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## Balancing Work and Family Life. ERIC Digest No. 110.

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The myth that family and work occupy separate spheres is fast fading in the face of tremendous demographic and economic changes (Voydanoff 1984). Smaller families, increasing numbers of working women, nontraditional family patterns, and changing values are spurring a growing awareness of the interdependence of work and family life.

Although the composition of the labor force and family structures have changed rapidly, attitudes and institutions have been slower to evolve. Many workplace rules and practices remain based on a male, single-earner work force, and many families still act under role-sharing assumptions based on the presence of full-time homemakers, despite the fact that fewer than 7 percent of families fit that model.

For many people, the conflict between these assumptions and reality necessitates finding better ways to balance home and career. This concern is not a gender issue but one that affects all people as they make life and career choices. Gender equity cannot be achieved until "society recognizes the importance of work and family roles for both women and men" (Vocational Education Journal 1989, p. 27).

Career and vocational educators as well as employers face the challenge of preparing people with the attitudes and skills needed for successful integration of work and family life. The field of home economics recognizes the importance of work-family issues in its mission statement, which notes that home economics education prepares youth and adults for both the work and family spheres and focuses on their interrelationship (Vocational Education Journal 1989). This ERIC Digest looks at some programs and practices in secondary home economics and career development and counseling for adults that deal with this subject. Essential curricular elements and strategies are highlighted, and benefits for individuals, employers, and society are identified.

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR LIFE/CAREER PLANNING

Two theoretical concepts underlie many existing approaches to the family-career connection: developmental stages and systems theory. Recognition of the developmental stages of careers, families, and individuals provides a better understanding of the stresses and conflicts arising from various roles, especially when high-demand stages of two roles occur simultaneously (Miller 1986). Systems theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of individual, career, and family and identifies how satisfaction or dissatisfaction in one area affects the others (Schneider 1990). Ideally, life and career planning should be taught as a unit, and examples from consumer/homemaking education show that middle school is not too early to begin (Vocational Education Journal 1989). As people progress through the different stages of their multiple roles, reexamination of life/career issues is beneficial either in formal courses, seminars and workshops, or counseling situations in higher education and adult settings.

Ten critical choices affecting the work-family balance are as follows (Vocational Education Journal 1989, pp. 28-30):

1. Choosing to view work and family life as interconnected

2. Selecting a satisfying career
3. Choosing a career with day-to-day flexibility
4. Choosing a career with adequate salary potential
5. Deciding upon the right partner and time to marry
6. Deciding whether and when to have children and how to provide child care
7. Choosing a job with potential
8. Determining priorities at home and at work
9. Obtaining the necessary training for a career
10. Choosing to take control of one's life

These decisions can be addressed in the choice and sequence of topics for a life/career planning course. The following list of important topics for a life/career planning course is a synthesis of a number of program examples and curriculum guides ("Adult and Family Living" 1990; "Family and Career Transitions Resource Guide" 1989; "Family Life and Worker Productivity" 1986; "Individual and Family Life" 1989; Kaser and Frazier 1989; Miller and Weeks 1985; "Vocational Education Journal" 1989):



--Interdependence of individual, family, and career systems



--Developmental stages of individual, family, and career



--Values, realistic expectations, and priorities



--Career and life-style choices



--Coping with multiple roles

- 
- Sex roles and sex stereotypes
- 
- Parenthood/family life education
- 
- Child care and elder care options
- 
- Managing time, a household, money, stress, and change
- 
- Using resources and developing support systems
- 
- Dual career and single parent/displaced homemaker issues
- 
- Cultural differences in family-work attitudes

In addition to these specific subjects, many family-work curricula emphasize the usefulness of transferable skills. Certain similarities between the home and the workplace--in structure and organization and tasks--indicate that some skills are useful in both areas (Miller and Weeks 1985):

- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- Decision making
- Communication
- Problem solving
- Conflict resolution

--Goal setting

--Negotiation

## JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

New York State's approach to the reform of the general curriculum recognizes the value of teaching both career and family skills (Vocational Education Journal 1989). Since 1986, seventh and eighth graders have been required to take a course in Home and Career Skills in which the emphasis is on learning to learn and thinking skills. Students become aware "of a world where both men and women take care of the children, go to the market, and go to work" (p. 46).

Iowa State University researchers tested 37 lesson plans on balancing work and family in grades 10-12. They found that students' knowledge of work and family concepts increased and more realistic attitudes about the future were developed. The curriculum was considered appropriate for home economics, career education, business education, cooperative education, and other occupational areas. One important feature is a lesson on federal legislation supporting work and family life, making students aware of the effects of public policy and preparing them for advocacy roles as citizens (Vocational Education Journal 1989, pp. 34-35).

## JUGGLING LESSONS: PROGRAMS FOR ADULTS

The Career Center at Florida State University infused work-family information into an existing career planning course. The experiential exercises dealing with sex roles, marriage and family, and career planning were integrated within a conceptual framework based on systems theory. More recognition of dual career issues and awareness of family and work responsibilities were apparent after the course (Gerken, Reardon, and Bash 1988).

If people manage to get through high school and college without learning critical skills for balancing work and family, there is still hope. The curriculum developed by the Minnesota Vocational Education Work and Family Institute has been adapted for technical institute and community college classrooms and workplace seminars. Customized seminars for other businesses improved morale, team spirit, and efficiency and led two corporations to sponsor working parent resource centers in Minneapolis and St. Paul that offer reference materials, consultation, and classes (Vocational Education Journal 1989, pp. 36-39).

## THE BENEFITS OF BALANCE

Work and family roles are both central to the personal identity and life experiences of adults. Educators, employers, and society can all help individuals harmonize those roles in their lives. Supportive educational strategies, employment practices, and public

policies are those that enhance opportunities for children to develop well, expand opportunities for men to carry out their role in the family, and increase opportunities for women to participate fully in the labor force and society (Voydanoff 1984).

The benefits of successfully combining work and family roles for individuals, employers, and society include the following:

- --Improved quality of life and mental health
- --Greater individual contributions to the well-being of society
- --Increased productivity
- --A wider pool of competent employees, averting projected labor shortages
- --Better employee morale and less turnover
- --More aware and informed citizens who can exert constructive influence on public and private institutions
- --A more holistic upbringing for children

In addition to the resources cited here, the ERIC database contains other examples of local, state, and federal family-work programs.

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