

Take Your Daughter to the Unemployment Office Day

You really can't win: sometimes you feel that you're not a good enough mother because you have a job - and sometimes because you don't.

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My seven-year-old daughter, Lillie, and I were splashing around in the swimming pool at the charming Westchester farmhouse of my boss, Charlotte. She had made a casual offer earlier that week ("Stop by for a swim anytime you want, the house is always open.") and I'd decided to take her up on it.

I'd been working for Charlotte for nearly a year. In my decade as an advertising copywriter, this was one of the best jobs I'd had. I liked and respected Charlotte, a tall, pretty blonde who'd had a major advertising career along with, incredibly, five children. I once asked her how she had pulled that off. "It wasn't easy," she replied. "They've all been in rehab." She was funny, down to earth, and best of all, she liked my work enough to hand me some of the best assignments.

Somehow I knew it wouldn't last. Even more than most industries, advertising is famous for its instability. Management shifts, accounts change hands, time passes. One day you realize you are not the hot new girl in town anymore. You've been tossed up on the shelf, like an advertising concept everyone loved at first, until one person and then another finds something wrong with it. Soon you're no longer getting the plum assignments. Eventually there's a new, new girl in town lugging her boxes of advertising annuals into your former office.

You get used to picking yourself up and starting again. As one of my first bosses, Tony, said, "It's all about persistence, not talent. The guys left standing are the ones who refuse to stay down."

Lillie had met Charlotte several times at the office. No surprise, this super-mom had a winning way with kids, and Lillie fell instantly in love. That day in the pool, my intrepid daughter was getting especially rambunctious, kicking and splashing Charlotte until I said, "Hey, that's my boss you're nearly drowning."

Lillie stopped cold and looked at me. "You mean, she could fire you?"

"Uh, yeah..." I said awkwardly.

Then my small, curly-headed blonde daughter took her stand. She shot Charlotte a look. "If you fire my Mom, I'll kill you!"

Startled, Charlotte and I laughed nervously, then quickly changed the subject. Sitting by the pool, I realized for the first time that Lillie must remember the time I came home and cried after losing my job four years earlier, when she was in nursery school.

I had been part of large "housecleaning" - a term that always makes me feel like a sad little stray dust ball under the desk. My agency brought in a new creative director. The day he arrived, a group of us were called in, one-by-one, to meet with the agency president, Mary Ann, another pretty blonde (yes, the powerful Women of Advertising are very often pretty blondes.)

"Lisa," she began, in what was obviously a lawyer-scripted speech. "I'm afraid this is not a good news meeting."

My feisty young daughter had apparently decided to take it on herself to protect me from this ever happening again, even though I knew she already felt a more than a little iffy about her mother going to work.

"Why can't you pick me up from school like Emily's Mom does?" she used to plead after being brought home by her babysitter. I tried to explain that I chose to have a career, that it gave us more financial security and let us take trips to Disneyland, that I believed in a woman earning her own way in the world.

It felt kind of futile saying this to a four-year-old. How could she possibly understand the complicated calculations that go into such choices? My husband and I didn't want the financial strain of trying to survive on one salary, and I didn't want to feel completely dependent on a man, as my mother had been. I was well aware of how much she regretted that. The women's movement of the 70s, my college years, only reinforced that lesson.

We had a great time that day at Charlotte's. When we left, she promised my daughter that she could "come back anytime" and watch videos on her big-screen TV.

Of course, that never happened. What did happen was this: About a year after Lillie's take-no-prisoners announcement to Charlotte, political forces conspired to shift her out of her job as my creative director and into another position in a sister company.

My first inkling of danger came when we were in Denver attending focus groups. For weeks, I had been asking Charlotte to look over some ideas I was working on, and she kept mysteriously refusing. Finally she blurted out, "I guess I should tell you. I'm leaving the company."

"Where does that leave me?" I asked, flustered and shocked.

"Oh, you're a good writer. They'll find a spot for you," she replied. Then she added, "But if I were you, I'd start looking."

Over the next few months, all the people Charlotte had hired were fired by her replacement. Including, eventually, me.

So, in spite of her valiant efforts, my daughter could not protect her Mom from going through this again. It also meant that Lillie could no longer go to visit her friends at my office, could no longer hang out and draw pictures with Charlotte's cute young assistant, could no longer shoot balls on the office pool table with my former colleagues. When she found out, she said, straightforward as always, "You mean we can't ever go swimming at Charlotte's house again?"

That's right, kid. Get used to it. Because my friendly relationship with Charlotte went the way many workplace relationships do. It ended as soon as the job did. Adults are supposed to understand this rule and not "take it personally."

This is hard for a little girl. "That's just the way it is," I tried to explain. " Like when one of your friends starts going to a different school and makes new friends there, and doesn't come over to play anymore."

I suppose I should chalk this up to one more lesson for my daughter about life and loss, about the fact that sometimes you fail no matter how hard you try, about false starts and rocky roads that lead absolutely nowhere.

But standard industry disruptions and an ailing economy aside, it's hard for me not to worry that losing my job might simply seem like her mother's personal failure.

I worry about not being a good role model for her. I worry that my several difficult spells of unemployment will make her think less of me and of my abilities - and possibly of her own potential. Especially since I am the one she's seen go through this, and not her father.

You really can't win: sometimes you feel that you're not a good enough mother because you have a job - and sometimes because you don't.

Sometimes, frankly, I find myself wishing I had chosen to be a stay-at-home Mom, because then I wouldn't have to face up to this particular parenting challenge.

All I can do, however imperfectly, is what Tony said: keep struggling back onto my feet the best I can. It's not the sort of shining model of success I had in mind. But maybe it's the kind that is, in the end, even more valuable.