

THE **NATIONBUILDER**
REVIEW

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WOMEN'S

CONFERENCE

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PARENTHOOD'S POWER

Amy Henderson

In mid-2015, I was more than eight months pregnant and down on my knees picking up the peas that my three-year-old daughter, Clare, and my nearly two-year-old son, Aidan, had spilled all over our kitchen floor. It was lunchtime, and I was still in my pajamas and hadn't yet brushed my teeth. And while the kids above me banged their fists on the table and continued to spill food onto the floor, I became viscerally aware of the taunting voices in my own head. They were telling me that no matter what I did, I was a failure. I was going to fail my kids if I continued my career, and I was going to fail them if I didn't. And, because of my kids, I was definitely going to fail in my career. I'd been hearing these voices since my first pregnancy. But on this particular day, I'd had enough. I resolved to no longer let the voices have their way with me. It was time to find my own voice.

As a resident of California, one of only three states in the United States that offers paid maternity leave, I had twelve weeks away from work during which I could begin this process. So, in between round-the-clock feedings and diaper changes, I talked with mothers who had good relationships with their kids as well as thriving careers. I paced the house with my sleeping infant in my arms, my neck kinked to hold the phone between my cheek and shoulder while I whispered into the receiver: *How are you doing it? Please, tell me.*

I had a shocking revelation during these conversations. The vast majority of the women I called—senior vice presidents at tech companies, CEO's, computer programmers, partners at law firms, nurses, doctors, and more—realized that they were performing better in their careers because they had kids, not in spite of them.

A senior level computer programmer who built and managed the teams at several successful tech companies shared this anecdote with me, "Since becoming a mom, I no longer tolerate when a coder does a half-ass job and then fights when I tell him that I'm not going to merge his code into the system. Before, I would

hesitate and worry about it escalating into a team conflict. Now, I don't want to waste everyone's time fixing the problems brought about by his shitty code."

When I asked her if it was her experience that allowed her to have the confidence to be more assertive at work, she replied, "No, it wasn't. Because my daughter is a higher priority to me than my work, I now glean more of my value from my role as a mom, and whether I'm doing right by her." And this, she realized when she was talking with me, allows her to be more effective at work.

Before talking with me, however, the majority of the moms I interviewed had been, like me, too inundated with negative messaging to even consider the potential positive impact motherhood could have had on their careers. And the voices telling us that motherhood would cause us to underperform at work weren't just in our own heads.

Donald Trump said in an October 2004 NBC Dateline Segment, "Pregnancy is inconvenient for business." And it's not just Trump, many of the CEO's I know, while unwilling to say it publicly, feel the same way. Shelley Correll and her colleagues, then at Cornell University, found that mothers in the workforce are rated as significantly less competent, less intelligent, and less committed than women without children; and a mother is 79% less likely to be hired, and half as likely to get promoted, when compared to an equally qualified woman without a child.

What was happening? Why did there seem to be such a huge gap between the perception and the reality of motherhood's impact on career performance?

Enthralled, I kept going, continuing the interviews and looking into other fields of research—including neuroscience, evolutionary biology, game theory, primate patterns, leadership studies, and more—to help me understand what I was hearing. Eventually, I also began to include dads in my research.

But I'll be honest, I didn't want to include dads.

My husband was a more engaged partner and father than many of the men I knew. When my son was two and we saw a vacuum by the side of the road, he pointed to it and said, "Dada," because in our house, my husband is the one who wields the vacuum. But, despite the fact that my husband handled many of the domestic tasks, since becoming a mom, I had started to resent him.

And I wasn't alone. Many of the moms I interviewed told me that they also resented their husbands. As accomplished career women, we'd had to not only meet but exceed the bar for excellence in the workplace in order to get ahead or advance in our careers. And this bar had risen even higher after we had kids. But for our husbands, fatherhood automatically boosted their careers. On average, a father earns \$5,000 more than a childless man. But, with each child, a mother

earns 4-15% less than a childless woman. And when you dig deeper into these numbers, you'll see that women fare pretty well in the workforce before they become moms: a childless woman earns ninety-three cents of a childless man's dollar. But a mother earns only seventy-six cents to a father's dollar. These findings, published in a 2014 report and presented to congress by Michelle Budig, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, are attributed to what gender scholars call the "fatherhood bonus" and the "motherhood penalty."

Why do fathers earn so much more and mothers earn so much less than everyone else? Because our economy is still organized around the concept of what gender scholars call the "ideal worker" father married to a stay-at-home mother. In this model, the mother takes responsibility for the house and children, and the father is expected to devote himself to his job, free from any caregiving responsibilities, because the family depends on his income.

The majority of American families, however, no longer exist in this model. According to a 2015 Pew Center research survey, only 25% of families with children under eighteen have an ideal worker father and a stay-at-home mom. A 2016 study by Ernst and Young found that the fastest growing segment of the U.S. workforce is moms, 56% of whom have children under the age of three. And in her book *The Richer Sex*, Liza Mundy claims that within a generation more households will be financially supported by women than by men. But, the expectations of the workplace have not yet caught up to reality.

And then there's the home front, where the majority of us encounter the implicit assumption that mothers are better suited than fathers to care for their children. I unconsciously believed this was true. I had carried Clare in my womb, birthed her, and was nursing her. In the role of nurturer, I was biologically superior to my husband. And, as much as I loved being the primary caretaker for our daughter, I resented my husband for not matching my level of responsibility.

But when I began interviewing mothers who had experienced meteoric success in their careers and they talked about their relationships with their mates, I began to question my own.

One of the women I spoke with during my research was Shellye Archambeau, the CEO of MetricStream, a Silicon Valley tech company with over 1,000 employees. The daughter of a stay-at-home mom and a dad without a college degree, Shellye was recently named "the second most influential African American in technology" by *Business Insider* magazine. Shellye told me that her husband deserved much of the credit for her success because he carried the bulk of the responsibility for caring for their home and children.

She talked about how women often set expectations for how things are

done at home, and try to control it; we want it done our way, or a certain way, and this tells our husbands that a certain domain is off limits and that they should stay away. But then we get mad when they don't step in.

"At first," Shellye told me, "there were times when I tried to micromanage the way my husband did things at home, and he had to stop me and say, 'Look, I'm going to do it the way I want to do it.' And initially that was hard for me, because his way was not my way."

In one of her class pictures, Shellye's daughter was wearing two braids that were supposed to be pinned up on her head, but one had fallen down. "While my husband was doing her hair, I could've stepped in and done it better," Shellye said, "but that would've disempowered him."

After I interviewed Shellye, I asked my husband if I blocked him from stepping in at home. My husband looked at me sideways. "You never even let me hold our first child until she was six months old," he said.

Exasperated, I told him: "I would've been happy to let you hold her, especially when she woke up every two hours at night. But you never got up to get her."

"I never heard her cry," he said.

And this was true. Part of the reason I begrudged him was because he happily snored through her crying, while I, a previously sound sleeper, sat bolt upright in bed the second she began to whimper.

"You could've woken me up," my husband told me. "I would've been happy to go and get her."

Around this time, I found a study detailing the effect of parenting on the brains of both men and women. Apparently, regardless of your sex, engaging in parenting releases the hormone oxytocin. For nearly a century, oxytocin, also known as the 'bonding hormone,' was associated only with mothers because it's released during childbirth and when a child is breastfeeding. However, a 2014 study, led by Ruth Feldman, a psychologist and neuroscientist at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, found that dads also produce oxytocin in direct proportion to the amount of time they are engaged in caretaking. And, in most cases, primary caretaking dads produce the same amount of oxytocin as primary caretaking mothers. As Professor Feldman explained, "Evolution created other pathways for adaptation to the parental role in human fathers, and these alternative pathways come with practice, attunement, and day-to-day caregiving."

All men—including my husband—are neurologically primed to care for our children, but the only way they can develop these capacities is by engaging in caretaking activities.

There's nothing I can do about the past. But I can change the present moment. Now, when our third child cries at night, I shake my snoring husband awake. True to his word, he gets up to hold her and soothe her back to sleep.

And this has far reaching implications. Kids do better with engaged dads. According to research by Scott Coltrane from the University of Oregon, preschoolers with engaged fathers show higher levels of cognitive competence, self-control, and empathy. Researchers at Penn State have found that as adolescents, the children of actively caretaking dads have more self-esteem, especially the girls.

Wives do better with husbands who play an active role in caring for their children. In 2010, a Swedish study found mothers' future earnings increased 7% for every month of parental leave that her partner took. And in countries where men take paternity leave, women are significantly more likely to serve in leadership positions, according to a recent joint study by the Peterson Institute for International Economics and EY (formerly Ernst & Young) of nearly 22,000 companies across ninety-one countries. The study also found, relative to companies with little gender diversity in leadership positions, more women in senior positions yields an increased profitability of 15%.

And then I discovered that moms aren't the only ones facing discrimination in the workforce. Dads who are seen to have caregiving responsibilities are also stigmatized. A 2013 Rutgers university study found that men who take leave to care for a child or a parent are less likely to be recommended for promotions, raises, or high-profile assignments. Another study, conducted in 2013 by Long Island University, found that caregiving fathers face significantly more harassment, such as being teased, put down, or excluded.

A few months after my husband started tending to our little one at night, we were having breakfast in the kitchen when he mentioned that he'd gotten up with her the night before.

"What?!" I said. "You heard her cry and I didn't."

"Yep," he said with a wink.

So, I included dads in my research.

And, now, after conducting ninety-three interviews with moms and twenty-seven interviews with dads and pouring over thousands of pages of related research from other fields, I believe that parenting makes us better at work.

But before I go any further, I need you need you to understand that parenting is difficult. If you're an engaged parent, you already know this. But if you haven't spent much time around kids, you may not know about the daily gauntlet

of challenges faced by parents. A millennial without kids recently told me that he thought parenting was easier than work done outside the home because, “there’s no risk involved in caring for children.” Before I had kids, I would have agreed with him. Parenting looked easy. When people I knew went out on leave, I wondered what they would do with their time. What new hobbies would they master in all their free time?

But then I became a parent. And, like over 90% of the engaged parents I interviewed, I was blindsided by the challenges. My first child, Clare, came into the world as a slight wiggling in my belly. She eventually grew into thumping fists and full-footed kicks, into clearly articulated flashes of individual toes and fingers visible just beneath the blue-veined surface of my nearly translucent skin. When she was born, I felt my chest crack open with a love more powerful than I’d ever imagined. All of the affection I’d ever known—for other people, places, and dreams—swarmed through the opening her presence created. And I discovered a new way of being in the world. One that was infinitely more tender, expansive, and miraculous. I had created life.

The vast majority of the parents I interviewed experienced a similar transformation with the birth of their first child. Bzur Haun, the CEO of Visage Mobile, told me, “The first time I made eye-contact with a small human that looked like me, I melted. And the melting never stops. I was never the type to tear-up in the past. Since kids, simple thoughts can turn on the water works for me.”

The shadow side of this euphoric experience revealed itself to me about six weeks after Clare was born. Because having the power to create life also meant that I was responsible for safeguarding that life. Aided by a lack of high quality, consistent sleep and shocked by the many demands of caring for my new baby, I found myself operating in an altered state of hyper-vigilance. For several nights, when I should’ve been sleeping, I sat up watching Clare sleep, cycling through a list of fears: Is she breathing? Should I pick her up to make sure she’s breathing? What if I don’t pick her up and she dies of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome? What if I do pick her up and I can’t get her back to sleep and I go without any sleep tonight? Will I produce enough milk for her if I don’t get any sleep tonight? What if I don’t get any sleep and I fall down while carrying her tomorrow? Will she injure her brain because her soft spot hasn’t yet melded together in her skull? Is she breathing . . . ?

The diligence required to raise a newborn and toddler can be overwhelming. Especially when done alone, or mostly alone. And, I discovered during my interviews, this is also true for dads and non-birth parents who carry the bulk of the responsibility for raising their children. Griffin Caprio, now the director of

engineering at Enova, served as the primary caretaker for the first sixteen months of his son's life, an experience which he described as incredibly stressful. "It was 100% dependent on me to not let him get killed," he told me.

When Clare was six weeks old, I learned that I couldn't do it all by myself. Our health care practitioner stepped in when she saw that I had an elevated heart rate and that I was operating in an altered state of mental functioning. And a community of mothers—my mom, my mother-in-law, and friends who were moms—intervened to help me. They shared their hard-earned wisdom, took turns holding Clare, and showed me how to develop a healthy level of vigilance, one that allowed me to care for both my baby and myself.

More than 80% of the parents I interviewed said that they'd encountered at least one painful time of reckoning, when they were forced to face difficult things about themselves and/or their relationships with others. Parenthood teaches us where we need to grow, and gives us the opportunity to stretch past what we think are our limits to meet the challenge of raising our kids.

It's important to note that I interviewed a very select group of parents. I started with the working moms I admired, and then I asked them to connect me with working parents they admired. Which means that the vast majority of the parents I interviewed were self-selecting in a very particular way: they were choosing to grow through the challenges they faced. And while they had a range of unique and specific areas where they further developed themselves, when I coded the interviews I'd conducted, I found one common theme: nearly all of them had developed more and better relationships with the people around them.

Earlier in this piece, I detailed how active parenting releases the hormone oxytocin in both men and women. When oxytocin is present, according to Shelley E. Taylor at UCLA, people are more likely to respond to stress with the impulse to "tend and befriend," rather than to fight or flight. "When it is operating during times of low stress, oxytocin physiologically rewards those who maintain good social bonds with feelings of well-being. But," Taylor told *Science Watch*, "when it comes on board during times of high social stress or pain, it may lead people to seek out more and better social contacts."

Building a community of support, I heard from almost every parent I interviewed, was essential. Julie Miller-Phipps, the regional president for Southern California Kaiser, told me, "When you become a parent, it's not doable to have everything fall on you. I quickly discovered that I couldn't do it all myself, and I didn't need to. Others couldn't do it by themselves either, and I could help them. I built a network of people in my child's life and in my work life who help me ebb and flow and be resilient."

Building a community of support is step one. Step two is learning to deepen and sustain those relationships.

Clare was three the first time she told me she hated me. I reacted by running out of the room in tears and huddling in the fetal position on the bathroom floor. At the time, working a full-time job and still nursing Clare's eight-month-old brother, I felt more than stretched. I was working many late nights so that I could be present with my children in the mornings and evenings, and I regularly took Clare on "mommy-daughter dates" to give her some of the attention she desperately craved from me. But when Clare told me that she hated me because I wanted her to finish her vegetables, it reinforced the voices in my head that told me I was failing her. And I wanted to sit on the bathroom floor and surrender to them. They were right, I couldn't parent well and have a career. I should give up. But then Clare knocked. And when I let her in, she climbed into my lap, wrapped her arms around my neck, and told me that she loved me more than anything and could I read her *Pinkalicious*. Pretty please?! This, and many other similar instances, taught me that my daughter is resilient; I am resilient; we are all more resilient than we realize. And so are our bonds with each other.

And this definitely translates to how we show up at work. In Feldman's lab, they found that oxytocin positively impacted the regions of the brain associated with emotional processing, social understanding, and cognitive empathy. In other words, showing up for parenting allows us to become more emotionally intelligent. It also teaches us the value of moving through emotionally charged situations. Dave Hoover, a software engineer and key contributor at several successful startups, said that being a parent has helped him be a better leader. "Through parenting, I learned that sometimes you need to be able to give negative feedback to help someone grow. My experiences as a dad helped me get through these anxiety-filled experiences because I could see the bigger picture: That this is really best for everybody, even if it's uncomfortable right now."

Having broader, stronger, more durable social networks allows us to amplify our efforts. Motivated to succeed in our careers and at home, parents want to accomplish more in less time. Working with others makes this possible. Collaboration, says game theorist Martin Nowak, is the most successful form of engagement. According to Nowak, Darwin was wrong: collaboration, not competition, is the key to survival. In the long run, cooperators, those who work well with others, are the ones most likely to win anywhere—the animal kingdom, in computer simulations, and even in corporate environments.

Wharton management professor Adam Grant studied three different behavioral styles that people adopt when pursuing success: matchers, takers, and givers.

Matchers expect all exchanges with others to be fair and equal. Takers exploit the people around, taking what they want without reciprocating. And givers are defined as those who will help others even when it might seem to go against their own best interests. Of these three behavioral styles, givers are overrepresented at the top levels of leadership. And when givers succeed it creates a ripple effect, lifting up those that surround them, rather than excluding them, which often leads to more sustainable, long-term, success. Or, as Amy Pressman, the President of Medallia, a 1,000-employee company she co-founded with her husband while raising three small children put it, “You can’t fire your kids, so you must grow and evolve as a person to adapt to their needs and wants. As a result, parenthood has increased my capacity to nurture the best in others, a skill I strive to integrate into our company.”

In order to effectively work with others, focus is essential. Nearly every parent I interviewed talked about their increased capacity to focus and their clarity of purpose. Many mothers I interviewed, and several dads, attributed this to the anguish of leaving their child behind to return to work. “One thing I am struggling with is ‘why’ and ‘how’ to stay in the workforce after becoming a mom,” said a senior manager at a global consulting firm, “I face this every day. Before I step out of my door I ask myself, ‘Is this worth it?’ Some days it’s ‘yes’ and some days it’s ‘no.’”

Some parents, who may have even been eager to return to work when their children were newborns, want to be more present with their kids later in their lives. Ultimately, any parent who leaves their child to go to work—whether it’s a choice or a financial necessity; whether it’s when their child is a baby or when they are older—must grapple with the distance it creates. There are times when we want to be with them and we can’t be. And this forces us to question what we are doing, and how we are doing it.

“Holding life in your arms gives you the perspective to sort out what matters and what doesn’t,” said Liz Wiseman, who is president of the Wiseman Group, the author of three best-selling books, and who had four children while working as an executive at Oracle. “It gave me a filter to get through all of the fluff and the chaos so that I could be laser-focused on what really mattered.”

Being honest with ourselves, and taking action from this deeper level of insight, enables us to be more courageous. Over 90% of the parents I interviewed said they became more assertive at work after having kids. Take Josh Levs, a former NPR journalist, who was working at CNN when his wife gave birth to their child prematurely. Time Warner, his parent company, denied him access to the ten weeks of paid leave that was available to any parent except a biological father.

Even though Josh knew it could harm his career, he decided to take legal action.

“It was the right thing to do,” he told me. “As a parent, I realize that the choices I make will be reflected in someone else’s eyes.”

Josh’s case received major national and international attention. He was flooded with support from other fathers who wanted the right to be engaged dads, and from mothers who knew that families thrived with engaged dads. He wrote a book on the topic, *All In*, and has become one of our most outspoken and necessary voices in the national conversation about gender equality.

To sum up my research, which would take an entire book to detail, working while parenting mandates that we develop broader, better relationships with others. Successfully sustaining these relationships requires a greater level of honesty with ourselves, and with others, and this allows us to operate at a higher level of trust, and ultimately, effectiveness. And this lies at the heart of parenthood’s capacity for career transformation. Especially in the workplace of the future. Because technology is ushering us into a new era of work.

The internet is changing the way we operate. We are moving away from the old model of leadership—which is hierarchical, directive, top-down, and transactional—to a type of leadership which is collective, distributed, bottom-up, facilitative, and emergent. In other words, we are entering an era where relationships—and the ability to create, deepen, and sustain them—matter. Leaders of the future will be those who can build and influence the most engaged, active, and broadest communities. And, as Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google, says, “In a networked world, trust is the most important currency.” Parents are primed to succeed in this new model, because showing up for parenting while building a career requires us to become masters of deep honesty and trust-building. We are entering a time where those who collaborate well with others are even more likely to succeed. Which is why Janet Van Huysse, the former VP of HR and then Diversity at Twitter—who implemented programs at Twitter designed to support new moms, new dads, and the managers who worked with them—believes that “the companies who will succeed in the Twenty-first century will be the ones who encourage and foster the development of skills acquired in parenting.”

To find my own response to the voices that told me I couldn’t both have a successful career and be a good mom, I’ve spent the past two years dismantling inaccurate assumptions about myself and the world around me. And what’s emerged in the process is a blueprint for how we can all evolve towards a future of greater equality and success.

Our next generation of leaders have the opportunity to look beyond the

bias of previous generations, to see that an engaged parent isn't a less productive employee; to build a society that encourages us to play an active role in caring for our families because doing so will allow us to become more relevant in the workplace of the future.

Erin Wilson, the co-founder of Tech startup hirepool.io, recently told me that the election had changed his relationship to his family. "Previously," he said, "I'd considered myself more of an employee of my wife's, and she was the CEO of our home, especially when it came to childcare. But after Trump was elected, I began to question my assumptions around gender roles. And I decided to change the way I looked at my role in our family. Now I consider myself a co-founder of our family, and I've stepped up my level of responsibility and ownership. I've seen this have a significantly positive impact on my wife's career, and on our marriage."

My research indicates that Erin's career will also flourish.

Here's to Erin's success.

Here's to our collective success.

May we all learn to work well together. The future depends on it.