

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Cut parents some slack, already

By Amy Blackstone, Special to the BDN

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Last month, an American Greetings [video](#) showing candidates interviewing for the “world’s toughest job” quickly went viral. Job requirements included working while standing 135 to unlimited hours per week, no breaks, no vacations and, ideally, degrees in medicine, finance and the culinary arts.

The punchline? Candidates learned they had applied for the job of being a mom.

While the aim of the video was to sell Mother’s Day cards, it provides another opportunity: to think more deeply about where these job expectations come from and what effect they have on us all. The unrealistic expectations our culture places on moms hurt everyone: mothers, fathers, kids and even those who don’t have kids.

In the late 1990s, sociologist Sharon Hays observed that the predominant view of parenting is that it should be “child centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.” It is also thought to be primarily a mother’s responsibility.

This means that mothers who wish to be viewed as “good” must be constantly available — emotionally, mentally and physically — for their kids. They are expected to tote little Susie and Johnny from school to soccer to scouts, all with a supportive smile, a dedicated ear and possibly a homemade, gluten-free, sugar-free, dairy-free, antibiotic-free snack.

As Hays put it, “If you are a good mother, you must be an intensive one.”

These pressures haven’t declined, but they have expanded to include fathers. Moms and dads dedicate more of their time to their kids these days than in any previous era. In fact, [between 1965 and 2003, men’s time with their kids tripled; women’s doubled](#). Today it’s all about helicopter parenting, and it doesn’t stop when kids reach adulthood. A recent [survey of 18- to 24-year-olds found that parents of these young adults are taking an increasingly active role in their children’s job searches](#), some going so far as to accompany children on their job interviews or writing thank you notes after interviews.

It hasn’t always been this way. Children were once essential to the economic survival of their families. In Colonial times, American children labored on family farms and in home workshops. As the Industrial Revolution took hold, children went to work in factories. While the shift away from placing such heavy burdens on children is no doubt a good thing, the pendulum seems to have swung just as far in the other direction.

As it turns out, the pressures of intensive mothering and burdens of helicopter parenting are not good for anyone. Moms who buy into the culture of intensive parenting carry the heavy burden of

unrealistic and unhealthy expectations. A [2013 study](#) by a team of University of Mary Washington psychologists found that “aspects of intensive mothering beliefs are detrimental to women’s mental health.”

The pressure to intensively parent is not good for couples either. [Psychologist Joshua Coleman](#) notes that “the increase in parenting hours on the part of both husbands and wives may pose some threats to the couple relationship since many couples have increased their time with their children by eliminating or greatly reducing time for romance.” Indeed, making time for each other through date nights is associated with both higher marital quality and lower risk of divorce.

It isn’t just parents who lose out when the pressures of intensive parenting prevail. A [study of the impact of helicopter parenting](#) found that the children of parents who hover are more likely to use prescription drugs for anxiety and depression and more likely to use pain pills recreationally. They also don’t fare as well emotionally.

Even those who don’t position the parent role as the center of their universe are chastised for being selfish and uncaring. The culture of intensive parenting therefore harms child-free adults as well. Stereotypes of the child-free as cold, selfish loners are [both common and empirically unfounded](#).

Parenting is a tough and important job. There’s no need to make it more difficult by piling on unreasonable expectations of mothers and fathers. The responsibility to change these expectations rests on all of us. On Mother’s and Father’s days, let’s forgo the greeting cards and instead show parents we appreciate them by cutting them some slack. We would all benefit by reducing the cultural pressure on parents to do it all, have it all and be it all.

Amy Blackstone is an associate professor at the University of Maine and chairwoman of the sociology department. She is a member of the Maine Regional Network, part of the [Scholars Strategy Network](#), which brings together scholars across the country to address public challenges and their policy implications. Members’ columns appear in the BDN every other week.

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