

Ask the Career Coach: How To Explain Why You Work

What to say when your child asks.

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Editor's Note: "Ask the Career Coach" is a column dedicated to those who may be in transition or wrestling with a career dilemma by providing a forum for advice. We welcome your questions. Please send them to CareerCoachLisa@gmail.com.

Dear Career Coach Lisa,

My young daughter has been saying things to me like "Why do you have to work if ___'s Mommy doesn't have to work?" and "I don't want you to work anymore." I once consulted with a child psychiatrist who said I should tell her how much I like my job, but, to me, that would seem like I'm telling my daughter that I prefer to work than to stay home with her. Can you share your experiences/suggestions/advice with me?

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Every mother—and in today's market, many fathers as they have gotten more involved in their child's daily life—have been asked this very question: Why do you have to work? When a child is comparing you to another friend's parent, you can respond by listening attentively and acknowledging their comments. Ask them how they feel about you working. Typically, we jump to conclusions they would prefer us to be at home, but it just might be a question they have.

When a child says, "I don't want you to work anymore," typically she means, "I want to spend more time with you." In this case, I would review how your evening is structured and whether you can give your child your undivided attention for a selected time period each night. When my kids were young, I used to give each child a dedicated block of time with my undivided attention. We read books out loud, played a game or just snuggled and talked about our day, sharing stories of the good things that had happened and some lessons learned from other situations we experienced. We would talk about reactions of others, what could have happened if, or current events/news, whatever was on their mind. It was always my favorite part of my day. Of course, afterward I would go back down to my home office and check emails before I would go to bed.

Typically, when you are ambivalent about your work—wishing you were home when at work and wishing you were at work when you are home—this is your own feelings, not theirs. When a child sees that their parent is happy and well adjusted, their reaction more typically is one of contentment, assuming the home care situation is a comfortable one for all involved. Our feelings as "moms" are typically based on our paradigm of the perfect mother myth. What we expect of ourselves while balancing our careers/jobs and family is critical to our success in juggling it all. The message we share based on our dialogue, verbal and nonverbal messaging, reflects our own comfort level. Whose expectations are we reaching for—ourselves or someone else's idea of the perfect mom?

In addition to spending quality time with your child, you might want to explain a little about what you do at your job and how that part of your life helps you to be a better mom as it allows you to appreciate your child and enjoy spending the smaller amount of time you have with her. Also, it is important that you explain what you do at work and the value it brings to the company, to others, to yourself in simple terms.

After I explained what I did to my son, I heard from another parent my son told other kids at school that his mom fires people. I recalled thinking I must not have explained what I did for a living in terms that made sense for my son for his developmental stage. Explaining my role as a Human Resources professional was not as easy as my husband's. His career as an architect was building and design. That was fun and easy to explain! After reviewing what I did with my son, all he said was, "Sorry you don't get recess, it is the best part of the day!" After hearing this, I once again tried to explain my job in simple terms. Later that week, I heard from that same parent my son told her "my mommy makes other people happy when she hires them or solves their problems and only sometimes fires them." Well, that second explanation sounded better than before. This taught me a lesson that I couldn't assume my son understood when I tried to explain something but learned to ask him what he thought I said.

As I continued juggling my work/life balance with my second child, I learned from my experience with my son. When I explained my career to my daughter, she surprised me when she replied with "she is proud to have a mom that works as she sees me as a strong woman. She is happy that she has a mom that loves her and her career." I must admit I was surprised and thrilled to hear this. It is written in the journal I keep for her as is my son's comment about recess in his.

As a working mom and trying to juggle it all, I am always balancing my time spent with my kids with my time spent working, speaking and writing—and sometimes just finding a few quiet moments for me! All working parents try to juggle their time and it is this balance that makes life worthwhile!

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