



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Working moms and stay-at-home moms: Let's celebrate both

Years ago, in my first job out of college, I worked with a woman who was sharp, productive and always smiling.

I knew she had two small children in day care, but since she was always enthusiastic, I assumed she worked by choice.

And then one day, I caught her crying in her cubicle as she clutched a framed picture of her 6-month-old baby girl. Her daughter had hit another milestone at day care, and this one got to her. With tears spilling over the picture, she opened up to me.

Only then did I realize she wasn't working by choice; she was working by necessity. Her husband's income wasn't enough for a family of four, so she was doing what she had to do. In her heart, however, she wanted to be home.

I often think of this story when I hear about the "working mom versus stay-at-home mom" debate. It's so easy to judge moms who choose a different route than us, but the truth is, none of us know what circumstances other families face.

Some moms work because they need the income. Some work because they'd go nuts taking care of kids 24/7. Some moms stay home because they love it and can't imagine life any other way. Others stay home because their family needs them there, or because it doesn't make sense financially to work since their salary would all go to day care.

I understand both sides because I'm caught in the middle. I'm not fully in either camp, which makes me feel lost sometimes in terms of where I belong. While working from home as a writer allows me to be readily available for my family, I also know how hard it is to balance family and work, especially when I'm on a deadline.

Yes, I get to experience the joy of doing what I love to do and meeting lots of neat people as a result. I can find fulfillment in something independent of my kids, which, on a bad day of mothering, comes in real handy.

At the same time, I experience the guilty pangs of not being able to say "yes" every time my kids ask something of me. I know what it's like when a child asks, as I'm dropping off carpool, if I can eat lunch with them today, and having to say, "I'm so sorry, but I can't today because I have a meeting," then wondering for the next 30 minutes if I'm scarring them.

The point is, everyone's life is different. And regardless of our personal convictions, there are many ways to be a great mom. Yes, staying home benefits the family and helps maintain a smooth operation (unless we're overcommitted, which is another story). On the days I dedicate myself to nothing but household chores and organizing my kids' lives, everything runs better. There seem to be fewer glitches and less rushing around.

On the other hand, I love that my daughters see me taking risks and chasing dreams,

handling rejection and celebrating victories, because these are things I want them to do. Through my journey as a writer, I've been able to teach them lessons about life and perseverance that I hope will encourage them when they're scared to fail, scared to dream, or scared to put themselves out there.

All this to say, I'm thankful for working moms and stay-at-moms because both are worthy of celebration. More often than not, it is working moms who take care of my kids at school, help them at the doctor's office and cultivate their talents through extracurricular activities. And it is stay-at-home moms who will drop everything if I need help (or a friend to talk to) during the day because their schedules allow it. They channel their talents into equally important things like organizing dinners for a mom who's ill, planning a Halloween carnival the elementary school kids won't forget and teaching my kids how to grow a vegetable garden when they're playing at their house.

However a mom shares her gifts, it's all good. And for most moms, the bottom is this: We're all passionate about our kids. We all understand how even the best job in the world can't hold a candle to the joy of motherhood, and if we needed to, we'd give up our work in a heartbeat. We all want assurances our kids will turn out OK. We're all deeply insecure because even with our best efforts, there are no guarantees.

So let's cut each other more slack, ladies, and find unity in the fact that whether a mom works or stays home, our heart is with our family. Let's all set positive examples for today's girls so they see what it looks like to be happy at home and at work, doing what we're called to do or need to do. Personally, I want my four daughters to always be capable of getting a job. I don't want them adopting the mindset that they'll simply get married and never work, because nobody knows what the future holds.

Most of all, I want my girls to see how rewarding and fulfilling motherhood can be. I want them to witness the joy a mom can discover in raising a family, serving others, and making the world better. Whatever choices they make, I hope they're proud of them. And I hope that with every choice I make today, I give them something to look forward to, a future worth aiming for because they see that even with the happiness I derive from work, the happiness I enjoy from being their mom is exponentially, profoundly, and always greater.

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