



Parents as leaders?

Stella Collins reveals the workplace skills that parenthood provides

When my children were small, I was out with my husband and we got chatting to some young graduate trainees who clearly felt they were destined for great things.

At the time I was a very happy, fulfilled, full-time mum and knew I was doing the right thing by staying at home and developing the next generation. However, I suspected this wasn't a widely

held view of motherhood and was unlikely to be held by a group of male, up-and-coming, would-be executives. I expected that, if I said I was a full-time mum, I'd be left out of the conversation – so I did some quick thinking and said that I was a “crisis management executive”.

That got their interest, and I was bombarded with questions about what a crisis management executive did. So I told the complete truth – and explained the role of a parent in business terms. The young, would-be leaders were impressed

and thought my job sounded interesting, challenging, full of development opportunities and that the skills required were just the ones they wanted to acquire in their careers. They were a little disappointed that pay wasn't great, but were definitely interested in the career opportunities.

And it was a learning point for me – I realised that, by being a full-time parent, I'd honed many of the skills I'd acquired in a ‘proper’ job, and learned quite a few new ones.

The issues

One of the big issues in business is the skills shortage, with multiple drives to encourage people back into work and to gain new expertise. Women, in particular, often feel less confident about their talents and abilities after being at home with children and can have a tendency to down play the expertise they have gained at home.

A study by City and Guilds has shown:

- One third (29 per cent) of mothers lack confidence about returning to work.
- Nearly one in five (18 per cent) worry that they have been out of the workplace for too long to return.

Conversely, the report highlights how many organisations feel that ‘returners’ would have a constructive effect on their business, with a quarter (25 per cent) believing that they are more positive towards work.

Many organisations are missing out on peoples’ talents by not necessarily considering how well parenting skills can be carried into the workplace, and it may be that many excellent leaders in business are not transferring some of their proficiency into the home.

Now, it is all very well, and quite fun, to imagine that when you’re coercing your child into the bath before bed you are practising the same techniques as those required to land a huge deal in the boardroom, but it does make you wonder whether there are successful people who use similar tactics.

So I asked successful business-woman and parent Nicola Horlick whether her parenting skills had been useful in the boardroom. She said “yes”, that she never read management books or journals but relied a great deal on her parenting skills, and thought they’d been very beneficial: “Particularly for managing teams – women’s natural instinct to nurture works very well.”

She also noted that, in work, we have to handle teams and individuals by drawing boundaries and parameters in the same way as dealing with children.

In handling the skills shortage, Horlick thinks it would be better for children, women and society if, when they took a career break, there was a clear route back. She acknowledged that the world of work has often moved on, so there is a need to up-skill women in some areas, but they will have enhanced many other abilities whilst at home.

So I think from her comments it’s safe to believe she uses similar tactics to influence a big deal in the boardroom to those she uses to persuade her kids into the bath.

The benefits

What are the potential benefits of taking this approach of transferring skills from the playroom into the boardroom and vice versa?

Access to non-vocational courses has been found to be a good con-

So what might a crisis management executive do?

What it’s called in business	What it’s called at home
Create a vision	This is the sort of family we want
Balance task, team and individual requirements	What sort of holiday do we want this year that will satisfy a toddler, a teenager, granny and us?
Create, maintain, update and implement disciplinary procedures	“What is going to happen if you throw the cushion again?”
Look for win-win outcomes	If I read a book to the children it will allow me to sit down for ten minutes, and they’ll enjoy the story.
Negotiate	“While you’re giving your sister back her toy, I will go and get you a drink.”
Delegate (long term – to include succession planning)	Start by teaching a small child to make pastry shapes now so that, when he is a teenager, he can cook the dinner once a week (this really works).
Make decisions	Which school is the right one for our child?
Handle emotional and logistical crises	“Where is the nearest casualty unit?”
Practise constructive feedback	“Granny is going to love that picture of her. Next time, let’s put plenty of newspaper down so there is less paint on the table. You’ve worked really hard on that painting.”
Network	Toddler groups, antenatal classes, music groups, toy library, book clubs, playground meetings, PTAs, school governors meetings.
Interview	“What I need is a reliable nanny/cleaner/after-school club”
Change management	How will we handle the first week at the new school?
Performance coaching	“Where do you think is a good place to start to make your bedroom look tidier?”

Which skills do you practise? What others would you add?

confidence-builder for women on the path to returning to work. These courses could be even more constructive by demonstrating that people already have relevant abilities but need to apply them in an organisational setting. Sometimes, changing the language used to describe skills is enough to begin creating that change in confidence.

We could help the nation's children's esteem by acknowledging that looking after them, nurturing them and, most importantly, helping them develop is an expert job that doesn't come second to 'real work'. Confident parents who are proud of the job they do would help, in turn, to produce confident children.

On a personal level, it can reduce stress levels while dealing with a screaming toddler, or a recalcitrant teenager, to think about how it's going to stand you in good stead with the next 'difficult' manager that you have to face. It helps to take you out of the immediacy of the situation and provide a level of proportion. And it can make it more fun – turn it into a challenge rather than a battle.

And when dealing with aggressive behaviour at work, it may be effective to think about some tools to tackle it that you have learned in dealing with a seven-year-old who's determined to get their own way.

Perhaps we can also begin to save money for the nation by doubling up the uses to which you can apply learning. After attending an influencing course at work, you could practise applying the same tactics at home when the 13-year-old is threatening the 11-year-old with death because it's his turn with the Xbox. Rather than resort to what you've done before, how about seeing this as an opportunity to:

- practise devising win-win outcomes;
- decide which of Cialdini's influences would be most helpful in this scenario.



I realised that, by being a full-time parent, I'd honed many of the skills I'd acquired in a 'proper' job, and learned quite a few new ones

Not only do you get a chance to rehearse some techniques that could be useful in the next pay negotiation, but you create an opportunity to teach your children some tactics that will pay off for them too. And your demonstration of emotional intelligence in holding back from yelling will also have a positive impact.

The government is already promoting development of services for parents and Every Parent Matters, launched in March, is looking at how to fill the gaps in parenting services. Parenting classes have a positive effect on behaviour and family relationships and more of those gaps could be filled by considering how we transfer the skills of leadership, that we learn at all levels of work, into our parenting.

Perhaps parenting could now be considered another valuable part of the career portfolio that we are encouraged to acquire, rather than something we do when we're not 'working'.

The Leitch Report suggests that we need to improve the nation's skills level in order to ensure that we continue to develop – perhaps effectively cultivating the next generation is one key to national success.

How to become a crisis management executive

- Get hold of a leadership skills list and tick the ones that apply to you (email me if you would like a copy).
- Find examples of how you demonstrate that capability (e.g. vary my style – when you take a small child to the doctor, you behave in one way with the doctor, while taking a different approach with the nervous child on your lap).
- Consider all the groups you get involved with when you are parenting – which do you take a leadership role in? For example, chairman of the PTA, running the white elephant stall at the school fete. Think about the

things you do in that job and use the skills list to translate them into transferable (and marketable) talents.

- Listen to people talking about work and the type of language they use. Translate your world into their language – have fun finding out what happens. They don't need to know that Tom, who you influenced to 'make some hard choices about his latest intake', is your son, who you've just persuaded to eat cabbage. I'm not suggesting that you deceive people when you write a CV or attend an interview – just view your skills in a different way and practise talking about them in business language so that it becomes natural. When you rejoin the world of work, you've got the language ready.
- Read the business pages of the papers and learn that language.
- Create scenarios. Imagine how you'd go about persuading a CEO to fund your project – using the same skills that you successfully use to encourage a teenager to visit her relatives.

Use your instinct and appropriate language

Of course, there are some cautions here – there will have to be lines drawn between work and parenting. It may not work if you ask your six-year-old whether he thinks "the strategy of coercion is the appropriate course of action in this particular scenario".

And telling the story of the *Three Little Pigs* may not be the illustration your boss requires to see the wisdom in waiting for the right solution rather than jumping at the first one (on the other hand...)

Use your intuition and your instinct to decide what's going to have the best results in any particular situation. Take a deep breath whenever you're under stress and about to react and consider what you'd do if you were in the oppo-

Parenthood is one of the best, and most rigorous, learning-for-leadership programmes that many of us will ever experience. If you were to see 'Parents as Leaders' advertised as a workshop, would you apply?

Free-to-enrol learning programme, open to all abilities (no pre-qualifications required)

Ongoing costs will be incurred but can only be estimated at this time (latest estimate from the Liverpool Victoria financial services company suggests the costs of child rearing may be £180,000).

Flexible learning times

There will be some choices about activity times, however many activities will take place at times entirely out of your control (regular night-time meetings will be called – for a few years!)

Opportunities for intensive practice

Regular opportunities to practise your new skills, feedback will be frequent, possibly detailed, but may not always have been planned. You will be able to regularly repeat interactions so that you have the chance to adjust your approach.

Learning will be self-managed

Choose from multiple learning methods including complete immersion, online information, books, TV programmes, formal and informal group work, formal and informal lectures, mentoring, coaching, CDs, well-intentioned advice from others who have done it before and action learning sets (coffee mornings). It will be almost entirely up to you how, when and where you learn. The most notable thing about these immersion methods are that you are guaranteed to change your behaviour.

site mode. One benefit of this is to take away some of the heat in a situation by focusing on behaviour, rather than on the individual, and your reaction.

Be confident that you've developed many talents at home and work, that skills are interchangeable, and choose the appropriate behaviour and language for you in a given situation.

Parenting is a time-consuming and hugely important role in society and mothers, and fathers, acquire knowledge that they may not gain elsewhere – or at least not

so rapidly. Encouraging people to see their parenting skills as transferable into the workplace is one way to give women in particular the confidence to retrain and to fill the skills gap.

And valuing the experiences of parenthood would help society to respect the role of parents and to appreciate the extraordinary part that ordinary people play in developing and nurturing the next generation. ■

References

1. http://findoutmore.dfes.gov.uk/2007/03/parenting_matte.html
2. http://www.liverpoolvictoria.co.uk/press_releases/cost
3. <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/news/pressoffice/pressreleases/2006/cdata/february/Mothers+returning>
4. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB585.pdf>

Many organisations are missing out on peoples' talents by not necessarily considering how well parenting skills can be carried into the workplace

Stella Collins is director of Stellar Learning. She can be contacted on +44 (0)118 983 6339, at stella@stellarlearning.co.uk or visit www.stellarlearning.co.uk