

SPECIAL TOPICS

**Coaching Intercollegiate Debate
and Raising a Family:
An analysis of perspectives
from women in the trenches**

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The year 1992 was dubbed the "Year of the Woman" in politics, and yet, what many individuals will remember most from 1992 may not be the elections, but the Murphy Brown-Dan Quayle debate. While the issue of working mothers has been dramatically pushed to the forefront of the socio-political arena, what the media elite have neglected to explicitly point out is that the issue of working mothers is neither new nor insignificant.

Women have been working outside the home for more than one hundred years. Approximately 20% of American women were working outside the home at the turn of the century (Matthews & Rodin, 1989). The percentage rose during World War II as women replaced men in war-related industries. Since that time, the number of working women has continued to grow. As of 1988, 55.9% of women, or 53.9 million, were in the civilian work force (p. 1389). It is further estimated that by 1995, 81% of all women aged 25-34 will be in the labor force (Chusmir et al., 1990, p. 167). Therefore, while the issue of working women is not a new concept, the issue of working women and men and family life is a relatively new one — one that has received a great deal of attention in the last several years. While studies suggest that most working women are satisfied with maintaining a job and a family, the issue has never been raised in the context of intercollegiate debate. This field presents a unique situation for women

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debate coaches in that the travel and time demands of the activity are different from the demands of a "regular" faculty member or a typical nine-to-five job.¹ Thus, the purpose of this essay is to examine the practicality of having a family and coaching intercollegiate debate.

Review of Literature

There is a great deal of current literature regarding the issue of working mothers. For example, Chester (1990) suggests that women base their decisions regarding work and raising children on external factors (such as job-related factors and husbands' attitudes) and individual characteristics (values and beliefs about work and raising children).

Once the decision to work has been made, Moore (1986) argues that women face three potential conflicts: time-based (limited resource of time), strain-based (strain related to one role may "spill over" to another role), and behavior-based (different sets of behaviors for each role may be incompatible). Richter (1990) elaborates that a working mother faces two types of transitions: planned (these occur regularly in the morning when going to work and in the evening when going home), and interposed (which occur when a person is in one domain and deals with issues from another domain). Such conflicts and transitions are problematic for working mothers, but Apter (1985) argues that women need to accept such conflicts; "these conflicts are not shams, or the result of a conspiracy, but the result of complex needs within a society that has not as yet attuned itself to these particular complex needs" (pp. 59-60).

Despite conflicts, however, scholars have found that women can be satisfied with careers and family life, the that such balance takes work. For example, women administrators believe that the satisfaction of having children outweighs career problems, but that having a family can present problems and barriers to maintaining a career (Marshall & Jones, 1990). Stewart (1989) discovered that women who were satisfied with their decision to have a career and family had "flexible or adjustable work hours, supervisors' understanding and cooperation when emergencies arise or children are ill, job hours compatible with school and day care hours, adequate pay to obtain domestic help, and willingness of co-workers to help meet deadlines

when emergencies arise" (p. 30). Richter (1990) concluded that women must seek solutions on three levels. On the organizational level, when women schedule meetings, they should keep stressful transition times open. On the family level, she encouraged equal participation with family chores; and, on the individual level, she argued that women should try to create a transition routine between work and home so that the transition is easier.

While the research about working mothers has provided interesting information regarding women's feelings about their dual roles, these studies have not examined women who have time commitments as rigorous as those of a debate coach. Additionally, women debate coaches do not have some of the options discussed in the above studies, such as maintaining hours which correspond with those of day care centers. Thus, research into the dual roles women play provides an important contribution to the academic and forensics communities, particularly in light of the trend toward more working mothers.

Method

Data in this study consist of narratives solicited from women with families who coach National Debate Tournament or Cross Examination Debate Association intercollegiate debate. These two types of debate (policy- and value-oriented) comprise the predominant forms of debate in college forensics. The women in the study were asked several general questions designed to promote a discussion of their impressions of coaching and motherhood. It should be noted that there are not many women in the debate community who fall into the coach/mother category; five narratives were returned, with an acceptance rate of sixty percent. In order to better analyze the narratives, a coder examined each sentence and/or group of sentences and placed them into categories. The categories which emerged include the advantages of coaching debate and raising a family, the disadvantages of coaching debate and raising a family, criteria by which such an arrangement works, and, finally, advice to those who are considering such choices.²

Results

Only one of the respondents argued that there are several advantages to coaching debate and raising children. The skills of organiza-

tion and time management served her well as a mother and administrator. The children benefit from travel, and they benefit from having college students as friends. Finally, she felt that she was happier as a result of having both a career and children.

All of the respondents indicated that there are disadvantages to doing both jobs. One of the main disadvantages had to do with time problems. That is, the enormous amount of time required to coach debate and travel takes away time that a mother would like to spend with her children. This results in what one respondent called a "deadly dilemma," creating a continual feeling of guilt. Thus, coaches felt that they had to choose between extensive coaching and spending time at home — a perpetual dilemma which causes a great deal of stress. The second disadvantage dealt with role conflict. One coach write, "Traditional gender role indicates that a female should be submissive, non-assertive and noncompetitive... these qualities would not lend themselves to success in our field." Moore (1986) would agree; strain- and behavior-based conflicts could be very pronounced in the area of debate coaching.

Women debate coaches also argued that it was possible to coach debate and have a family under certain conditions. First, several of the coaches argued that one must assess the nature of the program in which one is working. If the program operates on a local or regional level, then the effect on the coach/mother is minimal. However, if the program is large-scale, the coach/mother must make good use of assistants and not travel as much. One respondent indicated that when she gave more responsibilities to graduate assistants, the competitors turned to her assistants more than her. This was a problem for her at first because it caused some jealousy, but she had to eventually accept the fact that the choice to spend time at home would make it harder to get close to her students. Another respondent said that she was not able to attend as many tournaments since having a baby. Thus, when a coach/mother is assessing the nature of the program, she must be prepared to accept different relationships with the squad as well as the decreased level of help that she can provide to the individual students.

The second factor that seems to be important to successfully balance coaching and motherhood is a supportive spouse. One respondent wrote, "unless your spouse truly understands and, more impor-

tant, accepts the demands of coaching and the demands of parenthood, the combination may be impossible." Another wrote that she was fortunate that her husband was willing to take on the primary burdens of child care. Another indicated that raising a child and coaching debate was "close to impossible" because her husband's views of child raising and woman's career were "antiquated." This issue is one that Stewart (1989) does not address; thus, for successful debate coaching/mothering, support is essential.

Even though they were not asked this question, most of the respondents said that if they had to "do it all over again," they would. Further, they provided some advice to women who are thinking about balancing the two roles. First, they argued that the coach/mother must be creative in balancing the roles. One respondent wrote, "Give ... careful thought to your values and be guided by them when you are required to choose between the two roles (and you will be asked to do so). Realize that it is possible to succeed in both roles simultaneously, even on those days when you feel that you are succeeding in neither (and there will be those days). Know that more is expected of you than women in other fields and men in our own field (and be willing to accept that)." Richter (1990) would agree with her assessment and would argue that women coaches must examine the planned and interposed transitions in order to better deal with role conflicts.

Several respondents had a variety of advice regarding children. One coach argued that women should take their children to tournaments with them as long as possible, and they should establish an extended family. Two coaches recommended that women establish their coaching careers before having children. Finally, another respondent concluded that if one wants to coach and have children, "go for it. But be aware that it is not a road without holes. Still, like most highways, with a little forethought and constant planning, it can be maneuvered."

Conclusions

Being a debate coach and a mother is not an easy task. The respondents in this study generally are happy to be involved in both coaching and mothering, but the roles are challenging, perhaps more than the roles of the typical working mother. This study departs from general studies regarding the working mother by helping to explain

the struggles of a unique, tough profession. As some women in this study point out, the already-tough expectations of debate coaching may be more demanding for a woman than a man, and, at the same time, the woman still has the burden of caring for her family. More importantly, the small number of women debate coaches should be of concern to the community, and this essay provides some initial insight into why more women may not be involved.

It could be argued that the small number of women to which this essay pertains makes the subject largely irrelevant. However, it is hoped that this study will provide the incentive for further investigation into the realm of intercollegiate debate; perhaps the challenge of these roles may help explain the male-dominated nature of our activity; perhaps male debate coaches with children share similar views. The issue of tenure is also a factor, since the women debate coaches in this study indicated that they have a difficult time balancing debate and family, let alone worry about publishing. The implications of this finding extend far beyond forensics in that the inability to secure tenure affects individual communication departments as well as the discipline as a whole.

In the future, if enough coaches are concerned with the problems encountered by these dual roles, maybe actions can be taken (such as cooperative child care at tournaments) that can make these role conflicts less severe. At the very least, those who are not involved in forensics ought to be aware of the extreme stress and strain caused by coaching and family life. As it stands now, however, to the disgust of Murphy Brown fans, intercollegiate debate might be labeled an "anti-family" activity and those choosing to pursue both roles will continue to be pushed to the limit.

Notes

¹While there certainly are other occupations which require extensive hours, unusual shifts, or travel, our argument is that, in our discipline, forensics poses a unique burden upon those who are involved. At a minimum, forensics coaches are expected to meet with students during the day and usually at least one night a week to work on debate and speeches, then travel with them on weekends to tournaments.

In addition, we acknowledge that men who coach debate and have families face problems similar to the women who participated in this study. However, the purpose of this study was to examine the job of forensics director from the woman's point of view since the burden of child-raising traditionally falls upon the woman rather than the man. In addition, we argue that there are few women coaches, and it is time that their perspective is heard.

²Due to the small sample size, extensive content analysis was not necessary. Also, since only four categories emerged, determining an interrater reliability measure was unnecessary.

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