

# Are we cheating the childless?

## CHILDREN'S NEEDS PIT EMPLOYEES AGAINST ONE ANOTHER

BY PAM CHIOTTI  
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**D**on't look now, but that childless co-worker of yours — the one you thought was your friend — is silently raging because you've got first dibbs on prime vacation time.

And why shouldn't you? If you didn't spend March break with your children, well, heck, you'd never see them.

And you think it's completely fair to leave work early because your seven-year-old has an orthodontal appointment.

You deserve special privileges, special treatment. After all, you're pro-creating for goodness sakes.

Are employers bending over backwards for frantic, stressed-out parents, leaving behind a trail of over-worked, teeth-gnashing childless workers to pick up the slack?

Apparently so, says Elinor Burkett, author of the new book *Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless* (The Free Press, A Division of Simon & Shuster Inc.).

The issue of doling out perks to working parents is stirring controversy around office water coolers, although we never really know the true extent of peoples hidden thoughts.

Lori, who requested her real name not be used, is an intensive care nurse at a Toronto hospital. "The working mothers in my unit expect special privileges 100 per cent."

Lori says it is entirely feasible that management gives more leeway to working parents with respect to vacation time and sick days, "but you'd never be able to prove it. It's ridiculous what goes on around here," she fumes.

"All the time (workers with children) whine that they shouldn't work Christmas or Mother's Day, as if those holidays were special only to them. Not very likely."

A York Region resident for 15 years, Lori, who is 50-something, says parents get special treatment consistently.

"They take their kids to hotels, and kids stay free. Kids eat free at restau-

Childless workers often rage in silence because their co-working parents scoop special privileges, treatment

# THE BABY BOON

## HOW FAMILY-FRIENDLY AMERICA CHEATS THE CHILDLESS

ELINOR BURKETT

rants. There is no room in the business world for special privileges," she says.

"Sick days are sick days, whatever the reason," says Doris Tischlinger, regional co-ordinator for Investors Group in Markham.

Stressing that 80 percent of her company consists of self-employed representatives, salaried staff are not given preferential treatment if they are parents.

As a salaried boss, Tischlinger says she is understanding when workers with children are needed elsewhere.

"It depends on the circumstances. If someone leaves because their child is sick or needs to go to the doctor, that is fine.

"But if a childless worker approached me complaining that the worker with the child took time off for child-caring reasons and, in turn,

wanted time off to go shopping, well, that is not a legitimate reason. I wouldn't like being taken advantage of."

Receptive to workers' situations, Tischlinger — a mother of two boys — admits to taking time off occasionally to look after the needs of her children.

"If I leave early, then I have to make up the time, and you can be sure that I'll be at my desk at 6 a.m. the next day."

Just to prove Burkett's position wrong, Tischlinger points to a time when she had to officiate at a staff meeting to deal with conflicting vacation times.

One childless worker had already paid \$2,000 for her vacation and if she couldn't get that particular week off, she would have lost the money.

The other worker wanted the same week (March break) to spend time with her children. The loss of money took priority. The childless woman won.

"I like to work around problems, and when it comes to vacations, it's generally first come, first served."

Tischlinger, admittedly pro-family, says workers with children can be a benefit when it comes to hiring for certain positions.

"If the job is from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., that would be ideal for someone with school children."

Legitimate reasons for taking time off take priority over more frivolous reasons.

"If someone says they want Friday off to enjoy a long weekend, I would ask myself how often they have made that request."

"If they ask for Fridays off regularly, the answer would be, no."

But, if they want a Friday off to

attend their child's field trip, then that's a different story. But any time off, no matter the reason, would be considered "sick time."

"If my son phoned me up crying that he needed me, I'd be out of here in a flash, and would not expect to be reprimanded."

"But I would expect to be reprimanded if that sort of thing happened weekly," Tischlinger says.

Everyone can take time off. The question boils down to how, or if, you want to pay back that time.

Richmond Hill resident Loni Frommer recently took a day off from her sales and marketing support job at Investors Group on Cochrane Drive because her son Jesse, 10, required dental surgery. Her employer, Avrum Liederman, a certified financial planner, suggested she not come to work that day.

"He knows I often stay late," says Frommer.

"It's a question of mutual respect," Frommer says it's unlikely Liederman will dock her pay. Meantime, Frommer arranged to have the grandparents babysit the next day, since Jesse will likely miss two days of school.

Darlene Montgomery, a contributing editor for Markham's Raymond Aaron Group, is a contract worker who has been helping her sister out of babysitting jams for two years.

"My sister relies on me as her son's caregiver since she can't take time off work," he loving aunt and a mom herself says most companies don't consider the stress that is synonymous with a sick child.

"They don't file that in their compassion department," she admits.

"We've never thought about this issue. It hasn't been part of our culture to think about it."

One of Montgomery's co-workers, a "super-responsible person," cancelled three appointments with her son's ear specialist so she could avoid taking time off.

Stress from missing work is compounded by stress felt from attending to one's own child during work hours.

If employers don't understand the added stress, it's unlikely employees understand either, especially if they're asked to assume someone else's responsibilities, the author says.

Should working parents receive preferential treatment?

It depends on your frame of reference.

(The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless: \$36.00 Canadian: ISBN: 0-684-86303-0)

### VOICES

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