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Mothers face bias in jobs, study says

PROMOTIONS, PAY, HIRING AFFECTED

By Michelle Quinn
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Mothers may rule the roost at home, but keep ``Mom'' off the résumé. And watch the mom talk at work.

That might be some people's conclusions after learning the provocative findings from a small study of undergraduates' attitudes conducted at universities in Kansas and New Jersey. The study compared stereotypes of working mothers and fathers with workers without children.

And the results are not good for working mothers: They are less likely to be hired than childless men, women and working fathers. And when it comes time for promotions or pay raises, working mothers are held to a higher standard.

For people like Jill Matthews, the findings ring true.

Matthews, a San Jose mother of two, says she downplays her role as a mother to be taken seriously at her sales and marketing job at a software company. There, colleagues talk about a working mother who cut back her hours as ``doing the mom thing."

``I have to portray myself as a super woman," says Matthews, 39. ``If it does come out I have kids, I am careful not to say how stressful things are at home."

And as Matthews interviews for another sales job, her friends advise her not to mention until late in the interview process that she drops off her two children at day care every day.

``There's a perception that if you have small children, you are going to have trouble getting here on time," she says.

To uncover latent attitudes about working mothers, the authors of the study gave 196 participants the same résumé for an applicant for an entry-level job as an immigration lawyer. Half of the participants received résumés with a male name, half received ones with female names. Half of the résumés identified the applicant as single with no children, and the other half said the applicant had two children and was married.

Then the participants were asked to judge the applicant's commitment to the job, competence and availability. They also were asked whether they would hire the applicant and whether the applicant would make a good candidate for promotion.

Parenthood signaled that the applicant, male or female, was less available for work and less committed to the job compared with the applicant without children.

But the participants penalized the mothers and not the fathers. For example, they were less likely to want to hire the mothers and less likely to see the mothers as good candidates for promotion than fathers or childless applicants. Fathers, in contrast, were as likely to be hired as childless men and as likely to be considered good candidates for promotion.

``People see more negative consequences of hiring a mother," says Kathleen Fuegen, the study's co-author and an assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University. ``Mothers are expected to be the primary caregivers and employment takes a back seat to that."

The study, published in the December issue of *Journal of Social Issues*, may confirm perceptions of many working parents that there is a bias in the workplace against parents, particularly mothers.

When he decided to take a short leave to be with his son, Todd Berkowitz, 31, says he received only encouragement from his fellow employees. But when a female colleague made the same decision, the hallway discussion was different.

``It became a big issue," says Berkowitz, who eventually became a stay-at-home father in Menlo Park and a business graduate student. ``Why is she doing it now?' 'Is she going to come back?' "

But Theresa Marcroft, 46, says she has never experienced negative perceptions of her work because she is the mother of a 5-year-old.

Silicon Valley is all about getting the job done, she says. ``No one has asked me about my marital status, my kids," says Marcroft, a single mother who runs MarketSavvy, a San Jose marketing consultancy firm.

However, she doesn't take jobs that involve travel to Asia and works around her daughter's schedule. ``If some of the work is being done at midnight, as long as it's good work, no one cares."

Future studies should look at attitudes of older people in the workplace, Fuegen says. While the undergraduates had little work experience, they reflect attitudes in the culture and their expectations of the workplace, she says. ``They expect there will be this tension between parenthood, particularly motherhood, and paid employment," Fuegen says. (There was no difference in attitudes among male and female undergraduates.)

Since the birth of her first child nearly two years ago, Rebecca Eisenberg, a lawyer, says she has picked up subtle judgments that her primary responsibility should be caring for her child, not her work.

Eisenberg, 36, worked part time at home immediately after giving birth and then returned full time.

When male colleagues tell her she should have taken off more time, she asks, ``How much time did you take off for the birth of your children?"

``I don't talk about my child all the time," says Eisenberg, a San Francisco resident working for a San Jose company. ``I put pictures up on my wall at work. I'm doing that because I really do want to make it easier for other mothers. And fathers, too."

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