

READERS' LETTERS

Antonella Gambotto-Burke's column "Raising Antonella" (Issue 12) elicited a huge response – both positive and negative – from our readers. Following is a selection of letters.

HURTFUL WORDS

As an avid reader of your fantastic magazine I have just read "Raising Bethesda" and am shocked that you would allow such an article to be printed. It has lowered the high quality of articles that are within this issue.

Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but when a writer is actually paid to write an article and takes up an entire page to write about how lucky she is that she doesn't work full-time and have to put her child in either childcare or before/after school care, I find it offensive and damaging. She does not know other people's circumstances. Do you think that full-time working women actually enjoy dropping our babies off to someone else? Given the choice, does she think we would do that? My daughter has been in childcare, against my choice, since she was six months old. Not because I have to "keep up with the Joneses" but because our family survival relies on it. She should feel privileged that she doesn't have to make that choice. That obviously she earns enough, writing one page of crap, to make up for me working a 48-hour week!

Believe me, I am not about to turn this into a stay-at-home mum/working mum argument, because given the chance I would be a stay-at-home mum in a flash, but I am sick and tired of people like her making us feel like we are bad mothers because we work. Do we need reminding that we potentially miss our child's landmarks like crawling, walking, smiling etc? Antonella, the 1960s are long gone, when a wife sat at home spending an hour preparing her daughter's hair into perfect ringlets and awaiting her hubby's arrival home with baited breath. Welcome to the real world! This is a world where women work to ensure their children have food on their plates and that the debt collectors aren't knocking on the door to take their house away. Stop living in the stone ages, and more important, stop making working mothers feel bad with your hurtful and pathetic words! I can assure you that a vast majority of your readers purchased your magazine with their hard-earned money, so you may want to choose your writers' contributions carefully next time, or better still, have writers like Antonella keep their own old-fashioned and damaging opinions to themselves!

Monica-Ana Calderwood, via email

BLUNT REALITY

I have to applaud the blunt reality expressed in "Raising Bethesda". I too feel exactly the same and having been a lawyer in my past life, I am fully aware of what little time one would have left over to spend with a child. Why are women trying to juggle work and motherhood? Is it because

many men these days have not stepped up to the mark of affording their partners the "luxury" of being full time mothers; or there are genuine financial needs (these do not include financing a palace etc); or the career is just too important to them, because, hey, they've worked hard for it, just to give it up for a baby, which begs the question – why have one? I gave up my career when my daughter was born and embarked upon the most rewarding career I have ever had. Yes, financial sacrifices have gone hand in hand with that choice but every time I moaned about not affording this or that, I reminded myself that I had the option of leaving her in a stranger's care and affording whatever it was, and that thought always put an end to my wants.

I am a stay at home mum and feel sad that it is not a given right for every mum in today's society. Australia is very backward in its maternity/paternity leave. This is a corporate and state issue that needs to be addressed if we want to raise a healthy and happy next generation. It's no good encouraging women to have lots of children and then having to rush back to work (question why the baby bonus is now means tested?). You reap what you sow and whilst it grows you need to be there tending to it.

Belinda, via email

DISAPPOINTED

As your number-one fan and long time subscriber I anticipate reading your magazine at every edition. As a new mum I find your articles to be truthful, informative, real and sometimes inspiring. I read articles that bring me to tears and others that make me feel proud to be a woman and a mother. However after reading Raising Bethesda I am somewhat disappointed in your attempts to reach me as a reader. I am a mother of a nine month old, I own my own business, that business being a director/licensee of a long daycare/childcare centre, and I would have my child nowhere else but in a childcare centre at this age. She too attends the childcare – full time in the classroom surrounded by professional childcare workers and children of her own age – developing into a beautiful, intelligent and social little girl.

I am disgusted with the attitudes of some women who continue to judge me, and the working families who leave their children in daycare. In society I feel that woman will never be 100% supported in what they do. In the past woman sat at home, cooked, cleaned and played with their children all day, and waited on their husbands like baggage. So society told women to become independent and go and get a job and be equal to a man. Well, we have done that and still have people like your editor judging and dismissing working woman. When will we get it right!

Obviously never!

So much for woman's lib and doing what we think is best for our INDIVIDUAL family.

Phoebe Speranza, via email

IT'S A DILEMMA

As a subscriber to your magazine I enjoy reading through the articles in each issue. I am often surprised and slightly irritated by some of the words of Antonella Gambotto-Burke in her "Raising Bethesda" column and the Autumn 2009 issue is no exception. The dilemma of childcare is one that faces many families throughout Australia.

"Only 14 percent of families in Australia with children have a father at work and a mother full-time at home. For the other 86 percent it is a constant juggle to care for the kids, please your employer, pay the bills and have a life." (*The Working Mothers Survival Guide* by Melissa Doyle & Jo Scard, 2007.)

My own daughter is 17 months old and while I am able to work from home as a part-time interior architect, the four hours of daycare that she attends on a Monday afternoon are a saving grace for me. I am able to attend meetings and appointments, as my daughter interacts and socialises with other children whilst getting a chance to play with a wide range of toys and do craft activities that she doesn't often get to do at home. Many friends' children who have not experienced this daycare socialisation are rough, clingy and generally not as pleasant to be around as my daughter.

I have friends who have children of a similar age who attend childcare each weekday, in most cases because their mother needed to go back to work in order to contribute to the family income and to keep her position with their employer. In another case the mother decided take the opportunity to study nursing full time in the hope of having a more flexible way of contributing to their family income in the future. I know these women have been subjected to numerous callous remarks and cries of 'neglect' from mothers who are meant to be their friends and support network.

It is a wonderful option to be able to work from home, to be with your child and watch them grow and learn. However it is also one that is often tiring, irritating and difficult. In my case taking an inquisitive toddler to a building site for an impromptu site meeting can be almost too much at times. Doing hours of CAD work to meet a deadline while my daughter watches hours of 'In the Night Garden' is enough to fuel the guilt that I'm sure many working mothers with kids in day care must feel.

I applaud Antonella for her mothering abilities and the choices that she has made to enable her to also work from home and be a loving and supportive mother to her child. Unfortunately this is simply not an option in many occupations where the need to be on the job working in a team cannot permit a lone mother working from home. As women in our current society we need to be supportive of each other rather than throwing more guilt and blame and being harshly judgmental about these different choices.

I believe more discussion, thought and editing is necessary before articles such as this are published, especially being more sensitive about

the subject matter of your thoughtless illustrations.
Rosie Flynn, Perth, WA

INSTITUTIONALISED GENERATION

What a brave and honest piece of writing from Antonella Gambotto-Burke...

Feminism was meant to give us choice as women but it seems to have become an excuse for minimal contact mothering. When exactly did we hold the vote to disconnect from our children?

From our own intuitive mothering instincts... as many early childhood experts have said, our babies need us close by and they continue to need us as they become children, they are not little adults...even if one insists on wearing twee matching outfits.

Watching "Bringing Up Baby" on the ABC last week brought it all home. Is your new baby your number one priority or simply an ill-fitting piece of life's puzzle that one has to mould into shape?

I am the mother of two primary school aged children. I chose to be a home-based mother, leaving my long hours' profession for life's next role... It has not been without material sacrifice and at times sheer frustration but it was, for me, the only choice. New doors opened and income came from sources I'd never have considered before motherhood. A leap of faith...

Oh the joys of being a School Mum! We even removed our children from the private education system as we honestly couldn't see what we were gaining other than more bills! School assemblies, assisted reading with the kindies, canteen roster sessions with shared stories to shake your non-yummy mummy tummy, the school plays, open days, fetes, excursions and all the new friends to share the journey... priceless! Our local Public School is society's true melting pot; it mixes rich and poor, black and white, left and right into an uplifting and enlightening brew. The school insists that the children stand taller when they can see their parents being part of the education wheel...it's not just about writing cheques for the P & C funds it seems.

I have many friends who do work, many can not let go of their comforts, some say they don't know what they'd do if they stayed home? "Start by asking the children what they might like you to do with you if you were home with them?" I suggested. We live a simpler life than many of our peers and my children do come home to home-baked fare on a good day...

Move somewhere cheaper, sell the second car, grow vegies, volunteer, be part of your community, swap your skills with a new hairdresser friend (networking in the school canteen can be very fruitful!), house swap for holidays?

Become part of your children's life not just their schedule!

Long Day Care, Before & After School Care workers: many of them are themselves parents and I applaud their energy and care of others children... of course it is a better option than latchkey children but is it

the best option? Our children are surely the first generation to be institutionalised for so many hours a day for so long. Maybe they should be at home tending the pumpkin patch with Mum apres school rather than looking at its new season's fashion catalogue as belated bed time reading?

Choosing Motherhood as your priority and fitting the rest of life around it is the most rewarding jigsaw puzzle ever. It all clicks together eventually and you can show off the finished picture with pride. It will be mostly your own work!

Rowena Caverly, via email

TELLING IT HOW IT IS

I am a first time reader of your magazine and would just like to praise you on the column by Antonella Gambotto in the Autumn issue.

It was so nice to see a parenting magazine actually tell it how it is!

Instead of making everything sunshine and rainbows.

As an ex childcare worker with (0-1 yrs) I saw it all too often: babies as young as six weeks left in full time care. The mothers often used to say "they HAD to do it for financial reasons".

I know am a mother myself and realise what a copout that is. Since leaving work to have my son Jack 12 months ago we have been a single income family. Our lifestyle has changed dramatically. No more holidays, dinners out or expensive trips to the hairdresser. We pay our rent, bills, food and there isn't much left over!

But in my eyes it is a small sacrifice seeing my precious boy grow and change. I love the strong bond we have and knowing that at the end of the time I am the one who raised him and not various child care workers!

I think these "career driven" women need to wake up and get there priorities straight! Children need to come first.

Jodie Oliver, via email

FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS

As a new mum to a nine-week-old baby, I picked up My Child for the first time looking for good parenting read. For the most part I was impressed with the layout and the quality of the articles, however Antonella Gambotto-Burke's article on career mothers was incredibly disappointing.

Lashings of mother guilt where served with a healthy dose of judgement on the side. Her assumption that mothers leave their children in care due to their own selfish desires was both hurtful and ignorant. It is clear from her article that Antonella has a privileged life in which she can work if she wants to but also has the option of staying with her kids. Moreover her chosen career as a writer allows her to fit her work around her children. The duplicity of this article is what stunned me the most. The general gist seemed to be that if you have a job that you can work around kids, then that's okay. But if your career path doesn't allow that,

you'd better change careers. Rather than contributing to these incessant and unhelpful mummy wars, why don't we campaign for more child friendly practices amongst all employers? Due to the wonders of modern technology more and more parents should be able to work from home with flexible hours. Whilst Antonella gives the example of setting up home Internet businesses as a way for mothers to support themselves, this obviously cannot work for everybody. Nor can the country support a mass exodus of mothers from the workforce. As well as looking at flexible working options, we should be encouraging fathers to become more and more involved with the care of their children.

The irony of a magazine that advertises \$65 romper suits and then judges working mothers harshly is not lost on me. Unless of course Antonella thinks that children should only be born to the privileged? When my child reaches six months old, I will be returning to the workforce simply because I have to. However, I will be working from home some days and my husband will also work from home occasionally. I just wish that level of flexibility was available to all mothers, who have no option but to put their young children in long day care.

Robyna May, via email

STOP & THINK

The Autumn Issue is absolutely stunning and I have not been able to put it down! Antonella GB's article brought tears to my eyes – I see the little babies in my 3.5 yr old son's childcare still crying for their mum over two hours after she has dropped them off and my heart breaks. I know Mem Fox's statement, "We're going to look back on this time from the late 1990s onwards - with putting children in childcare so early in their first year of life for such long hours - and wonder how we have allowed that child abuse to happen" is very controversial but perhaps we should stop and think about it for a minute. Babies need intense nurturing, love and attention in their early years, their healthy brain development requires it. Babies who do not get enough love and attention in infancy are less likely to be well-adjusted adults.

Perhaps the government should only introduce the child care benefit tax and assistance for toddlers over 3, and rather give the assistance to parents who choose to stay at home to give their babies the nurturing and attention every child should be entitled to.

Louise, via email

IDEALISTIC LITTLE WORLD

I was excited to receive my first My Child magazine subscription this week. Imagine my disappointment when I read the article by Antonella Gambotto-Burke.

Apart from the idealistic little world the author lives in – well, it would be nice if all women didn't have to go to work once they had children (I notice she obviously does, but not all of us can work from home), but

the economy would probably fall apart. And yes, I realise she targeted "career driven" women, but that does not justify her comments, especially when we are *supposed* to be supporting women in the workplace.

Quite frankly if I didn't go back to work – I wouldn't be able to support all the companies that advertise in your magazine! Is that the message you want your readers/advertisers to get. Luckily I only took a six-issue subscription – this is one magazine subscription I won't be continuing.

Loretta Wholley, Perth WA

BEYOND SEXIST

I was saddened to read Antonella Gambotto-Burke's article condemning working mothers who utilise childcare. Women like Antonella feel justified when they judge and criticise another mother, but not once did she use the word "father". That Antonella is prepared to make a pariah of the working mother and not even consider challenging the social or familial status of the working father is beyond sexist, it's downright archaic.

Antonella doesn't challenge a man's right to refer to himself as a father, nor does she question why men bother to have children if they can't spend time with them. Working parents both miss their child's first words, first steps, and together they should adapt their careers to their baby's needs.

Well done, Antonella; you've just pushed the women's liberation movement back into the 1950s.

Georgia Costello, Nicholls, ACT

OFFENSIVE & INCORRECT

It is with disgust, anger and complete disbelief that I read the editorial in your Autumn 2009 edition Raising Bethesda by Antonella Gambotto-Burke. I am writing this email as an educator, as a PHD and Masters graduate in the area of children's emotional wellbeing, and most importantly as a parent of a 7 month old who uses day care 4 days a week.

This editorial piece, informed by emotive misconceptions and a complete lack of research, is offensive to and incorrect on every level for both care providers and care users. Every culture in the world has a history of the communal raising of children; hence the expression it takes a village to raise a child. As a society we have moved away from extended families and hence the need to build a network of caring adults around our children. I choose daycare because I see it as a way to build my little girl's community. Her daycare centre is staffed by individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds who share their cultures with her. The staff who care for her, are loving, skilled and genuinely interested in both her development and wellbeing. Together we celebrate her growth and development and acknowledge her unique little personality and spirit.

What a contrived list of examples of your female network who have magically made alternate careers. I look forward to the time when Bethseda approaches school age and the largely female workforce in education have left so they can pick flowers with their child, because they are scared of the 'child storage facility' condemnation from people like you. How dare you lay judgement on others without researching – shame on you and shame on My Child for publishing your tripe.

Claire Sheehan, via email

MUCH-NEEDED ARTICLE

I am writing as a concerned mother of three who whole-heartedly backs the opinions of Antonella Gambotto-Burke. Whenever I speak the women who mothered our generation they shake their heads in sadness at the deprived lives children live today - children who presumably have everything!

We, the mothers of this generation, pay a terrible emotional price when we allow fictitious material needs to dictate the pattern of our work schedules to the detriment of our roles as mothers.

There is NO EXCUSE for the outsourcing of parenting to strangers in childcare centres. There is a insidious lie being perpetrated by the professional women who belong to the 'heroine' category - I'm talking about the ones that you read about in their sparkling North Shore homes who behave as if it were nothing to combine a madly successful career and raising a family. This is urban mythology at its most pernicious. Children are not wind-up toys to be turned on and off at will.

Mrs Gambotto-Burke is very brave to expose the unwelcome truth of the matter that these children in care have effectively been abandoned by parents who, simply put, had more important things to do.

I applaud her for her outspoken views on this contentious subject and her much-needed article will surely raise the self-esteem of those Mums who have consciously chosen to raise their children themselves without heavily relying on childcare centres.

R Hohenlohe, via email

ONE-SIDED & UNINFORMED

I have just finished reading this very disappointing article. There are so many decisions in parenting that are difficult and I think this article presented a one-sided, emotional and uninformed personal opinion. I am currently on a one-year maternity leave break but will be returning to work soon. I just don't understand why mothers/parents have to make parenting into a competition about who does what better. If someone chooses to return to work either for financial or personal reasons then it should be their decision and not judged by someone who is not aware of that particular situation or child's/mother's experience. I could discuss many examples of children I have met that have not been socialised effectively and then struggle adapting to school or have separation anxiety when it comes to moving into the school

environment.

Perhaps in future if this kind of article is to be written then opinions/experiences from effective mothers who work could also be represented.

Melanie, Winston Hills, NSW

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for the Raising Bethesda column by Antonella Gambotto-Burke in the Autumn issue of My Child.

After having my first child a little over a year ago, I had never really thought that I would become a full-time mum. However, when my daughter was six months old and had managed to climb the waiting list she had been on since before she was born, we were offered a three day a week placement at a 'high quality' childcare facility.

After visiting the centre one afternoon to meet the people who would be caring for my daughter, I left within five minutes, tears flowing and determined that I would never be sending my child to any such institution. I left my job, (which I loved to bits!) and my husband found a job interstate that he knew he would enjoy and offered him decent income. We are unable to afford to buy a home in our new hometown, and we don't go out often, drive a flash car or go on any wonderful holidays...and we wouldn't have it any other way!

However, I have been so amazed at the number of raised eyebrows we have received about our choice. Those without kids who ask constantly when am I going back to work are completely forgiven for having no idea about the sacrifice it would entail (I certainly didn't!). But it is those with children, predominately mothers, whose comments astound me. I have been told that daycare is good for babies, and that I would be much happier if I wasn't being a mum all the time. I have been told that I have 'separation anxiety' issues due to the fact that I really do not want to leave my child in daycare while I go to work. Prior to having my child, I worked, very hard, for a number of different employers for many, many years. I have no doubt that no matter what I did, or how hard I worked, I was completely replaceable and really quite insignificant in the daily grind. To me, my life has now completely changed. To one little person now, I am completely irreplaceable. And I feel a lot more satisfied and important as a mother than I ever did in the workforce. I have wanted to be a mum for a long time, and love what it has done to our lives and our understanding of what is important. It is by far my biggest achievement and I imagine will challenge me for many years to come!

What I want to know is, when did being a 'mum' become so unimportant and unfulfilling that one just had to have a corporate focus away from child and home life to feel real? I will fight for as long as I can not to have to leave my child in a place where she is looked after by a stranger, that also cares for three to four others in an environment that is nothing like home. She is far too important to us to be treated like

that.

Kate, Darwin, NT

ANTONELLA'S RESPONSE

A "vast majority of preschools/daycares" have removed Mem Fox's gorgeous books from their shelves because she dared to say that babies require intensive parental nurturing? Welcome to the new Nazi Germany! For all readers who wrote in with sorrow and understanding rather than threats: my words were aimed at women with choices, as I wrote in the piece. For mothers who struggle alone or in reduced circumstances, I have only love and admiration. I also apologise to those who wanted more substantiation, but I only had a 900-word forum.

Enfin: The emotional serenity of babies is not a luxury. Our planet's future depends on it.