

Ditch the guilt, working moms: The kids are all right ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A girlfriend who is the proud mother of a bouncing baby boy recently went back to work. Despite having a full year of maternity leave at her disposal, she opted to return a couple of months early. When I asked her the reason, I was surprised to find out that finances had nothing to do with it.

"I love him to death," she said of her son, "but being at home with him all day was starting to drive me bonkers."

The baby in question is a gorgeous, happy, healthy boy - with a small catch. At the time, he had not yet learned to crawl. Neither was he content to sit idly in one of those hideous plastic bouncy things, playing with a row of terry toys and butterfly mirrors. Strangely, the standard-issue "circle of neglect" was boring to this baby. Instead, he wanted to be ushered around the world all day by the hand: Nothing less than a 12-hour, tottering-adult-guided tour would do. It was giving my girlfriend a back problem - and a brain ache. She wasn't happy. So she signed him up for a good daycare, bought a new suit and headed back to the office.

Within a week, she felt like a whole new person. And guess what else? The baby learned to crawl.

"Obviously we both needed to be in the company of trained professionals," she laughed.

It was a joke, but she was absolutely right.

Taking care of a babies is relentless, exhausting, often tedious work that, as a plethora of recent studies has shown, leaves most caregiving parents far less blissfully fulfilled than they might have hoped. Yet most mothers do it - or are expected to do it - for as long as they can reasonably afford to because we believe it's better for our babies to be with us all day than with a paid caregiver.

Except that's not true. According to a recent landmark study, there is almost no evidence that having a working mother in infancy adversely affects a baby's long-term mental development or behaviour.

The study, conducted by the Institute of Education in London, looked at the lives of about 17,000 British parents and their children, born mainly in the 1990s. In the end, it found that other factors, such as emotional stability and quality of home life, were much more important in determining early childhood development.

Well, duh, you might say. As anyone who has ever known a family with a working mom can tell you, the kids are all right.

This glaringly obvious fact, however, has never dispelled the insidious myth that children are better off if in the long run if their mother gives up her career to raise them. The study's authors acknowledge that their findings run against overwhelming public opinion to the contrary. Part of the myth's pervasiveness is self-justifying, of course. Mothers who relinquish their earning power and career status to provide the unpaid labour of raising babies are loath to admit that their sacrifice was made in vain. And who can blame them?

But according to the study's co-author, Professor Heather Joshi, incremental changes in society, such as increased corporate flexibility and paternity benefits, has over time evened out the playing field for children of working mothers.

The real question is: Is staying home with babies generally good for the mental development and behaviour of most new mothers?

My take, based on the overwhelming anecdotal evidence of my peers, 80 per cent of whom are in the throes of early parenthood, is: absolutely not.

Not only is work intellectually sustaining and financially remunerative for new mothers, but it sets a good example in an era when single-income households are simply not realistic for most of the married middle class (i.e., if your daughter decides to have children, chances are she's going to have to work, too).

"I love my kids, but I just need more," another working mother of two young children recently put it.

The major criticism I hear levelled against working mothers is that they spoil their children out of guilt. Women who do nothing but parent may be more attentive, sure. Less able to make small talk at a cocktail parties, absolutely. But better mothers? That's very much up in the air.

Among other things, intense stay-at-home mothering isn't the way human relationships work. Parenting involves a lot of chores, but ultimately it's a relationship that, like all relationships, requires delicacy and balance. Even the new mothers who I do know are quitting their full-time jobs these days are doing so in order to pursue more flexible career options. Few if any would consider devoting themselves completely to child care. This is because most women know instinctively what this study and others suggest: that parenting 24/7 won't make you a better mother any more than quitting your job to take care of your spouse will make you a better wife.

Sure, your three-year-old would prefer it if you sat on the floor playing Lego with him all day, but he'd also prefer to eat nothing but Froot Loops. That's the thing about three-year-olds: They don't actually know what's good for them. And they certainly don't know what's good for you.

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