

How to Promote Equity at Home as Moms are being Forced from the Workforce

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Just one year ago, dads were as likely as moms to crowd the halls of my kids' elementary school at morning drop-off and wash burp cloths at the laundromat, babies strapped to their chests. I loved that my kids — along with a whole neighborhood of kids — were growing up witness to men and women sharing in caretaking and breadwinning.

Then came the pandemic. With schools moved online and child-care programs closing, women all over the country began exiting the workforce at alarming rates. My neighborhood was no exception. As school sputtered back to a start, several local moms confided that they, like me, had cut back on work to help with remote learning. For most, their male partners either maintained their usual workloads or scrambled to take on more paid work to pick up the slack. Each of us had made different calculations in determining that we, rather than our partners, should scale back our paid work to be more present at home, our reasons including “he makes more money,” “I’m more patient with remote” and “my job got axed.”

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To find out, I turned to cognitive scientists who study how children However sound the logic, what message were our kids gleaning from this sudden shift? Might they be learning that when push comes to shove, women’s paid work matters less than men’s? make sense of the world. Marjorie Rhodes, a psychology professor at New York University and director of the Conceptual Development and Social Cognition Lab, said it was reasonable to assume that children of all ages are noticing “the increasing gender division of labor during covid.” Research suggests that if left to their own devices, children may make sense of it in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes, such as that moms are better at taking care of kids and dads work to support the family. That, in turn, can shape kids’ identities and life choices.

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