

# Young Adults and Adolescents: Not Too Early to Be Worried About Work-Life Balance

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**W**orking at the Berger Institute for Work, Family and Children at Claremont McKenna College, we consistently encounter young, talented and highly motivated undergraduates who express concerns regarding their current and future work-family balance. Comments like “I don’t want to go into \_\_\_\_\_ (finance, law, graduate school) because I won’t be able to have a life” or “if I go to grad school, I’ll be too old to have kids by the time I am ready for them” are common, even for first-year students.

Indeed, the difficulties of balancing work and family have been well documented. The changing demographics of the American family and workforce (e.g., Americans are living longer and having fewer children) and the changes in wealth distribution such that dual-wage earning families and single parent families have increased made the issue of work-family balance a pressing concern for researchers, policy makers, and the media for decades (e.g., Halpern, 2005). Much of this attention has been focused on ways in which employers can modify their work practices in order to accommodate work-family issues. Comparatively less attention has been focused on the impact this is having on the career choices and mental health of today’s adolescents and youth.

The increasingly high prevalence of anxiety and depression experienced by college students is becoming a growing concern among researchers, higher education administrators, and mental health professionals that serve this population. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2014), women are 60% more likely to suffer from an anxiety disorder than men, so it’s not surprising that female students are significantly more likely to be experiencing these symptoms. During college, most students feel pressure to succeed academically, but they are also adjusting, perhaps for the first time, to unfamiliar surroundings, new friends, and new ways of thinking and living. They are also beginning to prepare for their future. For most women, who are biologically limited in their number of childbearing years, this involves thinking not only of their career but also of how and when they might begin to plan for a family.

Students are also bombarded by the social media storm that gives mixed messages of whether to “lean in,” like Sheryl Sandberg, or to accept that they “can’t have it all,” like Anne-Marie Slaughter. Their concerns are further fueled and seemingly vindicated by the predominance of statistics showing that although employers are more flexible than they once were, allowing employees to work from home on occasion or to leave early when necessary, many are reducing options that could provide substantially more flexibility, such as flextime, job sharing, and child care subsidies. In addition, many students may need only to look to their own families for examples of what many studies are indicating: mothers often spend more time with their children and more time multitasking than fathers. A further potential source of students’ unease is the knowledge that, all other things being equal in a dual-wage earning family, women still shoulder the burden of housework (Halpern, 2005).

Many researchers (e.g. Gottfredson, 1981) have found that children incorporate work-family considerations as part of their gender socialization development in early childhood. In this study, even the youngest children preferred an occupation that seemed appropriate for their own sex; boys were typically more concerned with fi-

nancial values while girls were more concerned with helping others. It is not until the college years, however, that individuals have the choices and opportunities to make significant career-altering choices, such as whether to select a major that would hypothetically lead to one of the Science, Technology, Engineering, or Math (STEM) fields. Eccles and colleagues (e.g., Frome, Alfeld, Eccles & Barber, 2006) have repeatedly shown that women are less likely to choose these fields during the high school and college years because of the perceived work-family flexibility – or lack thereof – provided by these professions.

More disturbingly, when women do choose these fields (presumably after they have already realized that they are already interested and motivated in this subject area and are aware they will be in the gender minority), they are also more likely to drop out, causing a “leaky pipeline” pattern. Indeed, in their longitudinal study (Frome et al, 2006), 83% of the females who had male-dominated, STEM-oriented career aspirations in 12th grade switched to female-dominated, non-STEM aspirations within seven years. Further analyses revealed that the desire for family-flexible jobs significantly predicted this high attrition rate. After all, if the statistics are correct and working women can reasonably expect to perform the lion’s share of child care and housework, they might try to make at least one aspect of life easier by opting for what may be perceived as a more family-friendly career.

Therefore, it is important for those who serve the mental health needs of college students (particularly women) and emerging adults in general, to be aware of the potential work-family stress they may be experiencing as part of their identity and career development. In particular, aspiring professionals with family interests should consider three reliable findings regarding work-family balance (Halpern, 2005).

*First, maternal employment does not have a negative impact on their children’s development.* Parents worry that full-time maternal, or dual-earning, employment means their children will suffer developmental or academic setbacks, but there are effectively no meaningful differences between children of employed mothers and children of mothers who do not work outside the home. In fact, some studies have shown that maternal employment has a positive effect on children.

*Second, it is important that children are shielded from the negative detriments of poverty while also being raised in a supportive and loving home environment.* More often than not, both parents find that they must work in order to be able to provide a comfortable, healthy lifestyle for their families. This awareness alone is key for positive child development. Working parents, married or not, can focus on creating a supportive, consistent and nurturing environment (whether it is with the parent, another family member, or a child-care provider) for their children while still pursuing their own professional interests and financial stability.

*Third, even the most stressful career paths can be work-family friendly if you believe you can control the stressful aspects of it.* Identifying the causes of your work-related stress (long hours? unmanageable workload?) is an important first step. Finding a way to navigate these stressful aspects of a job

is a valuable skill (ask to work from home one day a week, ask to have more colleagues work on a project so that the workload is more evenly distributed) that can and should be applied to all aspects of life, whether that translates to being a supportive family member, successful student, or productive worker.

Helping individuals navigate and deal with the stress and depression that can accompany a challenging work-life balance during college years might be the best preparation for them as they pursue their profession ambitions after graduation. Furthermore, doing so will also give them the knowledge and tools to provide supportive and nurturing environments for their future children while still working to attain the occupational goals that fulfill them. ■

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