

Esther's blog: a game of two halves

I wonder how many mother and daughter pairs there are in Citymothers, like myself and my daughter? Until last year, I always had a full-time job, as an academic until she was 5 and then in the City until she was 29. I worked because I enjoyed it, and would have been unhappy without a career. As a consequence, our lives have been far more interesting and my daughter has had a more fulfilled, stimulated and stimulating mother.

Intellectual challenges apart, I wanted economic stability for my family and to be financially self-sufficient. Some women seem not to feel these needs so strongly. Of course people have to make their own decisions and all choices involve compromises and sacrifices. In a Citymothers survey, 71% of respondents said their greatest issue was parental guilt.

Historically women who could afford to have typically paid someone to look after their children; assuming that was through choice not societal pressure, it would seem that angst over maternal absence is a recent phenomenon, coinciding with the rise of women's economic independence. I have felt it. I never asked if my mother did nor, I realise, did it cross my mind to question her full-time career. It was obvious she needed and wanted it.

My daughter recently wrote in response to a blog where mothers said their children need them at home all the time: "I disagree. Children need a variety of influences in their lives, including both parents if possible, and other people such as teachers, friends etc. The broader the sphere of influence, the broader the mind, in my opinion."

I have a good relationship with my daughter and who knows if it would have been better, or worse, if I'd been at home more, since I wasn't. And now I'm fortunate enough to be able to stop full-time work in the City, I have many skills I can use in the not for profit sector and for my own enjoyment, as well as more time with my daughter (at last!), so I'm having a lot of fun.

In my next blog I plan to discuss enabling fathers to take more responsibility for their children. I might also dwell on the art of expressing milk in the workplace, if that isn't too much information.

Esther's blog: Positive parenting, the next generation, and unconscious bias.

Today I'm going to blog on three apparently unrelated things which are actually interconnected.

First: I was so impressed by the Citymothers seminar I attended on Thursday 9th October by Anita Cleare on behalf of the Positive Parenting Project, on strategies to encourage positive behaviour in our children (there are two more coming soon). It was an informative, uplifting and wise contribution to a massive subject, a subject which could with minimal adaption be applied to a difficult line manager at work, or the line manager's boss . . . even one's spouse. I hope people are inspired to follow the Triple P's guidelines and I'm wondering quite how I managed to produce such a thoughtful, energetic, focused woman as my daughter despite my not knowing any of the recommended strategies. . . I also felt a small sting of agism, when the speaker asked us to identify ourselves depending of the age group of our children, thus, she said, from "0-4, 4- 9, 9-12 and teenagers". . .What about me?! My daughter is 30 and I can tell you parenting doesn't stop -- ever!

So on to my next thought. Last weekend my daughter was home and, on her own admission, a bit stressed out. She had a job interview to prepare for, she knew her stuff well but was having some difficulty with her organisation's HR-devised competencies, on which she knew she'd be questioned. Using the best coaching-style skills I could muster, I asked her to show me an organogram of the organisation to see how her role fitted in, we talked through the role description, the likely biases of the interviewers and her strategy for showing off her knowledge in light of the competency descriptions. I realised there was not a chance I could have assisted her as effectively with such preparation if I hadn't had experience of working in an organisation at a senior level, and I probably wouldn't have reached that senior level if I hadn't been able to "lean in" to my role at various critical times including when she was very little.

So to my final scenario: I'm sitting in a meeting room in the City with four senior City gentlemen and we are discussing candidates for a job. It is important, they say, that senior people are targeted, the kind of men who have good connections with other senior businessmen, and so on, and so on. Get it? Would you have spoken up as I did and asked it to be minuted that I wished us please to use gender neutral language in order to help address any unconscious bias that might otherwise creep into the process of selection. I felt shrill, I knew I made my male colleagues uncomfortable but I felt I had to do it. Would I have done it when I was younger, perhaps in an interview for a job? I don't know. I'd like to think yes but I know how difficult it can be to push against the grain. Nevertheless, unless we do it where we can, along with being good role models for our children, things will not change as they need to for a more equal society. One of the most heartening aspects of the Triple-P seminar was the significant number of male attendees. I bet they won't be quite so readily assuming the best "man" will get the job when they help their adult child, male or female, prepare for an interview.

- See more at:

<http://www.citymothers.co.uk/Blogs/CItymothers/176.htm#sthash.jgXZXMDy.dpuf>

Esther's blog: Playing the long game in the city

I recently had the delightful experience of meeting up some old friends, all women who'd worked their whole adult lives in various professions, and all with children. We turned to discussing how we'd managed to survive, even thrive in the workplace and, when I realised my blog was due imminently, I thought I'd share the fruits of our musings. Of course the list is endless, and many points are not mother/parent-specific, but here goes.

Find two or three people within your organisation or line of business who can give unstinting support and feedback at moments of crisis. These are not necessarily obvious "sponsors" in the eyes of third parties, but provide a safe haven when difficult circumstances arise. The support can be two-way in that the same person will sometimes ask for your input into their life.

Never fall out with people unless you can't avoid it. If you put someone's back up against a wall they will almost certainly bite, and that can lead to painful or unpredictable consequences for you both.

Nobody is ever too junior to be kind to. That post room colleague who comes to your room each day may one day save your bacon when an important document goes astray.

Try to behave graciously in the face of provocation. It usually pays in the end to keep to the moral high ground. But know when it is important to have a strategic tantrum. Know where to draw the line. In the face of client or internal demands, protect the staff working for you. They will repay you threefold, but do it anyway as a matter of principle

Be very organised, including make time to network.

Be quietly firm about your parental responsibilities; when senior, encourage your junior colleagues to be open about theirs.

Delegate wherever possible, provided you can be sure quality is not going to be compromised. Know when it is fine for something to be "good enough" rather than perfect.

Be trustworthy and never break a confidence. Imagine that everything you say about someone could be repeated to them and ask whether you would stand by it.

Learn the art of strategic gossip, particularly with your inner circle of supporters.

Pick your battles but know when to stop fighting the losing ones. Avoid being labelled "shrill", or challenge it.

Think twice before committing controversial matters to an email. Consider where it might end up.

The more senior you are the shorter your emails should become.

Silence can be as expressive as speech.