

Raising Bethesda (Issue 12)

My Child columnist Antonella Gambotto-Burke questions why we applaud women who triumph in the workplace at the expense of their children's mental and emotional health

There is an unusually pretty primary school in our affluent suburb, and Bethesda and I pass it late in the afternoon on our way home from the store. The first time I saw children in its playground at 5.30pm, I assumed they were rehearsing for an event. Confused, I noted they were there each time we passed; sometimes the playground was even crowded. What, I wondered, were children as young as five doing at school in the early evening? 'After-school care in action,' my husband Alexander explained.

I began to study them – the boy who stood disconsolately at the fence, waiting in the cold for his mother to appear; those listless girls who looked for all the world as if they couldn't wait for childhood to end; the teachers who parented these middle-class orphans of industry. Some of the children stared at Bethesda from behind the fencing with expressionless fixity. I wonder how she must have looked to them, so warm and jolly in her stroller, and with her fists crammed with the flowers – camellias, lavender – we had picked along the way.

Women who would sooner swallow glass than leave their house keys with a stranger leave their babies with strangers every day. One woman I know lodges her son in daycare at 7.30 sharp each weekday morning, and picks him up anywhere between five and seven in the evening. Married and moneyed, she has missed his first words, his first steps, and every other milestone in his first year. His history is lost.

At 12 months of age, he keeps the business hours of a 40-year-old CEO. There are no hugs, no tender idling, no sense of being the best baby in all the world, none of the personalised love that makes kids trust in life itself. Instead, he's placed in what a friend of mine, a daycare survivor, calls a "child storage facility", and is expected to function socially – and with often indifferent strangers – when the appropriate neurological pathways have not even been formed. In later life, this boy will draw a blank when asked what he feels for his mother. Which one was she?

His mother justifies this outrageous neglect with her efforts to afford renovations, car, overseas vacations and, above all, "quality of life". The quality of life to which she refers is, of course, her own; her son's existence is a study in infant depression. He does not care whether he is driven or rides a bus, whether he lives in a rented apartment or a renovated palace, and New York, to him, is no more than an earache, but he does care that he is deprived of the single most irreplaceable person in his life: maternal indifference is the deepest scar a human being can ever know and one that has repercussions on relationships throughout life. 'The lawyer I work for spends *half an hour* with Tom at night,' a nanny told me. 'Why did she bother having him?'

Among my girlfriends, the mothers who work have all adapted their careers to their babies' needs (it is important to note that all of us are married or partnered, and none are in serious economic strife). One designs and sews as her toddler naps; others resigned from well-remunerated jobs and gambled life savings on home-based

businesses that have, like so many others, exceeded all expectations; and another junked a senior position in the financial sphere to study homeopathy part-time. After Bethesda's birth, I stopped accepting all assignments that involved travel, and worked only when she slept. It was challenging, yes, and I had to develop the ability to function on broken sleep and concentrate in bursts, but bamboo splints and a claw hammer could not have prised my hands from my baby.

I do not understand how a woman can refer to herself as a mother when she spends no more than an hour with her child each night, nor do I understand how this indifference to the fragility of children's psyches has come to be ignored in favour of celebrating professional achievement. Why do we applaud women who triumph in the workplace at the expense of their children's mental and emotional health? Is it because we are afraid of being different, or because we have forgotten what mothering is?

Mother-infant attachment is not optional, but critical to social-emotional development. And yet we have somehow embraced the idea that babies and toddlers need to be "toughened up", that maternal passion is a cloying force resulting in emotional debility, and that "independence" must be fostered in babies, whose cerebral development is literally determined by expressions of love from its primary caregivers.

I think of novelist Edna O'Brien's words, and how they never could have been written by one whose childhood had been shaped by daycare: *The girl kept looking back as she went down the drive for school, and as time went on she mastered the knack of walking backward to be able to look all the longer, look at the aproned figure waving or holding up a potato pounder or a colander, or whatever happened to be in her hand.* And then I think of those kids left until darkness in that playground. ●

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