

# Lose the guilt, working moms. The kids are all right <sup>[1]</sup>

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EXCERPTS

There are any number of questions a working mother might ask herself during the course of a typical harried day: Am I going to make this deadline? Have I forgotten an important appointment? Am I, in fact, wearing matching shoes?

The deeper issues of existential dread usually live at the back of the brain, ready to spring to life at 3 a.m.: Have I made the right choices? Am I doing enough for my children? If I love my job, does it subtract from my love for my family? Are we all going to hell in a big, Costco-sized handcart?

These are still the issues that plague modern women, no matter how often we tell ourselves that they are archaic and silly and that the Mommy Wars are heading toward détente. Many of us still fret that we cannot be all things to all people, that the pie of "me" will not stretch to nourish bosses, children, husbands, family, friends. (Men, I know you sometimes feel this way, too, but for whatever reason, the culture has decided that career ambivalence is a female issue.)

Well, here's a remedy for a restful night: A new study adds to the mounting evidence, as The New York Times recently put it, "that having a working mother has some economic, educational and social benefits for children of both sexes."

The research, which comes from Harvard University's new Gender Initiative project, suggests that both male and female children benefit from having mothers who work outside the home. Adult boys of working mothers are more likely to pull their weight when it comes to the monumental bore of domestic chores, and for adult women, the advantage is even more clear-cut: They are more likely to hold supervisory positions, and to earn higher incomes.

The data was drawn from surveys by almost 35,000 respondents in 24 countries (but not Canada) over two time periods, in 2002 and 2012. Any woman who had worked outside the home for any period of time with a child under 14 was qualified as a "working mother."

"What daughters of working mothers see is that it is okay to go to work, it's completely normal .... And it's okay not to spend all your time cleaning the house," professor Kathleen McGinn of the Harvard Business School, one of the study's authors, said in a video on the university's website. "Sons see something really different and that is everybody has to pitch in here."

In short, she said, "being raised by a working mom leads to much more egalitarian gender attitudes for adults."

I hope this will be welcome news to the 67 per cent of Canadian women with children under the age of six who are in the work force (that number rises to 84 per cent for women with children between six and 15.) It is one less thing to worry about and now we can start fretting about not having signed them up for summer camp.

The picture is not all rosy, by any means. Even if we can comfort ourselves with raising a future generation of enlightened sons and daughters, it is the problems of here and now that cause palpitations. Child-care costs across the country are crippling, and the holy grail of a national child-care program is as elusive as it was when it was first suggested decades ago. Without safe and affordable care, there are parents who will be forced to remain outside the work force (women's lack of participation costs billions of dollars to global economies).

For women to work outside the home, and to have their children looked after by someone who is not a member of the Addams family, they need to have stable, well-paying jobs that provide benefits. And with the rise of the so-called "precarious economy," these jobs are becoming as elusive as high-quality child care.

Women make up the majority of workers in the minimum-wage and part-time fields. If you're a mother, particularly a single mother, working in one of these jobs, you don't have the luxury of feeling guilt over missed birthday parties or school concerts. You're more likely to be worrying about whether you can afford to take a day off with a sick child, or whether you can find a babysitter during your night shift (the perilousness of these women's lives is laid out in stark detail in Caroline Fredrickson's new book *Under the Bus: How Working Women Are Being Run Over*.)

The answer may be to stop feeling guilt and start feeling anger over a system that doesn't change.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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