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How to Change Workplace Culture on Parenting



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By Mary Ann Mason

"When Ezra Max Brilliant was born in August 2008, I discovered that the house of myself that I thought I knew so well after so many years had another room, and in that room there was a closet, and in that closet there was a shoebox, and in that shoebox I could fit the house that I knew before Ezra. He is the joy of the world, and I look forward to enjoying him all the more now that this book is done. That I was able to enjoy him as much as I did during his first year without risking my career owes in good measure to the architects of the UC Faculty Family Friendly Edge program. They designed enlightened policies that children of all working parents should receive, as Ezra did and for which I am forever grateful."

That acknowledgment was written by Mark Brilliant, an assistant professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley, and appears in his new book, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978*. Rarely, I suspect, do such public tributes to family-responsive policies occur.

And until recently, it was almost as rare for fathers (and for many mothers) to take advantage of the parental policies that did exist. The policies that Mark used enabled him—as a father who provided substantial parenting—to stop the tenure clock for a year and receive a semester of teaching relief following the birth of a child.

Those policies have essentially been in place in the UC system since 1988, when a forward-thinking president, David Gardner, introduced what were then the most progressive family-leave policies in the country. In 2002-3, when we surveyed 4,400 tenure-track faculty members on the system's campuses, we found that, among eligible faculty parents, the use rates for the four major family-friendly policies (including six

weeks of paid leave for childbirth and up to one year of unpaid parental leave) were surprisingly low.

For example, less than half of eligible women who were assistant professors sought a semester of relief from teaching duties after childbirth, and less than a third asked for an extension of the tenure clock. The rates at which eligible men in the university system used any of those policies were even lower—at most one in 10.

Why didn't faculty members make use of such benefits in 2002?

One reason is that the policies were not well known. Among respondents to our "Work and Family" survey, only half of the eligible faculty parents were aware of the existence of the teaching-relief benefit, arguably the most important of the family-friendly policies.

In fact, only just over a quarter of eligible faculty members knew about the four major policies. As one mother commented in the survey, "I was shocked to learn in [a survey question] that I and/or my spouse (who is also a faculty member) might have been eligible for teaching relief, and that my spouse might have been eligible for six weeks of paid leave. I was never told about either of these programs, which is a little upsetting."

Department chairs, the arbiters of personnel issues, were often among those in the dark about the family-friendly policies. In those days, it was up to the chairs to facilitate requests for parental leaves and other such benefits. But there was no requirement that chairs inform faculty members of the policies, and certain department heads even discouraged such requests.

A second, equally important reason that many mothers and fathers did not use the benefits was their concern that they would be considered less-than-serious players if they took time off for childbirth. "Prior to tenure I would never have considered using the option," one mother said. "I would have considered it ... a fatal flaw."

Some fathers expressed a reluctance to use a policy that they believed was put in place for women. Even if they were substantial caregivers, they believed they would be stigmatized for taking the leave. One faculty father said, "In my opinion, there is a certain 'culture' surrounding asking for teaching relief that makes it difficult for male faculty to consider this as a viable option."

That is the vicious circle of culture change. Fathers are reluctant to use parental relief when offered because it is contrary to the ethic of the male breadwinner. Mothers are afraid to use the policies that only women use for fear they will be treated as less serious about their work than men.

Joan Williams, in her new book, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*, argues that men, who are increasingly more involved with child-raising, actually now report higher levels of work-family conflict than women do.

In a recent NPR interview, she observed, "That provider ideal has far more purchase on people's imaginations, I think, than we really acknowledge." She added, "It is time to change this crippling stereotype. ... Men are facing the kind of conflict that women have faced, but they're facing it without the ability to make the changes that women very often make."

Even the U.S. Supreme Court believes that the stereotypes must be broken. In 2003, Chief Justice William Rehnquist, not known for his feminist advocacy, wrote the majority opinion in *Nevada Department of Human Resources v. Hibbs*, on the question of whether Congress had the authority to make state governments give their employees the benefits of the federal Family and Medical Leave Act. To the surprise of almost everyone, the chief justice's answer was yes.

Michael Kinsley, writing on *Slate*, called the 6-to-3 opinion "amazingly radical," for its account of how society's stereotyped expectations of women as caretakers "create a self-fulfilling cycle of discrimination," which must be broken by enabling male employees to take time off to attend to family emergencies.

At Berkeley we have tried to break the cycle of low participation and fatherhood avoidance with several initiatives that expand family-responsive policies, including a temporary part-time tenure track with the right of return to full time and to emergency child care.

One of the most important new efforts is to assure that all faculty members are aware of the family-friendly benefits to which they are entitled. We began a campaign to emphasize the policies in recruitment and retention; a recruitment brochure now greets faculty candidates, and the faculty orientation incorporates a significant section on parental policies and support systems, including day care. Department chairs are pulled into the initiative with an orientation session and a "Deans and Chairs Toolkit" that explains their responsibilities in encouraging and promoting use of the policies.

Culture does not change easily, but there are early signs of improvement here. More mothers and fathers, like Mark Brilliant, are taking advantage of policies that are now automatic entitlements, not benefits that people have to individually request of their department heads.

We have yet to do a full survey of all the University of California campuses, but we are experiencing a most encouraging baby boom at Berkeley. Between 2003 (before the new initiatives), and 2009 (after), the percentage of female assistant professors who reported having at least one child more than doubled, from 27 percent to 64 percent, and for men it rose from 39 percent to 59 percent. Maybe "the times, they are a-changing"?

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