

Research shows school principals preferentially contact students' mothers over fathers

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A study from BYU, Syracuse University and Tufts University finds that moms shoulder disproportionate demands from kids' schools compared to dads, even when school offices have contact information for both parents. Credit: Rebeca Fuentes/BYU Photo

When a sick child needs to be picked up from school, who is more likely to get the call, Mom or Dad? A new study from Brigham Young University and Tufts finds it's considerably more likely to be Mom—even when the front office has contact information for both parents.

For their research, BYU economics professor Olga Stoddard, Syracuse University's Kristy Buzard and Tufts University's Laura Gee emailed about 80,000 U.S. principals, posing as a fictitious two-parent household looking for a school for their child. Emailing sometimes from a "mother's" account and sometimes from a "father's," they provided [contact information](#) for both parents and asked for a call, without specifying which parent to contact. The research is published as a working paper in the *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

Their suspicions were confirmed: 59% of principals who responded contacted mothers first, making mothers 1.4 times more likely to get a call than fathers. Reframing the email message to encourage principals to call fathers did help even things out, but only to a point. When the email signaled that the father was more available, fathers got 74% of the calls, but mothers still got 26%. Meanwhile, mothers indicating more availability got over 90% of the calls.

Tellingly, even when the father was both the email sender and the designated one to call, mothers were first contacted 12% of the time. When moms both sent the email and asked to be called first, dads were contacted almost zero times.

"There's clearly an asymmetry," Stoddard said. "You can tell external decision-makers, 'We've decided the father is going to be the point of contact,' and that's effective in pushing more of the calls to the father, but there's a ceiling. For the ever-increasing proportion of families that want a more egalitarian split in childrearing responsibilities, this

tendency makes it difficult to get to 50/50."

The study was inspired by a conversation between Stoddard and Gee about seeing only women's names on the volunteer sign-up sheets for their kids' activities. Both women observed that while their husbands wanted to take on half the child-rearing responsibilities to support their wives' full-time work, the men didn't often get the chance—it seemed schools and coaches automatically reached out to the moms.

"We looked at each other and said, 'There's got to be research on this already, on how women are disadvantaged in the workplace by shouldering disproportionate demands from outside forces,'" Stoddard said.

It turned out there wasn't, at least not rigorous, quantitative studies that showed whether the lopsidedness was all in working mothers' heads. So they designed one and found that the data backed up their experience.

In the study's accompanying survey, responses from 400 educators pointed to some possible explanations for why principals reach out first to mothers. It seems that principals think mothers are more available and that they like speaking with women more.

In addition, "a large driver of why mothers face more external demands has to do with [social norms](#) implying that mothers are better at these tasks and want to do them more than fathers," said Gee.

To explore the link between gender norms and external demands on mothers versus fathers, Stoddard, Gee and Buzard looked at their experiment results in a geographical context. They found that principals from areas traditionally associated with more conservative gender norms—more Republican, more religious, more rural, exhibiting a higher gender-wage gap and so forth—were indeed much less likely to

reach out to fathers at an equal rate.

Despite gender norms, most two-parent American households don't have a stay-at-home parent, and disproportionate demands during the workday can have major consequences for women's productivity. The researchers cited a study showing a 9% decline in women's wages from household interruptions. And that's not to mention the effect on how women think about their careers to begin with.

"It's not like in a vacuum, women are born deciding not to major in computer science," Stoddard said. "Choices happen in context of information, expectations and constraints that individuals face. Unequal external demands affect what kinds of careers women choose because they anticipate these constant interruptions coming up in the future."

The inequality can also be damaging for fathers who would like to be more involved, Stoddard noted. Most fathers the researchers surveyed suggested they prefer schools to contact them as often as schools contact their children's mother.

Believing that their findings about schools are likely applicable to many institutions, the researchers suggested that parents can help manage demands by clearly signaling whom should be contacted. Institutions can also design systems to increase equitable outreach, such as by allowing parents to designate times of day when each should be contacted.

Even so, Stoddard expects a long wait. "There's a lot of evidence that [gender norms](#) are really persistent. They change, but very slowly. So it's likely going to be many years before we see significant change."

More information: Kristy Buzard et al, Who You Gonna Call? Gender Inequality in External Demands for Parental Involvement, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4456100](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4456100)

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