

An anti-childcare movement is spreading online – it's both disturbing and regressive ^[1]

Ignore the trad wife influencers – wanting or needing space from your child is not just normal, but healthy for both of you

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Excerpt

Collecting my son from nursery is my favourite part of the day. He's usually in the garden, and there's a moment just before I say his name when I like to watch him, unnoticed. Then he'll hear my voice and will turn and run into my arms, smiling. Motherhood has taught me to appreciate the privilege of being loved this much, and of loving so much.

Most of us know from experience that relationships – whomever they are with – benefit from some air being let into them. Kahlil Gibran's poem *On Marriage* includes a line my mother often quotes: "Let there be spaces in your togetherness." Yet wanting, or needing, space from your child – to work, to rest, to create, to exercise, to recharge, to see people, to vacuum up all the cat hair in your flat – is being increasingly condemned in online discourse.

If you're a parent who uses social media, you have probably come across some of it. I have written before about the pressure on modern parents to parent more intensively than ever before, and the conflicted feelings that needing childcare can create in us. Yet it's only recently that I've noticed a trend that is far darker than the pressure and guilt that many parents, mothers especially, grapple with. It is an ideological anti-childcare movement that is beginning to proliferate online.

A recent, much-discussed *Times* interview with Hannah Neeleman, the "trad wife" influencer known as *Ballerina Farm* and a mother of eight, who gave up a promising career as a dancer to live a "traditional lifestyle" in rural Utah, told how her husband would not allow nannies in the house. This despite Neeleman becoming so ill from exhaustion sometimes that "she can't get out of bed for a week" (just one of the many disturbing details in the article).

Trad wife influencer accounts such as Neeleman's have helped normalise a version of motherhood where a woman's sole purpose is to nourish her sourdough starter and serve her family. But anti-childcare dogma can be found in other places, too.

Cod psychology clips from supposedly progressive accounts about the danger of placing children in the care of others are becoming commonplace in new parents' social media feeds. Rooted in warped attachment theory concepts, these videos often use clips from reputable psychologists, but remove them from their original context to spread outlandish claims.

In one video, I watched a woman explain that putting your child in nursery will lead to personality disorders in later life. Others show children crying at drop-off and pickup (needless to say, posting any video of a child in vulnerable moments like this is a gross invasion of their privacy), with captions berating parents for not being there 24/7.

Many of these accounts claim to be hubs for "conscious parenting", yet bear little resemblance to Dr Shefali Tsabary's parenting philosophy, which advocates parental self-awareness and emotional self-regulation. Rather, they worship a "traditional" model of parenting that is replete with contradictions – discouraging the use of childcare and promoting the importance of home schooling, while in the same breath worshipping prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies, despite evidence that children in these settings were cared for by a range of adults both related to them and not.

That's just one of the many inherent contradictions of the anti-childcare movement, which is predicated on the belief that a child is always best off in the care of his or her mother (never father), and that other adults have little to offer.

This line of thinking devalues the mother, whose own wishes and ambitions and desires independent of her children must, by necessity, be sublimated. It devalues the father, whose role is limited to that of authority figure and breadwinner or, at the very most, playmate. And it devalues childcare professionals, whose experience, expertise, love and care can contribute so much to children's lives.

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Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: gender roles ^[4]

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