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FAMILIES

Fringe benefit: happier children

Research shows that
parents happy at work
are most likely to have
well-adjusted youngsters

Boston Globe 8/25/96

BY BELLA ENGLISH P.D., D6

Children have an invisible, but crucial, stake in the American workplace. And whether he or she knows it, your boss plays a vital role in your child's happiness, a thought that can be frightening or comforting, depending on what kind of boss you have.

A new examination of the connection between workplace and home also offers this comfort to guilt-ridden working parents: It's not so much the number of hours on the job that affects your child — unless it's extremely high — but rather your overall job satisfaction.

In short, a parent happy with his or her job has the happiest and most well-adjusted children. Self-esteem as a pro-

fessional seems intrinsically linked with self-esteem as a parent, and children directly benefit from it, according to the findings of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University.

A lot of research has been done on what happens to chil-

dren when their mothers go to work. But the Philadelphia study was one of the first to look at the link between the quality of a person's work, and the "outcome" of their children. The findings have implications for how the modern workplace is designed.

"We found that the more authority or control they have at work is really important to mothers as far as their competence as parents goes," said Stewart Friedman, director of the Wharton Life Interests Project at the University of Pennsylvania. "Men felt better about themselves as fathers when they had jobs they liked and did well at."

Maintaining a boundary between work and home is critical to family life, **FAMILIES, Page D5**

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Happy workers mean happier children

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as anyone who has ever had a bad day – or week, or year – at the office can tell you. “Apart from the amount of time people spent at work, clearly very important was how much your work interfered psychologically with your family life,” Friedman said. “So if you’re thinking about work when you’re with your kids, your kids will feel that.”

That is probably no surprise to most parents. “Emotionally, you bring the office home with you,” says Patty Smith of Milton, who left a large accounting firm a few years ago and now runs her own business. “If things aren’t going well at work, my kids feel it.” Although she is still working long hours, it is on her own terms, said Smith, and her family life reflects the improvement.

Susan Reverby, a professor of women’s studies at Wellesley College and a mother of two, knows the dynamic between work and home only too well. “When I have bad times at work, it affects my kids. You bring it all home.” Reverby’s half-hour commute is her lifesaver. Instead of cursing the Mass. Pike like many commuters, she blesses it. “By the time I reach the TV 38 tower on the pike, I try to stop thinking about Wellesley and start thinking about what we’re having for dinner. That’s my transition time.”

The Philadelphia study is is probably no surprise to most parents. ‘Emotionally, you bring the office home with you,’ says Patty Smith of Milton, who left a large accounting firm a few years ago and now runs her own business. ‘If things aren’t going well at work, my kids feel it.’

In the Philadelphia study, the 800

subjects – all of whom worked in professional or management jobs – were classified as being either career-oriented or family-oriented. Those parents who were psychologically more involved with their jobs than their families had children with more health, behavioral and learning problems. Those parents who had the highest degree of satisfaction at work, including freedom and authority, had the better-behaved, better-adjusted children – children who, for example, displayed the least tendencies toward withdrawal, shyness or aggression, compared with their peers.

None of these results surprises Caryl Rivers, a Boston University professor who recently co-wrote a book on two-income families. “It’s very clear that the quality of a mother’s work has an impact on the way she mothers her children,” says Rivers. One of Rivers’ earlier studies found that the women with the highest overall well-being were mothers in prestigious jobs.

If the Philadelphia study’s findings hardly seem revolutionary to most working parents, it is because research often merely confirms what common sense has already told us. So perhaps the most important message is aimed at

employers: Make the workplace more family-friendly and everyone benefits. Most employers see the simple logic in this. But the leap from rhetoric to reality is huge. Lucky is the person who has real control over a work schedule, or can snag a part-time job with decent benefits. To the contrary, most corporations are still strong believers in “face time,” or showing your face at work for long hours.

“The most important challenge for organizations is to change the way they think,” said Friedman. “Why do you have to show up for work at 7 a.m. when you can do it at home at night?”

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Still, the way to an employer's mind is not through the heart but through the wallet. Executives must be convinced that work and family issues are so enmeshed that one directly affects the other.

"I think employers should care about children to the extent that when people's family life is suffering, it affects them as employees," said Jeffrey Greenhaus, a professor of management at Drexel University who co-wrote the study along with Friedman and Drexel colleague Saroj Parasuraman. "If you are stressed out at home, it's likely that you're going to be preoccupied with family matters when you're at work, and vice versa."

At a recent conference on family and work with Vice President Al Gore, the Philadelphia researchers listened as the chief executive officer of Starbucks Coffee extolled the virtues of a flexible workplace. Friedman later cornered the executive and asked if he really practiced what he preached.

"He said that as a result of flexibility and employee empowerment, he has a 40 percent better retention rate of service employees," Friedman said. Companies that don't allow employees more control over their work are likely to feel the effects.

"There are a number of companies losing top-flight people who say, 'I can't do this.' It's mostly women, but also some men," Friedman said. "These are talented people who can afford to leave. They have the brains and resources to start their own companies."

Consider a few real-life cases:

The final straw for Anne Goulart was a slender one, but strong enough to make her take a closer look at the balance between her professional and personal lives. She didn't like what she saw.

"There was a really bad day when my daughter had an invitation to a social event and couldn't go because my husband and I were both working," she recalled recently. "It seems minor, but I suddenly felt I was missing out on so many things in life. . . . And the kids always had to be on my schedule."

That schedule included a 70- to 80-hour work week. As a gynecologist in private practice, Goulart was always on call. "There was too much work and not enough of the rest of life," she said. So three years ago, she gave up her solo practice, cut her schedule in half and started taking summers off.

Along with her stress level, Goulart's income dropped - by more than half. But she has no regrets. "Life is so much richer," she said. "I just feel much more connected to the kids. . . ." Her new-found job satisfaction has translated into a home life fuller for everyone. "It was me that was missing out," she says.

And consider the case of another physician, pediatrician Rebecca Nilloff, who practices in Quincy and Boston. She has, with considerable effort, managed to construct her work life around her parenting.

When she began working in her medical practice 13 years ago, it was Nilloff and three male doctors. She insisted on part-time hours - a radical notion for a doctor at that time - and got them. Now, the other women physicians in the practice work flexible hours because they, too, have children. The hours allow Nilloff to be home with her children after school. (Indeed, she is often, as she puts it, the "first mom in the car line at school.")

A few years ago, when she was feeling particularly stressed out, Nilloff spoke to her family about quitting. "My kids got very upset," she recalled. "They said they were so proud of me, and besides, what was I going to do all day? I was shocked. I didn't realize how they felt about my work. That was a happy side benefit to it," she says. And it is a perfect example of what the Philadel-

phia researchers have "discovered" - happiness and high self-esteem on the job translates to the same in the home.

But the study has its limits: Its subjects were managers and professionals, groups that find it easier to negotiate their working conditions than, say, an hourly wage earner. And the reality is that Americans are working longer hours than they were 20 years ago. Global competition and downsizing have put the pressure on to produce better results, faster.

Nilloff realizes that, unlike her, most women can't work out decent hours with decent pay. She is thankful for her professional satisfaction, and well aware of her good fortune. Says Nilloff, "You need a lot of luck in all of this."

Luck, and maybe an understanding boss.