

I know that if I had been catering to him all day, I would not only be itching to get some time away from him, but I probably wouldn't enjoy the time I'm with him as much. There's something to be said for controlled doses of children, even one's own.

What the Massachusetts study didn't cover, however, was the eventual societal benefits of working mothers. By watching me succeed outside the home, my son sees women, not just as mothers, wives and nurturers, but also as people who can do everything a man can do and who dress better while doing it. In the long run, that's going to make him a better husband, father and person.

And when you add up all the children of working mothers, each of whom sees women as multidimensional, you've got a collection of children who can make the world a better place, for women *and* men.

I know that there are voices in our culture who tell us that working moms are to blame for every societal ill from 8-year-old snipers to flesh-eating bacteria. And though I won't deny that there are some wretched children of working mothers, there are just as many rebellious children from more "traditional" homes.

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Nevertheless, the constant drumbeat by those anti-working-mother forces in our society has an effect on the millions of women like me who work outside the home. While we try to avoid the Dr. Lauras of the world, who admonish us to get back in the house, it's hard to avoid feeling that we're somehow less "wholesome" than our stay-at-home counterparts.

Which is why I and so many of my friends were so gleeful when we saw the headline "No Lasting Harm for Working Moms' Kids." Though we can exude confidence on the job, there's always a tiny voice inside our heads second-guessing our parenting abilities. It's nice to get a little solace once in a while from the newspaper.

One constituency that may not be so happy about the study's conclusions, however, are women like my girlfriend—I'll call her Ann—who quit her job to stay home with her son because she was convinced that it was the best thing for him. After seeing this story she called me and was a bit miffed about her decision.

"I quit my job because I decided he needed me more than the firm did," she said, "and now I've got a bunch of scientists telling me I didn't have to. I can't win."

Which just illustrates why it's so hard to be a woman these days. If second-guessing *ourselves* isn't bad enough, we've got a bunch of people, from Dr. Laura to the University of Massachusetts, second-guessing our actions for us.

It raises an interesting question: Why do we need all this outside validation? Shouldn't we be confident enough in our own choices to feel good about them without having to cling to a piece of newsprint? Of course we should. And when everybody quits beating up on moms—working or otherwise—we will.