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Work & Family Mailbox

Columnist Sue Shellenbarger answers readers' questions

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Q: Telecommuting has brought great benefits for me and others on my team. However, my manager is still struggling with the practice. He gets stuck worrying about whether we start our workdays on time and are getting things done. What to do?

A: Your supervisor isn't alone; numerous books have been written to help people adjust to managing workers from afar. Consider taking the initiative in documenting your progress against agreed-upon objectives. Think about ways to communicate with your boss more effectively about specific measures of your progress and productivity. Also, take note of his other objections. Is he worried about your start and end times? Then "clock in" by email or phone. Does he hate not having face-to-face staff meetings? Then schedule and attend some. Are co-workers back at the office forced to cover tasks you'd do if you were there? Then figure out a fair solution to the imbalance. The key is to understand your boss's goals and concerns and meet them proactively.

Q: I enjoyed your recent column on how at-home moms are finding skilled project work. Can you list some staffing firms that find employers with flexible or project work?

—J.S., Englewood, Colo.

A: I can't recommend particular companies. However, among staffing firms that place experienced men and women in a wide range of fields, here are a few that have come to my attention: Mom Corps (www.momcorps.com) has offices in Atlanta, Chicago, Charlotte, N.C., Raleigh, N.C., Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. Flexible Resources (www.flexibleresources.com) works mostly in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut areas. Flexible Executives (www.flexibleexecutives.com) places executives in 20 states, mostly on the coasts and in major cities. On-Ramps (www.on-ramps.com) places staffers in New York, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Boston and elsewhere. Flexperience Consulting (www.flexperienceconsulting.com) operates mainly on the West Coast. FlexWork Connection (www.flexworkconnection.com) serves southern California clients.

Q: My ex-husband and I share custody of our teenage children; they stay with me during the week and with him on weekends. He lets the kids use his empty house when he's out of town on business; one of them was caught having a party there last year without an adult present. In contrast, if my current husband and I are away for the weekend, the kids aren't allowed to use the house. The kids argue that their dad trusts them and I don't; they say they won't have any more parties and I should give them access to our house too when we're gone. Am I way off base here?

—L.M.

A: I'd recommend holding your ground. Your teens are simply behaving like normal adolescents, pushing boundaries and challenging rules, says Pauline Tesler, a San Francisco family-law attorney and co-author of "Collaborative Divorce." The limits you've set are appropriate; most teens aren't yet skilled at controlling impulsive behavior or strong emotions,

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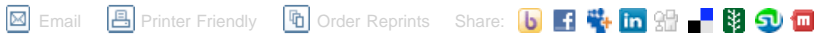
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and peer pressure is intense at this stage, Ms. Tesler says. To be sure, your ex-husband may find it hard to set limits during the week, and your children may sincerely intend to avoid having parties. Nevertheless, an empty house is "a magnet for friends who may want to experiment with alcohol, drugs, sexuality," and peers may decide to have a party regardless of your teens' intentions. In such a case, the adult homeowner could be held liable for any injuries or other harm that occurs, Ms. Tesler says.

Your teens will likely continue to try to "take advantage of anything less than a firm and united parental front," Ms. Tesler says. Consider talking with your ex-husband about achieving more consistent rules in important areas like this, involving safety and security. Ms. Tesler recommends pressing the issue if an agreement can't be reached, perhaps undertaking joint parenting counseling or mediation with a mental-health professional.

- Email sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.

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