

Q&A: Schools are more likely to call mothers than fathers, which has implications for the careers of working parents

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Credit: Karolina Grabowska from Pexels

Every parent is familiar with the requests: The call from the school nurse that Jimmy has a stomachache and needs to go home. The urgent

message from the soccer coach that Katie forgot her cleats for the game. The reminder from the PTO to bring cupcakes for the bake sale. They vary in importance, but even the small distractions can pull working parents out of their day and leave them feeling torn between home life and career.

Laura Gee, an associate professor of economics at Tufts, and her colleagues recently completed [a study](#) that looked at how those calls and messages are split along gender lines. One of their findings surprised exactly no one: Mothers get the lion's share of the interruptions. Even when schools are told that both parents work full time, mothers are 1.4 times more likely than fathers to be contacted by [school officials](#).

But the researchers also investigated whether parents who specify their availability can break that cycle. Purporting to be parents looking to enroll their child in a school, the researchers sent emails to 80,000 school principals asking for a call back and providing contact numbers for both a father and mother. About 60% of the time, the principals called the mothers. Even when the emails specified that mom was less available and dad was happy to field calls, 26% of the principals called the female parent.

The implication, Gee says, is that even when mothers and fathers try to share childcare responsibilities equally, society's gender biases are working against them.

Tufts Now spoke with Gee about the study and why these [phone calls](#) reveal how pervasive societal expectations can curtail women's ability to fully participate in the labor market.

What prompted this study?

My co-author Olga Stoddard [Brigham Young University] and I are both

parents. This paper was born out of constantly getting requests from our children's schools, PTAs, swim instructors, grandparents—everyone, right? We would send each other screenshots of our phones: "I'm in Sweden right now giving a talk, but who's getting this call from the [school](#)?" Just silly things like that. Both of our partners are male and also incredibly capable human beings who could field these requests. They were often listed as primary contacts.

We wondered if this phenomenon was universal. And that made us think, "We could test that."

It sounds like the main finding was in keeping with your own experience. Were there other findings that surprised you?

I was pleasantly surprised with how responsive the [decision makers](#) at the schools were to our messages about who is more or less available. Often the media narrative is around the outlier cases where the mother is a surgeon and the father is a stay-at-home parent, and no one ever directs requests to him even though they've been asked to a thousand times.

My expectation was that the man would get called just as often whether we specified he wanted the calls. But that wasn't the case. When we say that the man is more available, more calls go to him. I was heartened by this.

But it is asymmetric. When the female parent says that she is more available, she gets 90% of the calls. When you say the male parent is more available, the female parent still gets about one fourth of the calls. So you can never really push it down to all the calls going to him. That's unfortunate for male parents who want to be the primary caregiver in their household.

How do parents feel about getting called?

Early on in this research, we did a survey of parents to find out how they feel about fielding these calls. Women reported generally that they would like to be called less often. Men reported that they're pretty happy with the number of times they are being called or they wanted to be called more often.

Why do you think that gender bias is at work here, rather than just a perception that mothers are more available?

If a [decision maker](#) doesn't know much about a household and they are presented with a male name and a female name, they might think to themselves: women in the U.S. are more likely to be stay-at-home parents than men are, so I'll call the female parent because I'll be more likely to reach her.

But when we gave signals that the father was more available, about a fourth of the calls still went to the mother. So if it's not just about perception of availability, is there some other deterrent? And that led us to gender norms.

We brought in Kristy Buzard of Syracuse University to design the mathematical model to help us disentangle this. Because we wrote to many kinds of schools in many places, we could compare: religious versus non-[religious schools](#), schools in Republican-supporting versus Democratic-supporting areas, schools in places with a larger gender wage gap versus a smaller one. We found that the call inequalities we documented are larger in places with more traditional gender norms. Religious schools, for example, are more likely to call moms than non-parochial schools.

You argue that these calls are not just inconveniences—they ultimately affect the workforce. You write that women anticipate and respond to these external demands by changing the type of work they do and the careers they choose, which ultimately curbs how they progress in those careers. Can you expand on that?

We've known for a long time that there's gender inequality in the labor market and we've documented a lot of the reasons that might be. Traditionally, women got less education than men and women were more likely to work part time. But although those things are converging over time, we still see gender inequality in wages and treatment. So we really want to think about what's left over that's still driving a wedge between the way women and men are being treated in the workforce.

Other people have done great work showing that women anticipate that they are going to be treated differently simply because they are women in the workforce, so they tend to sort into more flexible jobs. More flexible jobs tend to be lower paid, lead to less career advancement, etc., which makes those women more likely to be able to take on more caregiving duties. It's a chicken and the egg kind of thing—it's hard to say what starts that cycle off. But I think documenting and understanding all the different parts of that cycle is important to our understanding of how to break that cycle if that is something a person or household wants to do.

What can families do?

First, to take the responsibility off families, I would love for the systems that parents interact with to become more friendly to this process, so

they can request that schools alternate between which parents they call, or they can ask for one parent or the other to be called on certain days.

But one thing a household can do is get a home phone number. Before cell phones, it used to be that you had one home phone number, and then whoever happened to be home would be the one who fielded the call. So you could get a third phone number that is for your household and route that phone number to the cell phone of whichever parent you want to be handling calls at certain hours or on certain days.

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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