

CALLING ALL WORKING FATHERS

A Homespun Idea for Revolutionary Change



"HELLO, TONY? THIS IS RYAN'S mom. Is your father there?" It's 7:30 on a Wednesday evening, I am sitting at my desk, my son's class list of 22 names and telephone numbers in front of me. I am only on the D's. "Nobody kept answering," as Holden Caulfield once said.

"He's watching TV," Tony replied.

"Great," I said, making a check mark next to his name. "Tell him I want to talk to him."

While Tony notifies his dad, I scan the list and look up at the clock. I still have work to do this evening, on a deadline that should have been mailed Express two hours ago. That afternoon, I'd called the editor waiting on the other end, who wasn't surprised to receive the message, "I'm running late."

She's a mother, too, so she knows the chagrin of uttering that phrase to colleagues, and she is kind. She gives me another day. By doing so, she has just made her own job harder—at 5:00, she has to step into her boss's office and report, "We're running late." My motherhood has just changed from "I" to "we," becoming plural again, thanks to another woman.

Tony's dad is taking his time. I try to recall what programs are on the air at 7:30 P.M., but the last one I remember watching was "Marcus Welby, M.D." Leisure time has disappeared from my life, which is how I became a Room Mother in the first place. I couldn't volunteer to be a Field Trip Mother or a Cafeteria Mother, because those required daytime hours, but Room Mothers can make their phone calls at night.

I still try to do my share of PTA-type tasks, because I don't want to fuel the current flames between mothers who work at home and mothers who work outside. Mrs. Laura L. Luteri, of Mt. Prospect, Illinois, just fired a tiny grenade into my camp, in a letter to the editor of *Better Homes and Gardens*. She wrote that she was sick of hearing the excuse, "I can't, I work," from women like me.

Mrs. Luteri resents me for depending on women like her to fill in. In fact, I am depending on school administrations

to recognize that Room Mother and Cafeteria Mother and Field Trip Mother should all become paid positions.

"Hello?" A male voice interrupts my thoughts with a touch of boredom. The voice doesn't sound as if it's dressed in a suit and tie; it has a sweatshirt and jeans on, but it manages to talk down to me nevertheless. Perhaps I have been referred to as "Ryan's mom," and so I sit up a little straighter and introduce myself.

"Hello, Mr. D., this is Mary Kay Blakely. I'm the Room Mother for Mr. Baldino's sixth-grade class," I begin in my most professional voice.

"Hold on," he interrupts, "I'll get my wife." The professional disguise fails. "Room Mother" gives me away—he recognizes this as a woman's call.

"No, wait," I reply instantly, keeping him attached to the receiver. "I've already spoken to your wife several times this year..."

A mental image of Mrs. D. flashes into my mind—like all the mothers of the children in Mr. Baldino's class, she is making dinner. I call during dinner to save myself time dialing repeats—working mothers are usually home at dinner-time. "Oh, God," they sigh when I mention my name, "let me get a pencil." Four times this year, I have made requests on their time and heard their fatigue. The cumulative guilt of 22 sighs repeated four times made me revise the message I'm sending out. I've only changed one word.

"We're asking the sixth-grade fathers..." I begin, and falter slightly. It is an editorial "we," but in fact I have no authority behind me. The other Room Mothers are not asking for fathers tonight. It is a "we" to make me bigger than "I," a "we" representing the plurality of motherhood, a "we" to give some power to the request I'm about to make.

"We're asking the fathers," I repeat, "to make brownies for the class party next Wednesday. Will you send a dozen to school with Tony?" I stop, to let the request sink in. I imagine Mr. D.'s eyebrows rising up on his forehead.

"Me?" he asks incredulously. After 12 years of fatherhood, Mr. D. has ap-

parently never been asked to make brownies, never been a Room Mother. Perhaps he is a father who spends "quality time" with his children on weekends and evenings, but he did not sound like a man who knew his way around the kitchen. That's where mothers generally conduct their "quality time," helping children with homework while making dinner and taking phone calls.

"Oh, I don't know, I've never made brownies." Mr. D. chuckles, as if I were teasing him. But I'm not.

"It's easy. All you have to do is read the box." I'm prepared to give him detailed instructions, over the phone, on how to make brownies. Fudge brownies, brownies with nuts, blondie brownies... suddenly, Mr. D. has 12 years of knowing nothing about brownies to make up for with me. I realize I'm getting worked up. I pretend that I'm late on my deadline because I've been making brownies all day.

Be patient, I caution myself—if he's never been asked to help out, how can I expect him to know? He could know from watching Mrs. D.'s fatigue, by observing the diminishing "quality" of her time in the kitchen. He does not see her exhaustion, perhaps, because "exhausted" is the way women in kitchens have always looked. Maybe he thinks "exhausted" is a normal state for us. The mothers in Mr. Baldino's class have been forgiving fathers on "how could he know" grounds for 12 years. Mr. D.'s "learning" time has just expired.

"I'll see what I can do," he says, taking me for a fool. "I'll see" is not the same as "I will." Those two words and their lack of commitment are why "working father" is still unfamiliar to the culture; why men and their newspapers fill up the early morning commuter trains, in time for "power breakfasts," while women catch the later ones, after junior high carpools; why executive mothers are telling the press they are leaving their jobs because they "can't do both," while their executive husbands are never even interviewed. "I'll see" is just inches above "I won't"—the phrase given up, with reluctance, in the

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seventies.

"We need a commitment tonight," I insist, keeping him on the phone. I am speaking to Mr. D., but I am thinking of the man in the study next to mine, the one I argued with last night, the one who's also working under a crushing deadline. He hates these arguments, as do I, because we both "understand" the pressures of work and family. We both understand, but I am the one who meets them. His deadline meant a month of 60-hour weeks at his office, a month of brief appearances at home. "I have no choice," he would say, apologetically, listing the emergencies, "I have to work."

"Tell that to Laura L. Luteri," I reply, although he'd never recognize the *Better Homes and Gardens* reader, or have any inkling of why she hates me.

"You see no choice," I amend, naming others. He could quit his job, I suggested last night, but didn't mean it. I couldn't argue persuasively for that choice, since my salary wasn't close to meeting our expenses. He made more money, and making more bread is partly why men are exempted from making the brownies.

Or he could quit the family, I offered as a second alternative, although I didn't

mean that either. They were the kinds of statements that get blown out heatedly during arguments, born of injury or jealousy. But he *had* temporarily quit the family, and by empathizing with his deadlines I lost ground on my own. What good did it do us to "think" equality if we didn't get to live it?

Or finally, he could introduce his boss to the term "working father" and the phrase "I'm running late." That's the "choice" I campaigned for heavily. It would diminish his considerable esteem at work, and wouldn't be easily accepted. There is no plurality of working fathers, and he would undoubtedly have to run late alone. But in a month of 60-hour workweeks, the subject of home responsibilities had never come up at his office. How could his boss know he needs time for his family if he didn't ask? His boss could know, of course, if he chose to "see" the family portrait on his desk and consider for a moment how such pictures are developed. Faces of affection don't just happen, he would have to conclude. They take time and care.

"You have to ask to change your hours," I pressed. "Our lives have to catch up with our heads."

"I'll see," he said.

"Mr. D., we need to know tonight," I repeat, asking for brownies but wishing for a revolution in the priorities of men. "If you can't bake them yourself, Sara Lee offers a good alternative." While I wait for his answer, I think about opening a new business, a consulting firm to help fathers "see," to discuss the many options to "I can't, I work."

"Okay," he says, recognizing the only answer that will return him to his TV program. "A dozen brownies, next Wednesday."

I then dial the number for Mr. F., repeating my message, then Mistresses L. and M. I am thrilled to raise the eyebrows of the fathers in Mr. Baldino's class. I imagine I am healing some tensions among women, between the mothers at home and outside it.

I have begun with brownies, but I plan to ask for day care and field trips next. I want fathers to absorb some of the home pressures they leave to mothers. When working fathers have the same needs as working mothers, corporations will begin to "see" the need for day care, flextime, sick days for family. The truth: when working fathers need the same benefits as working mothers, we will have them.

My deadline is still ahead of me when I finish the last call. But I feel successful, having pledged for 144 brownies, all from fathers. I can't be certain Mr. D. or Mr. F. did not immediately delegate the responsibility to their wives: "Tony needs a dozen brownies." Or that their wives did not reply, "I don't do brownies." But I realize, this evening, that I was through excusing fathers who "understood," but "had no choice." Understanding is fine, but now I want fathers to put their brownies where their mouths are.

Ms.

Mary Kay Blakely is a "Ms." contributing editor. In this column, her essays alternate with those of Barbara Ehrenreich and Alice Walker. "Ms." invites other women in pursuit of working fathers to share their ideas and techniques with us.

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