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The Myth of the Perfect Mother

Why It Drives Real Women Crazy By Judith Warner

Moms Shouldn't Be Martyrs By Anna Quindlen



What happened when the Girls Who Had It All became mothers? A new book explores why this generation feels so insane.

BY JUDITH WARNER

BACK IN THE DAYS WHEN I WAS a Good Mommy, I tried to do everything right. I breast-fed and co-slept, and responded to each and every cry with anxious alacrity. I awoke with my daughter at 6:30 AM and, eschewing TV, curled up on the couch with a stack of books that I could recite in my sleep. I did this, in fact, many times, jerking myself back awake as the clock rounded 6:45 and the words of Curious George started to merge with my dreams.

Was I crazy? No—I was a committed mother, eager to do right by my child and well-versed in the child care teachings of the day. I was proud of the fact that I could get in three full hours of high-intensity parenting before I left for work; prouder still that, when I came home in the evening, I could count on at least three more similarly intense hours to follow. It didn't matter that, in my day job as a stringer for this magazine, I was often falling asleep at my desk. Nor that I'd lost the ability to write a coherent sentence. My brain might

'I FEEL SO BLESSED'

Marisa Maez Brigman, 29, a TV anchor in Albuquerque, N.M., took a year off to stay home but says it made her miserable. 'I loved being a mom but something was missing.' Now, she gets up for work at 2 a.m. and comes home just as Delaney, 3 (at right), is waking.



MOMMY



MADNESS

have been fried, but my baby's was thriving. I'd seen the proof of that everywhere—in the newsweeklies and the *New York Times*, on TV, even in the official statements that issued forth from the White House, where First Lady Hillary Clinton herself had endorsed "singing, playing games, reading, storytelling, just talking and listening" as the best ways to enhance a child's development.

All around me, the expert advice on baby care, whether it came from the *What to Expect* books or the legions of "specialists" hawking videos, computer software, smart baby toys or audiotapes to advance brain development, was unanimous: *Read! Talk! Sing!* And so I talked and I read and I sang and made up stories and did funny voices and narrated car rides ... until one day, when my daughter was about four, I realized that I had turned into a human television set, so filled with 24-hour children's programming that I had no thoughts left of my own.

And when I started listening to the sounds of the Mommy chatter all around me in the playgrounds and playgroups of Washington, D.C.—the shouts of "Good job!," the interventions and facilitations ("What that lady is saying is, she would really prefer you not empty your bucket of sand over her little boy's head. Is that okay with you, honey?")—I realized that I was hardly alone.

Once my daughters began school, I was surrounded, it seemed, by women who had surrendered their better selves—and their sanity—to motherhood. Women who pulled all-nighters hand-painting paper plates for a class party. Who obsessed over the most minute details of playground politics. Who—like myself—appeared to be sleep-walking through life in a state of quiet panic.

Some of the mothers appeared to have lost nearly all sense of themselves as adult women. They dressed in kids' clothes—overall shorts and go-anywhere sandals. They ate kids' foods. They were so depleted by the affection and care they lavished upon their small children that they had no energy left, not just for sex, but for feeling like a sexual being. "That part of my life is completely dead," a working mother of two told me. "I don't even miss it. It feels like it belongs to another life. Like I was another person."

It all reminded me a lot of Betty Friedan's 1963 classic, *The Feminine Mystique*. The diffuse dissatisfaction. The angst, hidden behind all the obsession with trivia, and the push to be perfect. The way so many women constantly looked over their shoulders to make sure that no one was outdoing them in the performance of good Mommyhood. And the tendency—every bit as pronounced among my peers as it had been for the women Friedan interviewed—to blame themselves for their problems. There was something new, too: the tendency many women had to feel threatened by other women and to judge them harshly—nowhere more evident than on Urbanbaby and other, similarly "supportive" web sites. Can I take my 17-month-old to the Winnie the Pooh movie?, one mom queried recently. "WAY tooooo young," came one response.

I read that 70 percent of American moms say they find motherhood today "incredibly stressful." Thirty percent of mothers of young children reportedly suffer from depression. Nine hundred and nine women in Texas recently told researchers they find taking care of their kids about as much

fun as cleaning their house, slightly less pleasurable than cooking, and a whole lot less enjoyable than watching TV.

And I wondered: Why do so many otherwise competent and self-aware women lose themselves when they become mothers? Why do so many of us feel so out of control? And—the biggest question of all—why has this generation of mothers, arguably the most liberated and privileged group of women America has ever seen, driven themselves crazy in the quest for perfect mommy-dom?

I STARTED SPEAKING WITH WOMEN FROM ALL OVER THE country, about 150 in all. And I found that the craziness I saw in my own city was nothing less than a nationwide epidemic. Women from Idaho to Oklahoma City to the suburbs of Boston—in middle and upper middle class enclaves where there was time and money to spend—told me of lives spent shuttling back and forth to more and more absurd-seeming, high-pressured, time-demanding, utterly exhausting kids' activities. I heard of whole towns turning out for a spot in the *right* ballet class; of communities where the competition for the *best* camps, the *best* coaches and the *best* piano teachers rivaled that for admission to the best private schools and colleges. Women told me of their exhaustion and depression, and of their frustrations with the "uselessness" of their husbands. They said they wished their lives could change. But they had no idea of how to make that happen. I began to record their impressions and reflections, and wove them into a book, which I named, in honor of the sentiment that seemed to animate so many of us, *Perfect Madness*.

I think of "us" as the first post-baby boom generation, girls born between 1958 and the early 1970s, who came of age politically in the Carter, Reagan and Bush I years. We are, in many ways, a blessed group. Most of the major battles of the women's movement were fought—and won—in our early childhood. Unlike the baby boomers before us, who protested and marched and shouted their way from college into adulthood, we were a strikingly apolitical group, way more caught up in our own self-perfection as we came of age, than in working to create a more perfect world. Good daughters of the Reagan Revolution, we disdained social activism and cultivated our own gardens with a kind of muscle-bound, tightly wound, uber-achieving, all-encompassing, never-failing self-control that passed, in the 1980s, for female empowerment.

We saw ourselves as winners. We'd been bred, from the earliest age, for competition. Our schools had given us co-ed gym and wood-working shop, and had told us never to let the boys drown out our voices in class. Often enough, we'd done better than they had in school. Even in science and math. And our passage into adulthood was marked by growing numbers of women in the professions. We believed that we could climb as high as we wanted to go, and would grow into the adults we dreamed we could be. Other outcomes—like

the chance that children wouldn't quite fit into this picture—never even entered our minds.

Why should they have? Back then, when our sense of our potential as women was being formed, there was a general feeling of optimism. Even the most traditional women's magazines throughout the 1980s taught that the future for up-and-coming mothers was bright: The new generation of fathers *would* help. Good babysit-

“About once a year I just end up in tears, telling my husband, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’ He says ‘I want to help,’ but he doesn’t know how.”

—MARISA MAEZ BRIGMAN

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'I DON'T GET MUCH SLEEP'

In order to keep baby Sasha on schedule, Brigman pumps and bottles breast milk before heading to work at 3:30 a.m., entrusting a nanny with the 6 a.m. feeding. (Her husband, pro golfer D. J. Brigman, spends about 30 weeks of each year on the road.) At work, Brigman kicks back with co-host Mike Garofalo, then converts to mommy mode the second she arrives home—changing and feeding Sasha, bathing and dressing Delaney—without taking time to change her own clothes. Although she loves her career, which she describes as 'the one thing I have for myself,' the long hours and lack of sleep take a toll.



ting *could* be found. Work and motherhood *could* be balanced. It was all a question of intelligent "juggling." And of not falling prey to the trap of self-sacrifice and perfectionism that had driven so many mothers crazy in the past.

But something happened then, as the 1990s advanced, and the Girls Who Could Have Done Anything grew up into women who found, as the millennium turned, that they couldn't quite ... get it together, or get beyond the *stuck* feeling that had somehow lodged in their minds.

LIFE HAPPENED. WE BECAME MOTHERS. AND found, when we set out to "balance" our lives—and in particular to balance some semblance of the girls and women we had been against the mothers we'd become—that there was no way to make this most basic of "balancing acts" work. Life was hard. It was stressful. It was expensive. Jobs—and children—were demanding. And the ambitious form of motherhood most of us wanted to practice was utterly incompatible with any kind of outside work, or friendship, or life, generally.

One woman I interviewed was literally struck dumb as she tried to articulate the quandary she was in. She wasn't a woman who normally lacked for words. She was a newspaper editor, with a husband whose steady income allowed her many choices. In the hope of finding "balance," she'd chosen to work part-time and

at night in order to spend as much time as possible with her nine-year-old daughter. But somehow, nothing had worked out as planned. Working nights meant that she was tired all the time, and cranky, and stressed. And forever annoyed with her husband. And now her daughter was after her to get a day job. It seemed that having Mom around most of the time wasn't all it was cracked up to be, particularly if Mom was forever on the edge.

The woman waved her hands in circles, helplessly. "What I'm trying to figure out—" she paused. "What I'm trying to remember ... Is how I ended up raising this princess ... How I got into ... How to get out of ... this, this, this, *this mess*."

Most of us in this generation grew up believing that we had fantastic, unlimited, freedom of choice. Yet as mothers many women face "choices" on the order of: You can continue to pursue your professional dreams at the cost of abandoning your children to long hours of inadequate child care. Or: You can stay at home with your baby and live in a state of virtual, crazy-making isolation because you can't afford a nanny, because there is no such thing as part-time day care, and because your husband doesn't come home until 8:30 at night.

These are choices that don't feel like choices at all. They are



Friday, Feb. 18, at noon, ET: Judith Warner hosts a Live Talk on her book "Perfect Madness" at Newsweek.com on MSNBC. Submit questions any time. Transcripts are live for two weeks.

Family

the harsh realities of family life in a culture that has no structures in place to allow women—and men—to balance work and child-rearing. But most women in our generation don't think to look beyond themselves at the constraints that keep them from being able to make *real* choices as mothers. It almost never occurs to them that they can use the muscle of their superb education or their collective voice to change or rearrange their social support system. They simply don't have the political reflex—or the vocabulary—to think of things in this way.

They've been bred to be independent and self-sufficient. To rely on their own initiative and "personal responsibility." To *privatize* their problems. And so, they don't get fired up about our country's lack of affordable, top-quality child care. (In many parts of the country, decent child care costs more than state college tuition, and the quality of the care that most families can afford is abysmal.) Nor about the fact that middle class life is now so damn expensive that in most families both parents must work gruelingly long hours just to make ends meet. (With fathers averaging 51 hours per week and mothers clocking in at an average of 41, the U.S. workweek is now the longest in the world.) Nor about the fact that in many districts the public schools are so bad that you *can't*, if you want your child to be reasonably well-educated, sit back and simply let the teachers do their jobs, and must instead supplement the school day with a panoply of expensive and inconvenient "activities" so that your kid will have some exposure to music, art and sports.

Instead of blaming society, moms today tend to blame themselves. They say they've chosen poorly. And so they take on the Herculean task of being absolutely everything to their children, simply because *no one else is doing anything at all to help them*. Because if they don't perform magical acts of perfect Mommy ministrations, their kids might fall through the cracks and end up as losers in our hard-driving winner-take-all society.

This has to change.

WE NOW HAVE A SITUATION WHERE well-off women can choose how to live their lives—either outsourcing child care at a sufficiently high level of quality to permit them to work with relative peace of mind or staying at home. But no one else, really, has anything. Many, many women would like to stay home with their children and can't afford to do so. Many, many others would like to be able to work part-time but can't afford or find the way to do so. Many others would like to be able to maintain their full-time careers without either being devoured by their jobs or losing ground, and they can't do that. And there is no hope at all for any of these women on the horizon.

Some of us may feel empowered by the challenge of taking it all on, being the best, as Téa Leoni's "Spanglish" character did on her uphill morning run, but really, this perfectionism is not empowerment. It's more like what some psychologists call "learned helplessness"—an instinctive giving-up in the face of difficulty that people do when they think they have no real power. At base, it's a kind of despair. A lack of faith that change can come to the outside world. A lack of belief in our political culture or our institutions.

It *really* needs to change.

For while many women can and do manage to accept (or at least adjust to) this situation for themselves, there's a twinge of real sadness that comes out when they talk about their daughters. As a forty-something mother living and working part-time in Washington, D.C. (and spending a disproportionate amount of her time managing the details of her daughter's—and her husband's—life),

'SOMETIMES I FEEL GUILTY'

Despite being a devoted wife, mother and part-time physician's assistant, Rachel Byrne, 33, of Denver, says she's overwhelmed by the number of roles she has to fill. There just isn't time. You can only do things so-so.

Another frustration: her husband's expectations. 'He wants the traditional dinner on the table. That doesn't really work.' Byrne (right), a graduate of Dartmouth, attends a singalong at her daughter Danielle's school. She prepares dinner (below, right) while holding Nathan, 17 months, and rides in the back seat as her husband drives the family to lunch.

Byrne says motherhood isn't anything like she imagined. 'It's stressful, lonely and tiring.'





Family

mused one evening to me, "I look at my daughter and I just want to know: what happened? Because look at us: it's 2002 and nothing's changed. My mother expected my life to be very different from hers, but now it's a lot more like hers than I expected, and from here I don't see where it will be different for my daughter. I don't want her to carry this crushing burden that's in our heads ... [But] what can make things different?"

FOR REAL CHANGE TO HAPPEN, WE DON'T NEED more politicians sounding off about "family values." Neither do we need to pat the backs of working mothers, or "reward" moms who stay at home, or "valorize" motherhood, generally, by acknowledging that it's "the toughest job in the world." We need solutions—politically palatable, economically feasible, home-grown American solutions—that can, collectively, give mothers and families a break.

- We need incentives like tax subsidies to encourage corporations to adopt family-friendly policies.

- We need government-mandated child care standards and quality controls that can remove the fear and dread many working mothers feel when they leave their children with others.

- We need flexible, affordable, locally available, high-quality part-time day care so that stay-at-home moms can get a life of their own. This shouldn't, these days, be such a pipe dream. After all, in his State of the Union message, President Bush reaffirmed his support of (which, one assumes, includes support of funding for) "faith-based and community groups." I lived in France before moving to Washington, and there, my elder daughter attended two wonderful, affordable, top-quality part-time pre-schools, which were essentially meant to give stay-at-home moms a helping hand. One was run by a neighborhood co-op and the other by a Catholic organization. Government subsidies kept tuition rates low. A sliding scale of fees brought some diversity. Government standards meant that the staffers were all trained in the proper care of young children. My then 18-month-old daughter painted and heard stories and ate cookies for the sum total in fees of about \$150 a month. (This solution may be French—but do we have to bash it?)

- We need new initiatives to make it possible for mothers to work part-time (something most mothers say they want to do) by creating vouchers or bigger tax credits to make child care more affordable, by making health insurance available and affordable for part-time workers and by generally making life less expensive and stressful for middle-class families so that mothers (and fathers) could work less without risking their children's financial future. Or even, if they felt the need, could stay home with their children for a while.

- In general, we need to alleviate the economic pressures that currently make so many families' lives so high-pressured, through progressive tax policies that would transfer our nation's wealth back to the middle class. So that mothers and fathers could stop running like lunatics, and start spending real quality—and quantity—time

“Everything I do, I'm a perfectionist. I want to be a great mom, a great teacher. I know I can't make every standard, but I definitely try my best.”

-CARMEN ALVAREZ



with their children. And so that motherhood could stop being the awful burden it is for so many women today and instead become something more like a joy.

Women today mother in the excessive, control-freakish way that they do in part because they are psychologically conditioned to do so. But they also do it because, to a large extent, *they have to*. Because they are unsupported, because their children are not



'I FEEL OVERWHELMED'

Each day after teaching fourth graders, Carmen Alvarez, 35, cooks for her three daughters, helps them with their homework and finds time to attend at least one of their games. 'I feel responsible for everything,' Alvarez, who is separated from the girls' father, finished Ph.D. coursework at Boston College. Now, she's trying to complete her dissertation. 'How do you find time to put yourself first?' She writes in the early morning (left). Feeding her daughters (below), Melida, 16, Celia, 13, and Melissa, 11, and watching a snowfall with nephew Diego.



taken care of, in any meaningful way, by society at large. Because there is right now no widespread feeling of social responsibility—for children, for families, for *anyone*, really—and so they must take everything onto themselves. And because they *can't*, humanly, take everything onto themselves, they simply go nuts.

I see this all the time. It never seems to stop. So that, as I write this, I have an image fresh in my mind: the face of a friend, the

larily our daughters—any good. We're not doing our marriages any good. And we're doing nothing at all for our society.

We are simply beating ourselves black and blue. So let's take a breather. Throw out the schedules, turn off the cell phone, cancel the tutors (fire the OT!). Let's spend some real quality time with our families, just talking, hanging out, not doing anything for once. And let ourselves be. ■

mother of a first-grader, who I ran into one morning right before Christmas.

She was in the midst of organizing a class party. This meant shopping. Coordinating paper goods. Piecework, pre-gluing of arts-and-crafts projects. Uniformity of felt textures. Of buttons and beads. There were the phone calls, too. From other parents. With criticism and "constructive" comments that had her up at night, playing over conversations in her mind. "I can't take it anymore," she said to me. "I hate everyone and everything. I am going insane."

I looked at her face, saw her eyes fill with tears, and in that instant saw the faces of dozens of women I'd met—and, of course, I saw myself.

And I was reminded of the words of a French doctor I'd once seen. I'd come to him about headaches. They were violent. They were constant. And they would prove, over the next few years, to be chronic. He wrote me a prescription for a painkiller. But he looked skeptical as to whether it would really do me much good. "If you keep banging your head against the wall," he said, "you're going to have headaches."

I have thought of these words so many times since then. I have seen *so many mothers* banging their heads against a wall. And treating their pain—the chronic headache of their lives—with sleeping pills and antidepressants and anxiety meds and a more and more potent, more and more vicious self-and-other-attacking form of anxious perfectionism.

And I hope that somehow we will all find a way to stop. Because we are not doing ourselves any good. We are not doing our children—particu-

Forget about day camp or mandatory Gymboree. What's the point of raising kids if we don't have a good time and a few laughs?

BY ANNA QUINDLEN

THERE WAS A KIND OF CARELESSNESS to my childhood. I wandered away from time to time, rode my bike too far from home, took the trolley to nowhere in particular and back again. If you had asked my mother at any given time where I was, she would likely have paused from spooning Gerber's peas into a baby's mouth or ironing our school uniforms and replied, "She's around here somewhere."

By the new standards of mothering, my mother was a bust. Given the number of times I got lost when I was young, she might even be termed neglectful. There's only one problem with that conclusion. It's dead wrong. My mother was great at what she did. Don't misunderstand: she didn't sit on the floor and help us build with our Erector sets, didn't haul us from skating rink to piano lessons. She couldn't even drive. But where she was always felt like a safe place.

The idea that that's enough is a tough sell in our



THE GOOD ENOUGH

current culture, and not simply because if one of my kids had been found wandering far from our home there would have been a caseworker and a cop at the door. We live in a perfection society now, in which it is possible to make our bodies last longer, to manipulate our faces so the lines of laughter and distress are wiped out. We believe in the illusion of control, and nowhere has that become more powerful—and more pernicious—than in the phenomenon of manic motherhood. What the child-care guru D. W. Winnicott once called "the ordinary devoted mother" is no longer good enough. Instead there is an *über*-mom who bounces from soccer field to school fair to play date until she falls into bed at the end of the day, exhausted, her life somewhere between the Stations of the Cross and a decathlon.

A perfect storm of trends and events contributed to this. One was the teeter-totter scientific argument of nature versus nurture. When my mother was raising kids, there was a *sub rosa* assumption that they were what they were. The smart one. The sweet

one. Even the bad one. There was only so much a mother could do to mold the clay she'd been dealt.

But as I became a mother, all that was changing. Little minds, we learned from researchers, were infinitely malleable, even before birth. Don't get tense: tense moms make tense infants. (That news'll make you tense!) In a prenatal exercise class, I remember lying on the mat working on what was left of my stomach muscles, listening to the instructor repeating, "Now hug your baby." If I had weak abs, did that mean my baby went unhugged? Keeping up with the Joneses turned into keeping up with the Joneses' kids. Whose mothers, by the way, lied. I now refuse to believe in 9-month-olds who speak in full sentences. But I was more credulous, and more vulnerable, when I had a 9-month-old myself.

This craziness sounds improbable in the face of the feminist revolution that transformed the landscape of America during our lifetime. But at some level it is the fruit of that revolution, a come-uppance cleverly disguised as a calling. Every time we take note of



the home: if they were giving up such great opportunities, then the tending of kids needed to be made into an all-encompassing job. Professionalized for women who had paying jobs out in the world: to show that their work was not bad for their kids, they had to take child rearing as seriously as dealmaking. (Fathers did not have to justify themselves; after all, no man has ever felt moved to say that most guys have to work, you know.)

It's not just that baking for the bake sale, meeting with the teachers, calling the other mothers about the sleepover and looking at the SAT camp made women of both sorts crazy, turning stress

from an occasional noun into an omnipresent verb and adverb. A lot of this was not particularly good for kids. If your mother has been micromanaging your homework since you were 6, it's hard to feel any pride of ownership when you do well. You can't learn from mistakes and disappointments if your childhood is engineered so there aren't any.

So much has been written about how the young people of America seem to stay young longer now, well into the years when their grandparents owned houses and had families. But their grandparents never had a mother calling the teacher to complain about a bad grade. And hair-trigger attention spans may be less a function of PlayStation and more a function of kids who never have a moment's peace. I passed on the weekend roundelay of kiddie-league sports so our three could hang out with one another. I told people I hoped it would cement a bond among them, and it did. But I really wanted to be reading rather than standing on the sidelines pretending my kids were soccer prodigies. Maybe I had three children in the first place so I wouldn't ever have to play board games. In my religion, martyrs die.

'THERE'S ALWAYS SCRUTINY'

Jennifer Greenstein, 34, gave up a high-profile writing career in Manhattan to spend more time with her son, Jonah, 2, at home in East Brunswick, N.J. Although she works only part time, strangers routinely inquire about her arrangements. "I'll be out and people will ask, 'Where is your son?'"

Our oldest child wrestled custody of his life away from me at a fairly early age, perhaps inspired by an epic bout in which I tried to persuade him to rewrite a perfectly good fourth-grade paper to turn it into an eighth-grade paper. Perhaps I'd been added by the class art projects, some of which looked like the work of a crack graphics design team—and were. I asked the other day about his memories of my mothering. "You sorta freaked out during the college application process," he noted accurately. But then he wrote, "What I remember most: having a good time." You can engrave that on my headstone right this minute.

There's the problem with turning motherhood into martyrdom. There's no way to do it and have a good time. If we create a never-ending spin cycle of have-tos because we're trying to expiate senseless guilt about working or not working, trying to keep up with the woman at school whose kid gets A's because she writes the papers herself, the message we send our children is terrible. By our actions we tell them that being a mom—being their mom—is a drag, powered by fear, self-doubt and conformity, all the things we are supposed to teach them to overcome. It just becomes a gloss on that old joke: Enough about me. What about you? How do you make me feel about myself? The most incandescent memories of my childhood are of making my mother laugh. My kids did the same for me. A good time is what they remember long after toddler programs and art projects are over. The rest is just scheduling. ■

MOTHER

the fact that work is not a choice but an economic necessity—"most women have to work, you know"—it's an apology for freedom. How better to circumvent the power of the new woman than with the idea of mothering not as care but as creation? Every moment for children was a teachable moment—and every teachable moment missed was a measure of a lousy mom.

My baby-boomer friends and I were part of the first generation of women who took for granted that we would work throughout our lifetime, and like most pioneers we made it up as we went along. In 1976, Dr. Spock revised his bible of child care to say that it was all right if we worked and had children as well. There was a slapdash approach to melding these disparate roles, usually reflected in the iconic woman at a business meeting with spit-up on her shoulder. My first sitter was the erstwhile manager of a cult punk band. She was a good sitter, too. We got by.

But quicker than you could say nanny cam, books appeared, seminars were held and modern motherhood was codified as a profession. Professionalized for women who didn't work outside