

I Was Criticized For Taking My Baby To Work In 1985 – Are Things Better For Parents Today?

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When I saw the recent photo of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) combing her granddaughter's hair in her office on Capitol Hill, I was reminded of the time I brought my infant to work.

“Lose the baby,” my female college dean had said during my first job evaluation. “If you care about advancing in academia, it's unprofessional to bring him to work.”

That was in 1985. I was a new professor in a respected physical therapy program in New York City when my son was born. Although I could have opted for unpaid maternity leave, my new position was too important to me to take time off. I wanted to continue instructing the enthusiastic students I'd taught in the previous semester, and I didn't want to lose time that would accrue toward my future tenure. As recent transplants to the area with a new home and family, my husband and I needed the money. I'd spent years in college and a grueling graduate program, and I'd amassed seven years of experience at three hospitals to land this job. I didn't want to forfeit it.

But I didn't want to leave my baby boy, either. My breast milk was his sole nourishment. Although I could feed him by pumping, I loved the closeness that came with nursing. My home in the Bronx was an hour away from the college, so traveling back and forth during work hours to breast-feed was out of the question. The campus had no day care, so I brought the baby to school with me.

Fortunately, I had a sympathetic program director, a caring father himself, who supported my decision. I found a wonderful nanny, Anne, to watch my newborn while I taught classes and attended meetings. Early in the morning I'd arrive with my infant in a carrier strapped to my chest. Sometimes I taught with him still in it, but mostly Anne was in charge. In my office I stored a big, old-fashioned pram where he could stretch out while Anne pushed him up and down the halls, then outside when the weather was good. I shared my workspace with a very patient male faculty member. A first-time mother, I was self-conscious about breast-feeding. For privacy I brought in a foldout hospital screen from one of our lab rooms.

My pupils held and cuddled my child between their classes. When I taught the pediatric unit, I used him to demonstrate developmental reflexes and motor skills, to the delight of the class. When I taught sessions that were often more than three hours long, Anne held my hungry, crying boy up to the window of the classroom door for me to see. Then I'd give the class a break. Once when I was droning on about the nervous system, one of the students joked aloud, "Someone go pinch the baby."

I hoped I was providing a good role model, showing that you can work and still be a loving parent. I was fortunate I had an office where I could breast-feed and a job that allowed me to nurse throughout the day, and that I could afford the caregiver who traveled with me daily. My department colleagues chipped in and bought a car seat so I could safely transport my little one to work. My students were thrilled when I dressed him in the tiny T-shirt they'd bought that said "Future Physical Therapist."

Then, toward the end of the semester I met with the dean. She commended me on my presentation skills and student evaluations. Yet I feared that her final, crushing comment about "losing the baby" echoed what faculty in other programs thought. Her words shamed me. All the

good I thought I was doing — enriching my students' lives, role modeling, benefiting my infant, trying so hard to be a mother and professor — seemed irrelevant after her stinging smackdown. Still, I continued to take my son to work and finished out the semester with him by my side.

By the following autumn he was eating solid foods, crawling around the house and enrolled in day care. I nursed him before and after my eight hours of work, five days a week. I spent the remaining time at home preparing the next week's lectures while my husband took care of him. Two years later, I left my position when I had a second child. The demands of parenting two children (and then three), and the expense of child care convinced me to give up the coveted tenure-track position. I was able to take on adjunct work in my field, which gave me more family time.

Still, the dean's remarks haunt me even now. I wish I'd reported her to higher-ups instead of internalizing her criticism. Although this type of prejudice is still widespread, attitudes are changing. Today's working mothers are openly challenging illegal discrimination. They're registering complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and filing lawsuits against employers who discriminate against them.

Women with young children and babies are running for office — and winning. Last year Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.) and New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern made history by bringing their babies to work to breast-feed. In September, Ardern became the first head of government to take her baby to the United Nations General Assembly.

I was privileged to have had a compassionate director, faculty, staff and students who helped create a baby-friendly environment. Most women in the United States aren't as lucky as I was and, without adequate paid maternity leave and child care, they must choose between baby and career.

Now I'm a grandmother, and I'd like to think that I made a small inroad for working mothers when I brought my baby to work. I agree with Pelosi, who is a grandmother of nine and mother of five, and her hopes that U.S. society will soon view parenting as "a gold star" on one's résumé, rather than a liability.

As for that dean, by the end of the term she was out, not having been reappointed, and my child was still there. I like to think my baby had the last word.



(By Michael Holoszyc/Courtesy of the author) (Michael Holoszyc/Courtesy of the author)