

# Mothers Should Stay at Home

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"We can afford to take time out of our forty-year careers to raise our children."

Suzanne Venker is a former middle-school English teacher, a writer, and a full-time mother. In the following viewpoint she argues that mothers should stay home with their children because it is worthwhile to mothers and children. She asserts that women are led to believe the careers are necessary for happiness when in reality the joys of homemaking and childrearing are far more fulfilling. She counters claims that it is not economically feasible for mothers not to work by recommending that women plan for having children and that they take the job seriously.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, how has motherhood changed since the 1950s?
2. In 1999, how much money was made from the sale of self-help books?
3. According to the author, what is one of the results of women not planning ahead for motherhood?

It's a cultural shift that's been long in coming. "For the first time in 25 years, the proportion of working mothers with children under one year old posted a decline, to 55% in 2000 from 59% in 1998," writes [cultural researcher] Sue Shellenbarger. There are several reasons for this turnaround. For one thing, the Generation x'ers have witnessed the Baby Boomers' attempt to have it all and do not want that life for themselves. "Many young women express surprising ambivalence about their working mothers' lives and are attracted to a different goal: to be with their children as they grow and not rely on babysitters, as their mothers did," writes Marie Brenner, author of *Great Dames: What I Learned from Older Women*. Women have also discovered that the workplace isn't all it's cracked up to be. "I think women are beginning to feel betrayed by work. What they see at work, this identity, community, meaning, is not being found" says work historian Benjamin Hunnicutt. Women have to come to realize that it makes no sense to have children if one's intention is to find them another home in which to spend the majority of their waking hours. A former working mother, Margaret Cox observes, "Before I knew I was expecting my third child, I had a kind of epiphany. Although I loved my job and had a great one, I needed to be at home for my boys. I knew I had to make a difference in their lives. I needed to raise them myself." Finally, many women now accept that they do not really "have to work"—despite rampant use of this rationalization—because they recognize that having to do without some things is not the same as being poor.

Thankfully, motherhood no longer means living a life akin to that of the 1950s housewife. Not only have house dresses been replaced with work-out garb, mothers have every convenience they could ask for: dishwashers, disposable diapers, washing machines, microwaves, VCRs, cordless and hands-free phones, computers, and the Internet. The days of traditional homemaking are long gone. Women can now spend the bulk of their time enjoying their children. More important, though, women now accept that the issue of combining work and motherhood has little to do with gender (that is, a woman's "place") and everything to do with practicality and feasibility. They are also discovering,

much to their surprise, that they actually like being with their children. Who would have thought that despite the hard work and sacrifice, small, little beings could bring such pleasure and satisfaction? Appears society has kept such details hidden away.

Simply put, more and more women now recognize the enormous value—indeed, the basic necessity—of a house being a home, rather than a place to sleep and shower. They are content with the vast options women have today and place the most value on one of these: motherhood. To them, it is a profession and a privilege, not a jail sentence. Although their careers are on hold, they are multifaceted women, not beholden to a job for their happiness or self-esteem. They are certain their lives are meant for more than receiving a paycheck and that the moments of childhood come only once in a lifetime. "We want, at the end of our lives, to look back and see that what we have done amounts to more than a pile of pay stubs, that we have loved and been loved." writes [Canadian author] Danielle Crittenden.

## Unhappy in the Workplace

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Unfortunately, many women still haven't made the connection between their choice to have it all and their overall sense of despondency. In 1999, \$500 million dollars worth of self-help books were sold. *Five hundred million dollars*. It seems to me that if what Betty Friedan said [in 1963's bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*] were true—that raising children is a life of "empty, purposeless days" and that self-fulfillment is the only path to a woman's true identity—women would be too busy being happy and fulfilled to scour the self-help section of their local bookstore. "I don't think women as a group are much happier now than they were in the 50s" says psychologist Mary Pipher. Indeed they are not, and the reason for this is that Friedan's solution to the "problem that has no name" was bogus. It is good for women to be recognized for their many capabilities outside of motherhood; but the fact remains that most women do not find happiness by pursuing careers at the expense of motherhood.

Many people to whom women have turned have told them, in no uncertain terms, that it is impossible to have it all. Dr. Phil, known best for his ability to "tell it like it is" tells readers in the September 2001 edition of O magazine, "Life is about tough choices. I have never encountered a successful person who didn't have to sacrifice in one area of her life to be more successful in another. If you put more into your career, kids and family suffer; if you put more into family, career suffers. That's the bottom line." Financial guru Suze Orman tells us that financial freedom can only be achieved by giving up certain things we want. Oprah tells us that it is through giving to others that we grow as human beings: "When you shift your focus from success to service, your work will instantly have more meaning." The Dalai Lama tells us that material possessions mean nothing in the end and that true fulfillment can only be gained through sacrifice. And Gary Zukav explains that one's soul can never be at peace if we are always looking for more. In *Seat of the Soul*, he writes, "If you follow your feelings, you become aware of the different parts of yourself, and the different things they want. You cannot have all of them at once because many of them conflict. The fulfillment of one part of you creates anguish in another, or others, and you are torn." It is this feeling of being torn between career and motherhood that leaves women feeling empty. Women just don't realize that grass always looks greener on the other side—but rarely is.

Career and motherhood are not equal and interchangeable. Many women have failed to find a sense

of purpose in the workforce, but few women fail to find a sense of purpose at home. As Orenstein writes about the women she interviewed for her book, "Questions of career and achievement just didn't drive women the way they once had. The voice of ambition I'd heard in women had modulated from eager to conflicted to disinterested." One woman tells her, "By your mid-forties you're supposed to have attained a certain level professionally, and most of us actually have. But it's just ... so what? What are you going to do? Buy more things? Make more money?" And yet, if you asked another group of women who had spent the same amount of time pursuing full-time motherhood, few—if any—would feel that their children didn't "drive them the way they once had" or that their feelings about motherhood "had modulated from eager to conflicted to disinterested." And that's because there is no comparison between one's children and one's career. Raising children will always be more satisfying and valuable than any other work we do.

In the end, many women have come to learn that the only road to happiness is a sense of place and that this sense of place cannot be found at work. [Songwriter and Internet activist] John Perry Barlow defines happiness this way: "Happiness is not a solitary endeavor; it's a joint enterprise, something that can only be created by the whole. Contentment arises from a sense of family, community, and connectedness. Such virtues are in dwindling supply in America." And the reason they are dwindling is that working motherhood pulls women further and away from this goal. The faster we move and the more we do, the less time we have for family. Moreover, says Barlow, sacrifice has been underrated: "We have come to regard service as a self-suppressing obligation rather than a self-fulfilling responsibility. It doesn't have to be that way."

## Planning for Motherhood

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Unfortunately, many women have yet to accept this fact. Consequently, they do not take the time to consider why they want children in the first place or what the purpose of motherhood is. Not only do they not think about the emotional and financial aspects of motherhood, they do not ask themselves if they are ready for a career change that will require them to make huge sacrifices. Women ignore these issues and go into motherhood blindly, irresponsibly. Part of the reason they can do this is that society doesn't encourage women to plan for motherhood. Women are not expected to curtail their lives to suit the needs of children—so what's to think about? According to modern-day society, motherhood only requires women to make it through pregnancy and childbirth (Have you seen the array of books on this subject?), find a "quality" caregiver, and resume life as normal. As a result, the average woman today [as of 2004] gives very little thought to the realities of motherhood until the day her baby arrives. As [columnist Meghan Cox] Gurdon observes, "I discovered how tricky it can be for thirty-something professionals like me to immerse ourselves in domesticity when our lifelong expectations, and virtually all of our role models, are outside of it."

One of the results of women not planning ahead for motherhood is that they presume their circumstances to be a matter of luck. Women are lucky to be able to conceive. They are lucky if they are able to stay home with their children. They are lucky if they have their mothers nearby. They are lucky if they have the kind of job that allows them to work from home. They are lucky if their husbands pull their weight at home. Amidst all these fortunate circumstances, it's hard to believe that there are any happy full-time mothers. But there are. For what many women don't consider is the fact that some women plan their lives around motherhood, rather than planning motherhood around their lives. Some

women create a life for themselves that is conducive to raising children. "If there's a single, remarkable generational difference between the Boomers and the Gen-xers, it's that more of the younger women are now planning at this stage of their lives," writes [freelance journalist] Susan Brenna.

And so can you.

Planning for motherhood requires women to start thinking about children soon after they graduate from college, the idea being that if they give motherhood at least as much attention as they do their careers—if not more—they can then strike that balance they are so desperately seeking. They can plan to have children and a career—but separately. Or they can plan to incorporate some type of work with motherhood in a way that will not interfere with their obligation to their children. Thinking about children at the age of twenty-two does not mean women need to get married. On the contrary, I think most people should wait to settle down. It does mean that they must begin thinking about their desire to raise children and the need to be out of the workforce for a short time. Maybe not for eighteen years—though this should certainly be an option—but for five or six at least....

## Paradigm Shift

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It's time to shift our paradigm. Women must begin to view motherhood as something they get to do rather than something they have to squeeze into their hectic career lives. Motherhood is a career, not a sideline occupation. As one woman tells [sociologist] Peggy Orenstein, "The kids are now my work. They are my job. And in the same way that I was a perfectionist at work and cared a great deal about the product and about winning and all of those things, that has been translated over to my kids." Furthermore, women have plenty of time to pursue their own interests. Not only do we have time to focus on ourselves before we have children, we have the rest of our lives—after our children are grown—to become self-absorbed again. "Just as the young never really understand, or believe, that there is a long, long time stretching ahead of them in which to do all the things they want, so many young mothers continue to feel that if they don't move on the question of career now, the world will simply pass them by," writes [journalist] Midge Decter. It makes little sense to eschew the power and flexibility that comes from raising children solely because we fear who we might become without our jobs. There is no reason to try to do everything at once. We can afford to take time out of our forty-year careers to raise our children. Yes, putting one's career on the back burner may put some of us at a disadvantage when we enter the workforce again, but not doing so will put us at a disadvantage with our children—and our souls. Motherhood changes who we are. It is a gift, a chance to become a better person. What could be more liberating than that?

Contrary to what the women's movement would have us believe, the traditional family structure is not something that holds women down. The traditional family structure simply keeps women from having to worry about producing an income while they work on the most important job of their lives. And most husbands—even if they keep it to themselves—want to support them. One of the main reasons my generation has not been successful with marriage and family is that we do not view the family as a permanent unit, with two people working toward the same goal. Today's women are taught to be responsible for themselves, first and foremost, so that in case their marriages dissolve, they will have well-paying jobs. But this philosophy has failed....

It is abundantly clear that the philosophy of the last several decade—this Everyone for Himself philosophy—has failed. As the current [divorce](#) rate shows, there is no longer any incentive to settle down. This is why it is imperative that we re-evaluate the purpose of the traditional family, with one parent at home and one parent in the workforce. Until we do, Americans will never again be successful in raising strong families. It seems to me that the secret to making sense of career and motherhood is to see beyond the here and now, beyond our immediate wants and desires. If I had given up and gone back to work when my daughter was in her first year of life, merely because the transition was so jarring and her crying incessant, I would never have known the joy and sense of fulfillment I know now. It is because I stuck it out, waited patiently (a trait I needed to learn anyway), and worked hard every day to develop a relationship with my daughter that we share a strong bond. Does this mean she will always be the perfect child or that I will never struggle as a parent simply because I stayed home with her? Of course not. But it does mean that she knows I will be here for her tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. It means that she can count on me, not to be a perfect mother, but a stable force in her life. Most important, it means that she knows I consider her worth my time and attention.

And this will mark her soul for a lifetime.

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## Further Readings

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