

Why I refuse to feel guilty for sending my kids to childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"Childcare is child abuse." That's what I was told from an early age. My mother took great pride in the fact she did not "dump" her children at childcare.

Variations of "I don't know why women [it was always women] have children if they don't want to look after them" were tutted countless times by relatives, some of my classmates at school and university, and later by colleagues in the workplace.

When people told me their children loved childcare, I didn't believe them. "You can justify anything to yourself," I would silently scoff.

So when I became pregnant, I fully intended to be a full-time, stay-at-home mother. Not yet able to disentangle my sexist and conservative gut from my feminist head, I measured my worth by how much of myself I could sacrifice to motherhood.

I became just a mother in every way possible. And I hated it. And then I hated myself for hating it.

Why couldn't I be like other women whom I assumed could find fulfilment in spending all day cleaning up bodily fluids? Why did I have to care so much about intellectual stimulation, social interaction, professional identity, financial independence and social status?

I didn't deserve to have children was the only conclusion I could come up with.

When my daughter was 2½ and I was a weeping shell of my former self, with the occasional suicidal thought, a childcare centre rang to offer me a place. I almost didn't return their call.

Five years later, I can say with absolute certainty that returning that call was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

And not just for me, but for my daughters too.

Not only because I was able to rebuild my identity, my career and my mental health. And not because my daughter gained in me a role model who did not always put her own wellbeing last. It was because my daughter thrived.

My daughter started childcare for my benefit, I thought. But she turned out to be the greatest beneficiary of all.

Don't get me wrong, there were tears initially. There was gut-wrenching sobbing. (My daughter cried a little bit too when I dropped her off.)

The guilt for leaving her was almost unbearable. I agonised about attachment and trust, abandonment issues, the impact the increased cortisol would have on her hippocampus, and what my own mother would think.

But now as I watch my enthusiastic, curious and independent seven-year-old joyfully skip into school, I realise I was looking at the early drop-off tears the wrong way.

Leaving her at childcare was not deprivation, it was a gift. I was giving her the opportunity to develop independence and self-mastery. And that is exactly what she did.

Aside from the endless patience of the staff for messy sensory play with mud and sand that I didn't want in my house, the repetitive imagination games that used to bore me to tears, and the creative, cultural and physical activities that I couldn't provide myself, my daughter learnt skills such as sharing, waiting, standing up for herself, and resilience.

Once she settled in, I'd have to drag her out of there at the end of the day. Initially she was going twice week, but within a couple of months she was asking to go three times. By the end of the year, she would have gone every day if I'd let her.

And now my younger daughter is having the same wonderful experiences at childcare and blooming with self-reliance.

To be clear, this is not a stay-at-home vs childcare argument. I have no wish to contribute to the faux mummy wars. And I am well aware how fortunate I am to be able to choose between childcare and staying home myself.

But for my family, childcare was, and continues to be, a wonderful and enriching experience for all of us. My only regret is all the time I

wasted needlessly feeling guilty about it.

-reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald

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