

Articles

"Vote Mom: Juggling Motherhood and Work Takes Effort"

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You hate to see it when a visible working mom makes the lives of us invisible working moms harder than they already are. But that's what Massachusetts' Lt. Gov. Jane Swift did recently. Swift, for those of you not familiar with her story, provoked a storm of Bostonian outrage when it was reported that she used state employees as babysitters and errand-runners and that she took a state helicopter to her rural Massachusetts home when her 14-month-old daughter had pneumonia.

Swift was controversial before she ever took office because six months before her 1998 election, she announced that she was with child.

Her decision to stay in the race, big belly and all, rankled conservatives who believed that motherhood and career shouldn't mix. But those of us out here in the real world who have been combining diapers and briefcases for years were heartened that, not only would a mother seek public office, but a mother of a very young child.

OK, maybe we Thought she was a little nuts, too. Anybody who's realized in the middle of the day that she's forgotten to brush her teeth can tell you what sleep deprivation caused by taking care of a newborn can do to a body.

But Swift did it. She ran; she won; she was sworn-in. She even has what most of us mommies can only dream about: a stay-at-home husband.

Was this lady a role model or what?

And then we learned the truth: Swift isn't handling the working mom stresses any better than we are. In fact, because she's on the people's payroll, the transgressions she made trying to squeeze in a little more baby time caught the eye of the Boston Globe, which splashed her across the front page. They also gave the anti-working mom crowd ammunition for a big, fat "I told you so."

I'm not excusing Swift's misuse of taxpayer dollars. She shouldn't have asked her employees to watch the wee one when young Elizabeth Ruth visited mom's office. She shouldn't have asked her employees to pick up her dry cleaning. And she definitely shouldn't have used a state helicopter to whisk her over Boston's clogged freeways to get her back to her sick child.

But I understand what could drive a person to take such risks. If I was told my son had pneumonia, and I had a state helicopter at my disposal, even if I wasn't supposed to use it for personal matters, I'd be looking at that chopper pretty hard. Would I do it? Maybe, maybe not. The point is, I'd probably consider it. Like most moms, my desire to be with my child when he's sick is strong.

Swift isn't any different from the rest of us. She desperately wants to see her child, like any mother would, and she unfortunately bent the rules to do it.

For the record, she has said she would repay the state \$1,000 for the cost of the heli-copter ride. But it would be a shame if all mommy/politicians were tainted because of Swift's actions.

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Women in politics, particularly those with young children, certainly have their work cut out for them. A recent Deloitte & Touche survey revealed that 29 percent of Americans would be less likely to vote for a female presidential candidate if she were the parent of a child under 5. Only 15 percent said they would hold it against a male presidential candidate.

But plenty of women hold office and have children. Swift was just more visible because she sought office while pregnant.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, the lieutenant governor of Maryland, has young children, and not only have her child-care responsibilities not landed her an expose in the Baltimore Sun, but she is being touted as a leading Democratic contender for the Maryland gubernatorial nomination in 2002.

Donna Ferrara, a Republican New York state assemblywoman, keeps her daughter in her office and pays a nanny \$15 an hour to watch her. Most women I know would kill to have on-site daycare and a nanny.

I'm sure there are others. And, needless to say, there are thousands of us in non-elected positions juggling work and home responsibilities until our arms are tired. For the most part, we're doing OK. A little fatigued and in need of a day at the spa, but OK nonetheless.

And, most importantly, our kids are doing well, too.

It's a shame that the anti-working mom voices in our society are hunting out exceptions like Swift and failing to highlight the rules, like Ferrara and Townsend. I wish Swift hadn't strayed from the straight and narrow in her attempts to see little Elizabeth more often. And it's a shame that she was driven to such extremes.

But it looks like Swift has weathered this storm. Hopefully, she's learned her lesson, and she'll keep her nose clean. So maybe now she can go back to being the role model she should have been—the one we so desperately need.