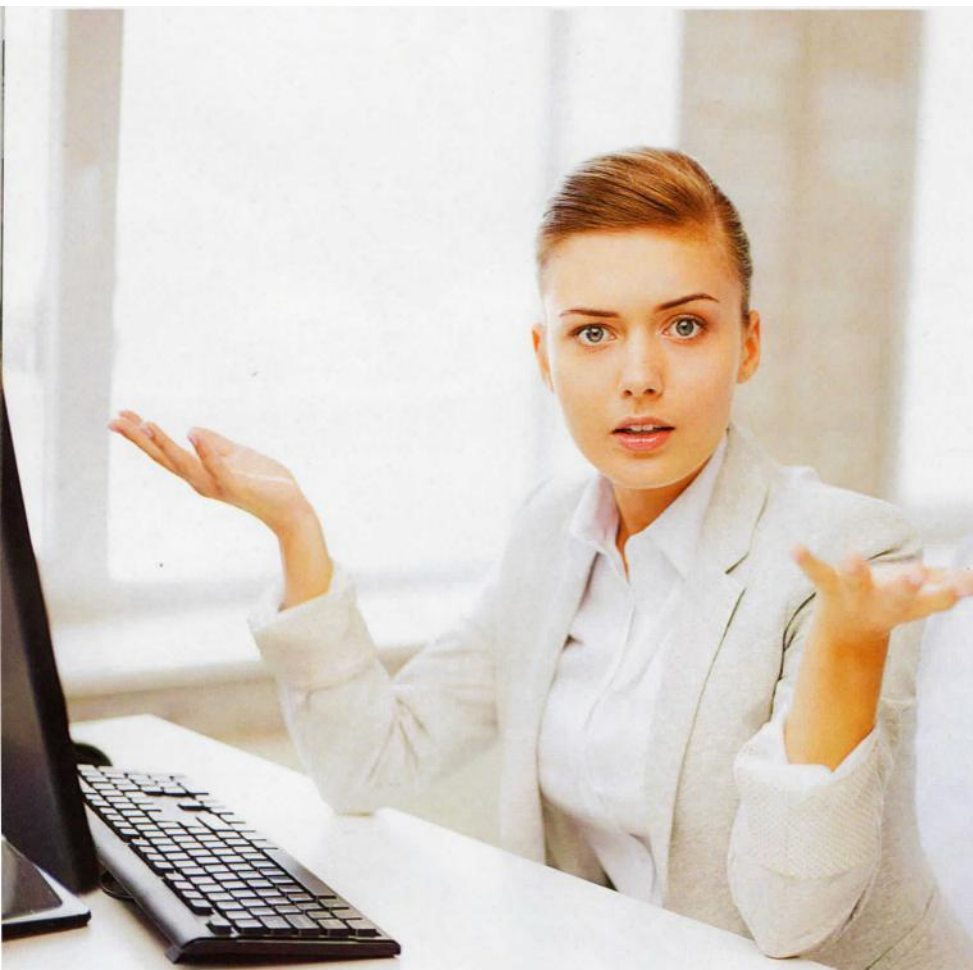


Discrimination in the Workplace

by Charise Jewell



Being a mom and working full-time is challenging. Being a mom and working full-time in a hostile environment is a nightmare. Discrimination can be subtle, which makes it that much harder to resolve. If you feel like you're being passed over for cool projects, dismissed when you offer your expertise, and snubbed when you receive that dreaded daycare call, chances are you're facing some serious discrimination and may not even know it. You're not alone. Many of us have firsthand experience, ranging from mild to extreme and everything in-between.

It Happened to Me

During my first pregnancy, I was surprised when a senior executive remarked that a new employee was single, "so no babies yet." The double-whammy was that the exec was a woman with three grown children of her own. She immediately realized her faux pas and got back to business, but her comment stuck with me. I'd been sheltered by an excellent boss (who was male) and it was the first time I'd witnessed this form of discrimination. It wouldn't be my last. By the time I found out I was expecting my third, a few bosses later, I was less naïve. When I shared

my exciting news, my then-boss replied, "I don't think that'll be a problem in terms of timing." He barely acknowledged my prenatal appointments except to look at his watch, changed the topic if anyone started talking babies at social events, and finally blew up at me when I was reluctant to go to work at four o'clock on a Monday morning. It was a nine-to-five desk job and I was seven months pregnant. We'd both hit our limits.

How to Proceed

The first thing to do is step back and look at the situation objectively. If you're seen arriving late and leaving early but no one knows

you're back online after the kids are asleep, there's definitely room for misinterpretation. If this is the case, don't hesitate to send emails after dark or toot your own horn about late nights and skipped lunch hours — now is not the time for modesty. I became hyper-responsive to my boss via email to demonstrate my commitment and productivity. I cc'd him on almost all communication, summarized project updates daily, and replied the second he emailed me, even if it was only to let him know when I would have an answer. This definitely took more time out of my day, but it also reassured him that I was still completely on top of my game.

If singing your own praises doesn't do the trick, think about how big a mountain you want to make out of what might be a molehill. It's okay to ignore a coworker's occasional eye-roll or snide remark, provided your skin's thick enough. Take a deep breath, turn the other cheek, and chalk it up to that D.I.N.K.'s ignorance. Focus on your work, do a good job, and no one who actually matters will listen to anyone else's smear campaign. This is how things played out with that female exec who let her wayward comment slip. I never felt any kind of negative vibe from her except for that one time, so it was easy to let her off the hook.

When That Doesn't Help

If, however, the criticism comes fast and furious by your manager or someone who could impact your climb up the corporate ladder; being the bigger person won't work. A conversation is required, so book a one-on-one to discuss that feeling in the pit of your stomach. You need to lay all your cards on the table, but in a non-accusatory way so no one feels under attack. Plan what you'll say beforehand, using sentences starting with 'When' and 'I'. For example, "When you set meetings before nine o'clock, it makes me feel like you don't want me there since I can't make it in that early," or "I felt like I made some important contributions at yesterday's meeting, but you weren't interested. Is there any reason why?". Your manager might have a perfectly valid explanation that has nothing to do with you, but you'll never know unless you ask.

For a productive conversation, avoid using absolutes like 'always' and 'never', listen without interrupting, and pause (and breathe!) before responding, especially if

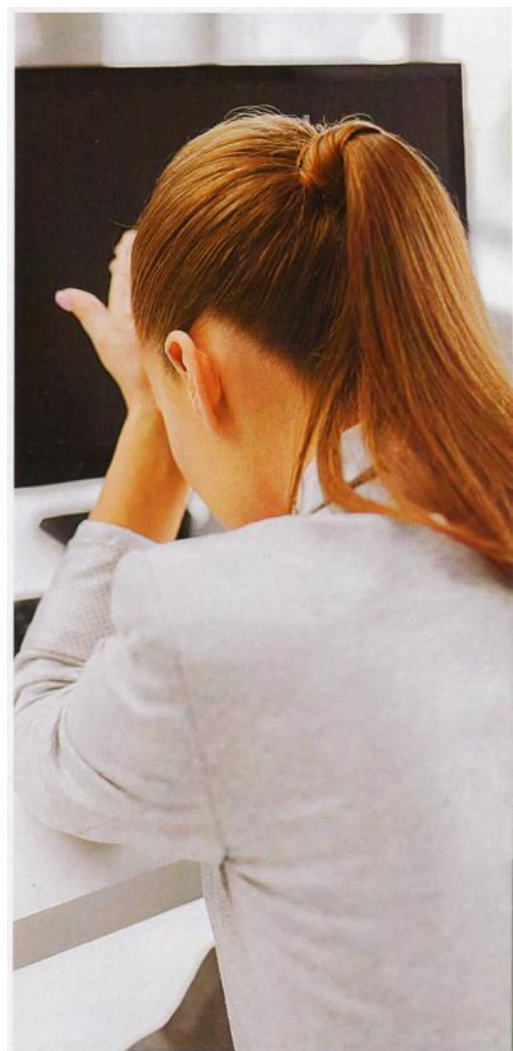
you start to feel defensive. The goal is to work together to solve the problem, so make a few suggestions once you've got the ball rolling. You could offer to rearrange your schedule if that's possible, or volunteer to head-up a project or committee. Asking for more responsibility is a surefire way to be seen as a serious player; as long as you follow through and get the job done. Well done.

Think about what you'd say to your daughter if she was being picked on in the playground: Why do you want to play with somebody who doesn't want to play with you?

If All Else Fails

If clearing the air doesn't help, step it up by approaching co-workers, HR, and possibly your boss's boss. Once they realize your dedication, and provided you're working hard and getting results, they'll be more inclined to bend over backwards for you. And if you give it your all and still feel slighted, stressed, or second-guessed, it's time to consider your options. You could complain to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal, (or your province's equivalent), or pursue legal action, but think twice: that long and expensive road rarely satisfies anyone. Your best bet is to ask for a transfer, or look for a new job and get out while the getting's good, like I did. My boss and I did have that grievance-airing conversation, and for a little while, things were better. But as my due-date approached, he became increasingly moody and standoffish, and by the time I left

we were barely on speaking terms. I had another honest conversation with the CEO when my mat leave was coming to an end. He wasn't surprised, was apologetic, and didn't have much to offer me. So I told myself what I'd tell any mom in a similar situation: You are a talent to be appreciated and if they don't recognize that then they don't deserve you. Think about what you'd say to your daughter if she was being picked on in the playground: Why do you want to play with somebody who doesn't want to play with you?



Charise Jewell is a former robotics engineer turned writer and parenting consultant. She can be found online at CRUNCHcompass.com when her boys are LEGO-ing and her toddler's drawing on furniture.