

Coming to grips with frustrations of motherhood [US] ^[1]

Review of Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety

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Source: Seattle Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Mar 2005

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

When Judith Warner returned to Washington, D.C., after several years of living in France, she felt she was a pretty good mother to her two young daughters.

A few months back in the United States cured her of that. Suddenly, she was caught up in the modern American mommy rat race and wondering why what had been so easy in France was so hard back at home.

Friends and acquaintances all seemed fellow sufferers, despite outward appearances. "They had comfortable homes, two or three children, smiling, productive husbands, and a society around them saying they'd made the best possible choices for their lives," she writes, "yet many of them seemed miserable."

Taking a page from author Betty Friedan, Warner calls this situation "the Mommy Mystique."

Warner believes the causes are many. Our culture's expectation of mothers has always seesawed between warning them to back off from their children (lest they foster wimps) and exhorting them to regard raising children as their life's work. We're currently in the clutches of the latter ideology, she says, thanks in large part to the prevalence of "attachment parenting" philosophies that lead mothers to believe they must respond instantly to a baby's every need or else doom him to suffer "abandonment issues" for the rest of his life. We've also bought too much into the therapy culture, Warner says, by intensely parenting our children as a way of curing ourselves of our own childhood wounds.

But the biggest culprit in the total-immersion mothering trap, Warner says, is the rise of a winner-take-all society that inordinately rewards the wealthy while throwing scraps to the rest of us. Today's middle-class parents live anxious lives, worried about job security, the affordability of health care and housing in good school districts, the prospect of paying for their kids' college educations and their own retirement. With families under such financial stress and little help from the government, it's no wonder mothers are overfocused on their children's success. After all, in a winner-take-all society, there's no place for the average kid who will become the average grown-up.

In other words, the mania for privatization that drove the Reagan '80s and continues today has finally trickled down to motherhood. Now, all problems you may have balancing work and family are yours alone. If you choose to work, it's up to you to find quality day care. If you choose to stay home, it's up to you to find a way to afford preschool or a morning out for yourself.

We've come to believe that this way of life is "necessary and natural," Warner writes. But it wasn't always thus: "Things used to be different in America," she says. "There used to be structures in place that gave families a certain base level of comfort and security. Things like dependable public education. Affordable housing. Job security. Reliable retirement benefits."

The only way out, Warner says, is for mothers to rejoin the political scene and to call for a new "politics of quality of life" that would create institutions to help us care for our children so that we don't have to do it all on our own.

It wouldn't be cheap; Warner estimates mimicking the French plan for child care and paid leave would increase government spending by \$85 billion per year.

Ann Crittenden's "The Price of Motherhood" showed how mothers become poor in old age. With "Perfect Madness," Warner convincingly shows the psychological damages. What more do we need to learn before things change?

- reprinted from the Seattle Times

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