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MAGGIE JACKSON | BALANCING ACTS

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Going solo

Single working parents find creative ways to face life, career demands

By Maggie Jackson | November 4, 2007

A recent bout of the flu underscored a sobering reality for single mother Martha Davis: there's no one to seamlessly step in to care for her two adopted daughters, ages 5 and 2, if she's out of commission. Davis, a Northeastern University law professor, is both the front-line and back-up caregiver for her busy family.

"I realized if I'm sick there's nobody else," says Davis, who hadn't been really knocked out by illness since she became a mom, until the flu struck last week. A New York transplant, she has no family in the area. "It made me worry."

For single working parents, the life and career challenges we all face daily are a little more stark, the hands of the clock are more unforgiving. Whether they are on their own by choice, through the death of a spouse, or because they are the prime caregiver after a divorce, the nation's 12 million single moms and dads living with their kids are arguably the most time-squeezed of us all.

So perhaps we all can learn something from how they do it. Relentlessly time-squeezed, successful solo parents constantly create ways to get it all done, and to get the help they need. Such parents also tend to rely on their children, which fosters a resiliency many of their peers with more help lack.

Mike Chamberland, for example, just struck a deal with his oldest daughter to resolve a new wrinkle in the family schedule. The Lowell dad, who has custody of his two daughters, ages 17 and 10, recently started a new customer support job, returning home too late to take his youngest to her weekly dance class. The solution? Pay his older daughter gas money to take her sister to class. He also struck a deal with a friend to care for his 10-year-old another weekday afternoon.

"You have to be creative," says Chamberland, who is also president of the 185-member Burlington chapter of Parents without Partners, a national network of support groups for single parents. "I'm getting home later at night, and the minute I walk in, dinner has to be cooked. Otherwise you're not eating until eight or nine."

One of Elizabeth O'Toole's main coping strategies since her husband died of cancer seven years ago has been "cutting the fat," she says. "That means when the PTA says 'you have to bake a dozen cookies by tomorrow,' you're calling and saying, 'that's not going to happen,'" says O'Toole, a massage therapist in Revere and mother of a 17-year-old son and 14-year-old daughter. "People don't understand: I am two people."

O'Toole also has raised her kids to be self-sufficient. After her husband's death, she sat them down and explained, "We all have to chip in. Mum can't do all of it. Mum has to be the breadwinner, the taxi driver, the bill payer, the grocery shopper. Where you can help out is keeping the house clean, and doing chores." And they did. The two kids learned to dust, sweep, and vacuum. "That helped a lot," says O'Toole, who is also a devoted planner - of shopping, meals, and schedules.

Women make up 80 percent of the nation's single parents living with children, although the ranks of single dads are growing, mostly since more are winning custody of their children after a divorce, according to the Census Bureau. Most research on the time squeeze of solo parents focuses on women, but anecdotally, dads report similar experiences.

Nearly 80 percent of single moms report having "too little time" for themselves, and 72 percent say they multitask "most of the time," according to University of Maryland sociologist Suzanne Bianchi, coauthor of "Changing Rhythms of American Family Life." Single mothers report making more sacrifices in both career

and in home lives than married parents, the research shows. In other words, they are squeezed both ways. But above all, their children tend to come first.

"The child really becomes the focal point of their lives," says Rosanna Hertz, a sociology professor at Wellesley College and author of "Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice," an in-depth study of 65 mostly middle-class women who chose to raise their children solo. The women in her study looked for flexible jobs and gave up promotions to raise children. Some recruited networks of people to help even before they adopted or gave birth.

Planning to adopt, Martha Davis gave up a law practice in New York to move to Boston and begin a university career that offers more flexibility. She's a devoted multitasker, toting work everywhere. But to preserve her sanity, she takes some time for herself. She plays bass in the Longwood Symphony Orchestra, and she's trained her kids not to come in when she's having a morning shower.

"That's the place where I'm by myself," she says. "I get a bit of time to myself in the morning."

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