

Day care makes the world more tender ^[1]

There is an exquisite vulnerability to dropping off your child at day care when they're very young, and sharing that experience with people you barely know erodes our boundaries and brings us closer together.

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EXCERPTS

I live in Quebec, the only jurisdiction in North America with a universal day care program and a robust paid parental leave policy. I have two kids. I took a yearlong maternity leave after I had each of them, during which I was paid 75% of the salary that I had been earning working in men's lifestyle media. When day care started, I paid \$11 a day for each kid, which amounted to \$250 to \$300 a month for full-time care. This was about five years ago, but the fees haven't changed. They range between \$8.50 and \$20 a day per kid, a sliding scale based on parents' incomes.

A common argument — which is less of an argument than a jumble of conventional wisdom and personal biases — is that when we send our children into the arms of strangers at a young age, our society becomes less tender, less loving. But I didn't love children before I had my own, and even after I became a mom, I wasn't inclined to take an interest in anyone else's kids. It wasn't until I started taking my older son, Jesse, to day care that I began to love children in general. I came to love other people's kids at the day care, and other people came to love mine.

Silence the voice inside your head that has internalized the patriarchal belief that children are best loved at home, exclusively by their mothers.

There is an exquisite vulnerability to dropping off your child at day care when they're very young, and sharing that experience with people you barely know erodes our boundaries and brings us closer together. After being exposed to years of bullshit wellness talk on social media and everywhere else, this kind of language can sound corny and meaningless, but I'm talking about a very concrete experience that changed my life. Strangers share vividly alive space with you when you're soothing your fussy toddlers side by side. I endured some of my softest, most exposed moments as an adult, standing in sock-feet in the day care entryway, hopeless at my own humanity. How could I argue that experiencing this in public makes for a less tender world?

American families, you need this. There will never be more political will than there is now, in the wreckage of this pandemic. It will be hard to make a case for a universal day care program on the grounds that it makes the world more tender. You'll have to convince your governments that it makes financial sense. But first you'll have to convince yourselves. You will need to silence the voice inside your head that has internalized the patriarchal belief that children are best loved at home, exclusively by their mothers.

Because in America today, there are only two types of mothers of young children: mothers in crisis and mothers experiencing neoliberal Stockholm syndrome.

The crisis is being well-documented in the media; I doubt that I need to remind you of the ways that women have taken on the burden of caring for a homebound nation of children while working from home. The Stockholm syndrome precedes the pandemic, though. It's what compels women to announce (on social media or to each other or silently, through their votes) that they believe women shouldn't have children unless they're prepared to care for them at home until they're 5. It's what animates their belief that women who are struggling to balance child care and a full-time job must have made the mistake of marrying a man who doesn't pull his weight around the house. This is Stockholm syndrome because without necessarily realizing it, these women have come to sympathize with the systems that control and oppress people like them.

Neoliberal motherhood is the belief that it's best for everyone if a nuclear family relies solely on itself. It's the belief that day care centers keep young children from "thriving" the way a mother's love — or a very specific kind of caregiver — might. It's the spirit behind a letterboard that an influencer I follow held up, beside her red-lipped rictus grin, that read, "As a mom, I know how hard it can be to care for my kids. Which is why I struggle to trust anyone else with them."

As a mom, I call bullshit on the belief that our kids are so special that only we can be trusted to care for them. For many American women, adopting this attitude is a matter of making lemonade from lemons to the extent that you begin to lose sight of other possible realities — Stockholm syndrome. If there are no quality affordable child care options, maybe it's easier to narrate a version of the story where you're a resilient hero rather than someone whose dreams of having a family and a career are simply not economically compatible. Who wants to

dwell on that? It doesn't make for a nurturing vibe around the kids.

For one year, my kids overlapped at day care. I was a full-time graduate student and money was tight. But I, a mother of two children under 5, finished my master's degree on schedule and engineered a career change for myself. It wasn't because of my unstoppable hustle, my grit, my discipline, or my Mama Cheetah Energy. It was because I had cheap, reliable, high-quality child care. I owe everything to that day care center.

The overwhelming corporeality of dealing with toddlers alongside other parents creates an intimacy that I may never know again. Granted, inequities plague the Quebec centre de la petite enfance (CPE) system as they do in other places; low-income areas are underserved by the system and families of color are disproportionately affected by these inequities. It's hard to get a spot. But a system is in place, and it can be improved. Party politics often use the CPE budget as a political football. But since the program started in 1992, the income taxes generated from an increase in (primarily women's) labor participation have enabled it to pay for itself.

I asked parents on the largest Montreal parent listserv I'm a member of to share their opinions about Quebec's CPE system, run by a highly regulated centralized body and staffed by unionized educators. Everyone who had their own day care experiences responded with overwhelming gratitude for the system.

Gabrielle, a Montreal-area mom, wrote that she likes how well-trained the educators are. "My daughter is part of this small community and so am I. I've grown quite attached to the staff and I'll remember them all my life as the first people who welcomed my child into the world outside of our family cocoon."

A parent who chose to remain anonymous wrote that, as a foster parent of an Indigenous kid, he was grateful to have access to an Aboriginal Head Start program staffed by Indigenous educators who teach kids songs and words in the Mohawk language.

Arielle Aaronson, an American expat in Quebec, wrote, "I deeply believe the system is working here in Quebec. Universal child care has allowed women to retain careers that might have been derailed by the arrival of children and increases their financial independence. It doesn't impose day care on any mother, but offers the possibility for families to envision a weekday life that doesn't revolve around their children."

For seven years, my weekday life started in the day care coatroom, where the parents would crouch down on tiny benches and wrestle their toddlers free of their winter wear, within inches of other families they often barely knew. The overwhelming corporeality of dealing with toddlers alongside other parents creates an intimacy that I may never know again. The little boots and shoes, the little mittens and barrettes and meltdowns and parents struggling to keep their composure; the humanity could barely be contained within that tiny little space.

The great thing about the motherly resource of tenderness is that it's inexhaustible when conditions are right. A few times, I had to come in early to pick up my kid for an appointment or because we were leaving town for the weekend and wanted to beat the traffic. I would be let into the dim space, the floors covered with the sleeping bodies of children splayed out on their little blue plastic mats, draped with purple fleece coverlets. I wanted to lie down and join them.

Choosing to stay at home or leave the house to work should not be a zero-sum game. We should be able to do either. Without affordable child care, most parents are not free to make this choice. The great thing about the motherly resource of tenderness is that it's inexhaustible when conditions are right. If a mom wishes to stay home with her kids, no government on earth will stand in her way. That love is hers to give.

For the rest of us, please allow me, someone who lives in a place with a day care on every second block, to reassure you: When everyone sends their kids to day care, and when that day care is affordable, tenderness absolutely abounds in the community.

I met families that I will know forever — there's a group of kids that I am watching grow up, that I will always remember as day care kids. Even families I never got to know will always be special to me — when I see them on the street we smile at each other through our masks and nod with approval at our growing kids. On the blessed occasions when I happen to cross paths with one of my kids' day care teachers, it's a bit like having a close encounter with a divine being. I hope they know how much we love them.

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