

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Child Care Career and Emotional Issues

While some people have careers, others have jobs. The difference between the two is that people who have careers often feel more attached to their positions and derive a sense of identity from them whereas people who have jobs are more likely to be less attached to their positions. How attached a parent is to his/her career or job will influence the decision to choose one form of childcare over another. Career attachment can also be expected to impact how the parent will feel about the type of care he/she ultimately chooses.

People work for a variety of reasons, income being only one factor. For some, work is a source of enjoyment and creative opportunity as well as income. Self-esteem may be derived by identifying with a career path, as well. Many parents, whether male or female, do not wish to become full-time caregivers and give up these benefits. They may also determine that to leave the workforce even temporarily would harm their careers. Parents who are attached to their careers may have motivation to stay with them even though doing so makes little economic sense to the family for a few years. Such parents will decide they must have professional childcare because they do not wish to interrupt their careers.

Parents who continue working and place the child in full-time or part-time childcare are likely to deal with a number of adjustment issues concerning their care choice. First, they will most likely feel sad when a maternity or paternity leave has ended and they must return to work and leave the child at day care. They may question whether they have made the right decision or feel like they are spending too much time away from the child. They may worry that the child will suffer from their 'negligence'. Grief and guilt feelings of this sort can be partially alleviated by calls or visits to the day care, especially in the first few weeks and by making sure to spend as much quality time as possible with the child during non-working hours.

Parents deciding to provide care themselves in whole or in part face a slightly different set of adjustment issues, both positive and negative. The parent who telecommutes part or all of the time will experience a loss of socialization opportunities and connections with coworkers and may become lonely. He or she will likely have to deal with coworkers who believe that someone who telecommutes is not really working when at home and that the parent is taking it easy or having fun all day. He or she may face perception issues from management staff, or even a direct manager, who may believe that he or she is no longer committed to the work team or fully contributing to that team anymore. The telecommuting parent is likely to not be a part of office gossip and politics. These perception and communication problems can become a stronger issue the more that the parent is absent from the 'regular' work environment.

Coworker perceptions can be managed with communication and continued performance and commitment. Over time as coworkers see that the telecommuting worker is still completing projects and doing quality work, some negative perceptions may evaporate. Also, in the current technological world, e-mail, cell phones, instant messenger, and other tools can go a long way in connecting the telecommuting worker to the workplace. Physical presence is generally not as necessary for most office-based work anymore.

In addition to social issues, telecommuters also face organizational issues. Working from a home office is very different than being in the workplace. It can be difficult for a parent to be motivated to concentrate on work tasks when his or her child is present. Maintaining concentration on work may be particularly difficult for very extroverted people who need to bounce ideas off of others. Simply put, working from home is not for everyone. While the parent has some flexibility in his/her schedule and

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the ability to take breaks to play with the child, there are also times when the parent is in the middle of a project or trying to meet a deadline and the child needs something to eat, requires a diaper change, or just wants attention. The parent must then juggle work and child needs. There is no closing the office door for quiet time when a parent works from home.

Parents choosing to leave the workplace and devote themselves to full-time caregiving must cope with issues including a change in identity and altered relationships with others, as well as the fear that they may face a difficult situation upon returning to the workplace in the future.

In today's society, we are often pressured to define ourselves by what we do, rather than who we are. A parent who has always worked and who may have spent years climbing the corporate ladder will likely experience feelings of grief and loss over leaving his or her career and will stress over adjusting to the new demands of caregiving. The parent may feel shame or embarrassment when asked by others what he or she does for work and may face attitudes and perceptions such as, "Oh, you just stay at home? That's…nice." or the more well-meaning person who says things like, "Well, yeah, raising kids is hard work, too, but I could never just stay at home all day and not have a career." The parent can walk away from those comments feeling that he or she has somehow disappointed others or not lived up to societal standards. The parent may also face isolation and will need to learn to seek out new ways to meet others, such as with playgroups, neighbors, or other stay-at-home parents.

A family's decision to have a parent stay at home or not determines in part how the child will be socialized. In a day care setting, the child is exposed daily to many other children and learns the important skills of sharing and playing together. Also, children in day care are likely to be exposed to and learn about people from different cultures, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Children who remain at home with a parent end up having less interaction with others. In some cases, such relative isolation can push the child towards shyness or to have difficulty interacting with other children when the time comes to enter school. It is important for stay-at-home caregivers to seek out opportunities for children to be exposed to other children, whether through play groups, children in the neighborhood or extended family, or through short day care situations such as at a gym/health center so that some socialization occurs.