

To Look Young at Work, Hiding Your (Child's) Age

Working parents who mix with young colleagues may hesitate to reveal they have teenagers.

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How old are your children? It seems like a simple question.

But it can be an awkward one for working parents with children in their teens, 20s and beyond. They don't want to lie when asked about their children's ages—but they don't want to be seen as over-the-hill either.

BJ Gallagher, 65, sidesteps the question, with humor. When she was asked about her son Michael, who is 46, over dinner at a recent conference, she replied: "It's reached the point where I've started lying about his age," says Ms. Gallagher, author of "It's Never Too Late to Be What You Might Have Been," a book on finding new careers and other pursuits late in life. Everyone laughed, and the conversation moved on.

"I never lie," Ms. Gallagher says, "but I never answer the question either."

Traditional assumptions about children's ages often miss the mark. Older parents are staying healthy and youthful-looking longer. Many have styles and tastes that allow them to mix with younger colleagues—until it comes out that they have a teenager.

Some 40-something parents are becoming conscious of the issue as the huge Millennial generation, those born in the 80s and 90s, enters the workforce. Jamie Joffe, 44, owner of a Lafayette Hill, Pa., event-planning and public-relations firm and mother of a 15-year-old son, noticed at a recent trade show that she was surrounded by people in their 20s. She was feeling a little old when a young woman she had just met asked her son's age.

"Um, my son is 13," she replied, then quickly corrected herself: "Wait a minute. My son isn't 13. He's 15," she says. The slip "was unconscious, to make me seem like I was younger than I was."

People are having children at a wider range of ages: It isn't so unusual any more for parents in their 40s or 50s to have toddlers.

"With adoptions, blended families, second marriages, third marriages, children's ages are just not relevant anymore" as an indicator of a person's age, says Karen Kaufman, president of the Kaufman Partnership, Philadelphia, impression-management consultants.

When people ask Steve Cony, 67, where his children go to camp, "I say, 'I can tell you the last camp they went to,'" he says. Above, Mr. Cony, his daughter Robin Goldberg; his son Evan Cony, and his wife, Carolyn Cony.

More parents are planning to work into their 60s and beyond, and worry about facing age discrimination. At 57, Brenda Norwood feels young, exercises and meditates. She would like to talk openly about her children, who are 23 and 21, but if someone asks their ages, "I'll be vague and say they're still in school," she says—which was true until recently, when her daughter finished college. Ms. Norwood, an accountant, says she wants to maintain a youthful image in case she has to change jobs in the future.

The problem seems to come up more often for women. "People tend to be more curious about a woman's age than a man's," says Anne Stevens, managing partner of ClearRock Inc., Boston, an executive coaching and outplacement firm.

But some men still face questions. "People will say to me, 'Where do your children go to camp?'" says Steve Cony, 67, whose children are 37 and 40. "And I say, 'I can tell you the last camp they went to,'" without mentioning that it was 30 years ago. If



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people ask what his children are doing, he says "they both got jobs in marketing," as if they'd graduated recently from college, says Mr. Cony, a former ad-agency executive who owns a marketing communications firm in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y. His son Evan, 37, and his daughter Robin, 40, have both advanced to better jobs several times since graduating.

Helaine Fendelman, 73, of New York, shifts the focus when asked the ages of her sons, who are 46 and 43, by saying, "my children are older than I am," and then goes on to explain that she sometimes feels younger than her sons, Barton and Jonathon. Ms. Fendelman, who owns and runs a fine-art and antiques appraisal business, sometimes plans trips so adventurous, such as a monthlong trek to India three years ago with a friend, that they worry about her, she says.

In the workplace, projecting an up-to-date image can eclipse any negative impressions created by having adult children or grandchildren. Making creative suggestions, showing broad knowledge of current events and mentioning how you use modern technology can convey a youthful mind-set, says Andrew J. DuBrin, author of a book on impression management in the workplace and a professor emeritus of management at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York.

Talking about adult children in a positive way can actually be an advantage, Ms. Kaufman says. "Rather than trying to hide your kids' ages, I'd be more interested in what you're learning from them," she says. A parent might signal social-media awareness by saying, "Boy, am I glad I have Millennial children. My daughter and son and I are in conversation every day using WeChat," she says.

Sharing parenting experiences can strengthen bonds with others, says Susan Howington, chief executive officer of Power Connections Inc., Irvine, Calif., an outplacement firm. If another parent is troubled by a rebellious 13-year-old and you once faced and surmounted a similar problem, consider sharing your experience and empathy, she says.

It is never wise to lie about children's ages. But it is fine to avoid the subject in certain contexts, such as job interviews, client meetings or anyplace where age bias could be an issue. Employers who ask applicants about their children's ages in job interviews risk opening themselves to charges of illegal discrimination based on age, sex or family responsibilities.

Hiring managers are drawn to candidates who are honest, but still try to put their best foot forward without deceiving the interviewer, according to Julia Levashina, an associate professor of management at Kent State University in Ohio, who has co-written several studies on the impact of attempts at impression management during job interviews.

One woman in her mid-50s, the director of a nonprofit, started a job search in hopes of moving near her daughter's family, including her one-year-old granddaughter, says Jeannette Woodward, author of "Finding a Job After 50." She was interviewing for a lower-level position, as a department head, and she was worried that the prospective employer might suspect she was failing in her current job, Ms. Woodward says.

In such a case, it is probably best to be open about your life stage and motives. "There's nothing wrong with loving your grandchildren," Ms. Woodward says.

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