

Sick Parents go to Work, Stay Home When Kids are Ill

By Christopher Mele, The (Westchester, N.Y.) Journal News

Got the sniffles? Low-grade temperature? Hacking cough? If you're a working mom or dad, chances are you're dragging yourself to work rather than taking a day off.

The payoff for parents who go to the office feeling lousy? They save a day that they may need to take off in the future if their son or daughter gets sick and needs to stay home.

It's all part of the juggling act of working parents who are trying to raise a family and maintain their careers, especially in an uncertain economic environment that demands productivity.

"Everybody's competing because they're afraid if they don't show up, their desk won't be there tomorrow," said Jeannette Lofas, president and founder of the Stepfamily Foundation Inc.

Lee DeNigris of Tallman, N.Y., has already had to take three weeks off from her job as a field technician for Verizon to care for her 5-month-old daughter, Amanda. Day care has been a breeding ground of germs for Amanda, who has had three ear infections, an upper respiratory infection and a long-lasting cold since February.

DeNigris, who also has two sons, ages 13 and 11, had been a stay-at-home mom. Now, economics dictate that both she and her husband work. That means going to work on days that she otherwise would have stayed home sick.

"I have to have the days available," she said. "When I got the stomach flu that she had and the boys had, I had to go into work with that. That was nasty."

Productivity ultimately suffers — to say nothing of the chances of infecting co-workers on the job — when sick parents head to work, Lofas said. "The bottom-line result is that corporations get less of their employees," she said.

Studies show that working parents give up personal care time, sleep and recovery time from illnesses to be with their kids, said Stephanie Coontz, national co-chairwoman of the Council on Contemporary Families.

"They will often go into work with colds or illnesses that, before they had kids, they would have grabbed at the opportunity to stay home," she said. "The evidence is pretty overwhelming that working parents neglect themselves first."

"Family issues" ranked as the second most cited reason for workers to take an unscheduled absence, according to a survey last year by CCH Inc., a provider of

employment law and human resources information. Personal illness topped the list of reasons at 32%, followed by family issues at 21%.

Yolanda Rios of Garnerville, N.Y., can vouch for that. The single mother of 16- and 12-year-old sons works as an accountant for Daikin, a chemical manufacturer. "I would have to feel really, really sick to stay home," she said.

Rios credits the company with being family-oriented and flexible so that she can make up time and leave early or late if she needs to. "I know not all companies are like that, so I count myself lucky," she said.

The drive to give up personal and sick days has a broader historical backdrop. In 21st century America, parents are responsible for their children longer than in decades past. In the 1920s and 1930s, kids were sent into the work force at ages ranging from 10 to 15 to support the household.

"Now, kids are an economic drain rather than an economic resource," Coontz said.

Flexible work arrangements or sick-day policies help ease the work-life balancing act. Sonja Brown, director of patient services for the American Cancer Society in White Plains, N.Y., has two daughters, 10-year-old Tayleur and 3-year-old SoMauri.

Brown said her employer recently adopted a new policy where workers get a block of time off to use as needed. No longer are days off called "sick" or "personal" days. The simple act of changing how the days are classified has made a world of difference. Brown said she now feels less guilty about calling in sick when one of her daughters is ill and she's more likely to take the day off if she needs it for herself.

"Before, it was like, 'Oh my God. I need to save the time for my child,' " she said. "Thank God my job has made it easier for us."