



Happy 25th Birthday Mothers at Home Matter!

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The Privileged Few

Theresa May is not happy with the ‘privileged few’ and I have a nasty suspicion that, although she didn’t specifically refer to mothers at home, the privileged few includes me or, at least, my children. It has become a privilege to spend your baby and pre-school years enjoying the consistent, responsive, loving care that all under threes (and most over threes) need and that a mother at home full time can offer. However, the implication in Mrs May’s anti-privileged few comments is that anyone in a position of privilege is not to be valued and in fact should be penalised. Which, as it happens, is the case. Families with only one earner will usually pay at least £3000 more in tax a year than families where both partners work. They will also forfeit a childcare subsidy of around £1500 per child.

Children need their mothers

I agree with Mrs May in some respects. It is deeply unfair that many babies no longer have the opportunity to experience their mother’s love consistently every day and night. It shouldn’t just be the privileged few who enjoy the soothing feel of their mother’s hugs and the reassuring and stimulating sound of her voice (see our report on research p 6-7). It’s not fair that some children have to spend long hours in nursery, where their stress levels rise, affecting them negatively, possibly throughout their lives.

Good mothering improves a child’s life chances

As I prepare to return to the Conservative Party Conference (Mothers at Home Matter committee members try to attend a range of Party conferences), I know that for the voices of mothers at home, or who would like to be at home, to be heard, I have to convince the Government that it will save them money if parents look after their own children, and that children who are cared for primarily by their parents will have better – buzz words alert – ‘life chances.’ And, even more importantly, that children from disadvantaged backgrounds will do better in life if their mothers look after them responsively, lovingly and attentively in their home environments rather than if they spend long hours in day care. One answer to poor social mobility is to improve the life chances of babies born into poverty by teaching their mothers how to mother rather than by taking them away from their mothers.

Time for parenting

It is not just babies and toddlers who need the care of their mothers. Some say that teenagers need the external lung of the loving, affirming mother almost more than young children do. Two of the main concerns of today’s society are the prevalence of screen time and the decline in mental health of children and teenagers (and their mothers). Throw in obesity and in what may be seen as a classic case of confirmation bias (ie, where I read into these facts my own presuppositions) I can’t help wondering whether it might help for children and teenagers to come home to an environment where their mother or father has had time to cook a home-made meal, has time to sit and talk through the issues of the day, and has the time and the energy to offer alternative entertainment to screens, without



subsequently having to work into the early hours to catch up on their paid job, thereby collapsing of exhaustion not far down the line. In other words, if their mother or father had time for them.

Privilege comes at a cost

Where I disagree with Mrs May is the implication, in the use of the word ‘privileged’, that the happy few who can care for their children themselves somehow have done nothing to deserve this. Our children may have the privilege of a home environment but this has often come at some cost to us. Single income families are amongst the poorest in the country. Many of us have forfeited holidays, cars and the ability to buy our own home for the privilege of giving our children what we believe to be the best start in life. Of course there are many two income families who also go without cars and their own home, but why should single income families be marked out for higher taxation and no help with childcare costs? Looking after children always costs money, either an income forfeited or a salary paid to others to care for our children.

So I would urge Mrs May and her Government to extend what the privileged few can offer their children to all parents: the opportunity to put the best interests of their children and family first, whether this involves both parents in paid work, or one parent at home caring for their children within the family. I feel very privileged that in my family situation we have been able to choose what we believe to be best for our children and I would love it if this privilege were extended to all. **M**

Claire Paye, Media and Newsletter Editor

Bringing CARE out of Chaos

As I take stock of MAHM's journey past, present and into the future, I compare it to the general political climate. We seem to be venturing into uncharted territory and it's hard to keep up with the pace of change.

We've all heard that before 'change' can take place there has to be 'chaos'. So how likely is it that we'll emerge with new understanding and more responsible systems, so that young and old can lead dignified and happier lives, with less stress, able to spend more time with the people they love and feel closest to?

On the optimistic front perhaps what we're currently witnessing is exactly the sort of chaos that's unavoidable when things need to turn around, so that eventually our leaders re-emerge with better ideas and start to prioritise what matters. We need far more flexible systems to accommodate different stages of the family life cycle.

What exactly is politics trying to solve? What does it mean to contribute meaningfully in life? There's disagreement about what it means to be 'equal'. Equality seems to drive many political decisions, but we don't all agree on the narrow way it's measured. If it means equal lifetime earnings between men and women (hence driving more mothers into paid work), then why are so many essential jobs for men and women so persistently low paid or not paid at all - and why is wealth inequality being tolerated? After all, there can only be so many highly paid jobs in the world and it's not always clear why some activity is more highly rewarded than others. Nothing would function without unpaid work behind the scenes.

From MAHM's point of view we continue our focus on building a kinder, more caring world for all, particularly the most vulnerable, so that, to coin a phrase, 'Every Family Matters'. It's impossible to lift children into a better future without proper regard for the child's family ties and community. It may not always be blood family. All caregivers deserve better support, recognition and respect.

But where do we mark our cross when no movement seems prepared to debate the need to care for children for a period of time? Whatever side of the political fence people are on, time and time again surveys show that many mothers (and some fathers too) would happily spend longer providing care if only they weren't penalised and discouraged so heavily in taxation, welfare and allowances.


It seems clear (and voting patterns show) that the political establishment - and the media - are increasingly disconnected from people's everyday concerns and priorities. Up and down the country families face challenges in their basic needs - housing, low pay, making ends meet, companionship, rising cost of living, concerns about health (including mental health) and the desire to have time for care responsibilities, but no

party seems to be offering imaginative solutions. We need to be bold.

For example there should be more opportunities for debate about a Citizen's income and a more simplified approach to Family Tax that takes into account our collective responsibilities over a lifetime to care for each other within households and across the generations. There should be a more dignified approach to social welfare and cohesion, which isn't about demonising people on low pay, who suffer poor health or who have other serious responsibilities in life beyond the world of paid employment. These are issues that may affect our sons, our daughters, their partners, all of us.

It's not only about young people. It's also about changing demographics and an ageing population. How can we care for people of all ages if there's no time set aside for us to provide that practical and emotional care? The group United for All Ages deals with some of these topics admirably, but even they seem to shy away from 'family based care' for children and teenagers. Leaders have to accept our basic need to give and receive CARE as an integral part of the human condition!

As I write my last introduction as Chair, I have to report that we've made little headway in rebranding a mother's care as modern and progressive, more caring, totally equal. Despite the establishment's claims to understand better the science and psychology of the human brain and what we need to develop and thrive as children and as adults, politicians refuse to accept that their policies may be partly responsible for rising mental health issues. Their policies mean more children spend longer in daycare and more adults are tied to the rigid demands of paid work, often poorly paid (requiring longer hours) or with stressful working conditions and little flexibility. Is that how we want to live?

I look forward to continuing on the MAHM committee and discussing these issues with think-tanks, charities, housing groups, child developmental experts, economists, experts in health and education and a number of other groups. But we need more people to come forward with their testimonies and to help on the committee. We can't do this work without YOU, our members. Thank you for the support you've given us throughout the last 25 years. 

Marie Peacock, Chair of MAHM

As well as Chairing MAHM, Marie has Early Years Professional status and is involved with a wide range of organisations, from the Save Childhood Forum to Maternal Mental Health. She regularly speaks up on behalf of mothers at policy-making meetings and has firsthand experience of the devaluation of care in policy circles.



Mothers at Home Matter at 25

It is 25 years since Mothers at Home Matter (MAHM) was formed. We asked two of the founders why they set up Full Time Mothers (as MAHM was), how things have changed since then and how they see the future for MAHM.

Sarah Douglas-Pennant, Honorary President

In the beginning

Full Time Mothers (FTM) was founded 25 years ago in 1991. As women became more educated and feminism demanded more rights for them, the concept of the mother at home began to be scorned. Women for the first time were encouraged to fulfil themselves and to cease being 'tied to the kitchen sink.' But this popular concept had its drawback: the abandonment of the duties to family and community, up till then fulfilled in unsung toil by women everywhere. The needs of children were being undersold, as was the value of mothering them.

In response, FTM was founded by a group of mothers concerned at the effect of this. Hundreds of women joined, writing in to describe how financial need had driven them back to work too soon after the birth of their baby, or alternatively how hard up they were, having refused to make that decision.

FTM's aim was to create a new climate of opinion about the value and the need for motherhood, and to campaign for fiscal and economic changes that would allow women to choose to be full time mothers. The slogan was 'Full Time Mothers ARE Working Mothers'.

Getting involved

My own involvement came a year or so later as a result of a letter I wrote to the Times when the rights of mothers to work-place nurseries were being heavily promoted, while no one it seemed considered the rights of the babies and young children. I joined the group, delighted as a mother and Montessori teacher to find kindred spirits campaigning for something I felt was so important. We lived in the West country and had three young children and I ran a three mornings a week Montessori School in my house.

For years I longed to attend the annual meetings, but could not get away. Then I began attending and discovered, when I sent for some research information offered, that ex-chair Kathy Gynnell, one of FTM's founders, had children at the same school as my son. I became more involved, and as my children grew older joined the committee; I succeeded Jill Kirby as chairman in 2002 when she left to become head of the think tank The Centre for Policy Studies.

Over the years we have campaigned by meeting and persuading politicians, sitting on parliamentary committees, joining with like-minded organisations, writing articles, appearing on TV and radio, and offering precious support to mothers at home, by groups in the early years, and by the newsletter which endorsed the value of what mothers at home were doing, however hard it was to have made that choice.

Recent developments

There was in time an increasing feeling that the name Full Time Mothers was too challenging and could put some people off. A new generation of members was coming to the fore and very many of them had to go out to work but still understood the need for nurture and valued what we were campaigning for, so in 2011 the name was changed to Mothers at Home Matter.

These days social media has become an important tool too and MAHM has an active Facebook and Twitter presence. We continue to work with like-minded organisations and make representations wherever there is a forum, governmental or other, looking for research information or views of interested parties on the welfare of babies and children.

Then and Now

One of the early concerns was that Child Benefit might be abolished. (It was of course.)

Social trends information also shows that in 1993:

57% of mothers with a child under 4 were full time mothers

13% of mothers worked full time outside the home

In terms of mothers with a youngest child aged 5 to 9, 33% were full time mothers

21% worked full time

48% worked part time

Although it is difficult to compare the figures directly, due to increased flexible and home-working, it is clear that the trend is towards more mothers in full time work (driven partly by a misguided Government agenda towards so-called equality), and more single mothers forced to work by the withdrawal of social security.

Looking back, the first thing that strikes me is how much things haven't changed, or rather how the same concerns keep arising time after time. In fact in many ways much ground has been lost since 1993: family life is ever less supported, despite some enlightened changes to women's rights after having a baby. Recurring themes have been:

- The difficulty for the mother/couple both to manage financially and to care properly for their children.
- More children at an ever younger age spend ever-longer hours in group settings.
- More grandparents drawn into providing childcare, despite their concerns about their own health.
- Lack of family time: parents for children, parents for each other or corporate family life, let alone mothers able to be serenely at home and 'there' for the family.
- Unfriendly government approach to the family unit. In financial terms the traditional family has less support than ever, with the tax and benefit system heavily skewed towards the family where both partners work and no recognition of the value of home-based parenting with a mother or father bringing up the children themselves.
- Spiralling housing costs putting unprecedented pressure on family finances.



Open Meeting & AGM

Open Meeting and AGM

Thursday 17th
November,

11 Mandeville Place,
London, W1U 3AJ

All are welcome to come to our Open Meeting, with members invited to join our AGM.


- 10.30am Coffee
- 11am Open Meeting:
Speakers Vanessa Olorenshaw and Jo Roughton.
- 1pm Lunch
- 2pm AGM

Vanessa Olorenshaw

The cost for the Open Meeting is £15, including lunch

Vanessa Olorenshaw is a mother of two, feminist, activist and breastfeeding counsellor who left the law for a life. She was raised in a working class family in Kent, England. Her 2015 pamphlet *The Politics of Mothering* criticised mainstream UK political parties for undemocratic and consensus policies on childcare and mothers at home. She was a founding member-cum-agitator of the UK Women's Equality Party and contributor to policy development on parenting. Vanessa believes that there is a need for a revolutionary, progressive, approach to the 'mother question' – and wrote *Liberating Motherhood* to encourage a mother movement to challenge destructive patriarchal and neoliberal policies. She will be speaking at the Open Meeting about what led her to write the book and the pamphlet, her involvement with the Women's Equality Party and her subsequent involvement with the Labour Party - particularly on the issue of basic income and care, on which she will have spoken at the Labour Fringe. She will read a short passage from the book and will have some available for signed copies.

We're delighted that **Joanna Roughton** has agreed to speak at our Open Meeting in London this year. Jo was formerly Television News Editor for Reuters based in Hong Kong and Singapore, and latterly the Head of Foreign News at Sky News in London. In 2002 she took the decision to become a full-time homemaker to her six children. Through the weekly 'BeHome' blog, Jo highlights important issues around 'Home' matters, writing about current events that affect the home and people who run it.

The 'BeHome' blog is a project of the Home Renaissance Foundation (HRF) which aims to highlight the importance of the work of the home as an essential building block of society, leading to a better and healthier society. HRF believes the home is like a business; the better organised it is, the happier everyone will be. But if it's neglected it will fail to provide the comfort and security that everyone needs. The work of the home needs to be taken seriously and to be properly recognised. Joanna's blog is for anyone who feels the work of the home is undervalued and should be properly celebrated. 

- Decline in marriage. Ever-increasing level of uncommitted partnerships.
- Mental health problems rising to epidemic levels:

Mental problems have greatly increased in young people especially girls. They now suffer worse than ever before from a lack of resilience. Insecure young people with mental problems have a destabilising effect on their peers which compounds the problem. The connection between the lack of the mother or a genuine substitute around wholly dependent young children and their future ability to thrive is never made; the more immediately obvious pernicious effects of social media and family instability are the factors most easily blamed, but they cannot supply the whole answer as to why.

Prioritising children's needs

Overarching all is the truth that dare not speak its name, ie the fact that children suffer throughout their life if they are not properly nurtured in their early years, and the natural person to do this is the mother. Only by denying the needs of the child has it been possible to liberate the mother and free her for the workplace, and the resulting deficit has largely been borne by the child. Ironically if he or she subsequently fails to thrive, it is the parents and society who suffer just as much as the unfortunate child.

The hope is that we as a society will eventually learn what makes for fulfilled and contented human lives, and apply the lessons from the start.


Pat Dudley, MAHM Treasurer

I joined MAHM, then known as Full Time Mothers, in 1993 and became Treasurer in 1997. My children were 12 and 9 when I joined and I had given up my job as an accountant in London when my son was born in 1981. I had always felt that looking after my children was my priority, not my job and it was quite normal in the 1980's to feel this way – now it is the opposite and women who prioritise their children and family are "wasting their education".

The needs of our children have not changed but society's expectations have – unless you are being paid for your work then you are either a scrounger or invisible. It makes me very sad to see so many mothers have in effect been persuaded that their little ones are better off in a nursery than at home. I am so glad that my daughter-in-law – a teacher – is at home with my two grandsons aged 4 and 1 and is also a member of MAHM!

I would like to see recognition of the valuable job that mothers are doing at home with their children and so I continue to support the work that MAHM does in being the voice of all mothers at home. Here is a wonderful quote from Robert Kennedy that sums up what I believe -

"Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials.

It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile." 



Why mothers matter: a roundup of recent research

Mothers at Home Matter members are increasingly called on to justify why we campaign for mothers to care for their children in their home environment. These studies show that mothers are indispensable in helping their babies and children develop communication skills, that good parenting in poor families probably makes more difference in attainment levels at school than increased pre-school participation, and that parents play a key role in helping their children learn to manage their emotions, which in turn leads to much better academic and social outcomes for their children.

Many thanks to the excellent charity What about the Children? (WATCh?) for highlighting the following research studies about mothers' voices. Please see their website www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk for many more studies regarding the development of the under threes, in particular. Although WATCh? is focussed on the needs of the under threes, the research they collate often points to the paramount importance of the unique relationship between a mother and her child.

Mothers' voices

A number of recent studies have shown that babies have a unique response to their mother's voice, and that this response is vital in language learning – both in how to speak and how to respond to other people's speech.

Mother's voice vital for newborns in acquiring language

Mother and stranger: an electrophysiological study of voice processing in newborns, Beauchemin et al, 2010

Behavioural studies have shown that newborns prefer their mother's voice to anyone else's, and that they prefer the sound of their mother's voice to any other sound. This study used electrophysiology to show how the newborns' brain responded. When listening to their mother's voice, the left posterior temporal lobe, which is known in adults to be involved in language processing, was active. When listening to a stranger's voice, this part of the brain hardly reacted. So this study showed an important link between mothers and babies, and the babies' ability to acquire language.

Mothers' voices are particularly significant in helping infants detect emotions in speech

The developmental origins of voice processing in the human brain, Grossman et al, 2010

Very young babies can detect emotions in voices, and respond particularly strongly to positive emotions when they hear their own language spoken. However, the ability to discriminate between different emotions expressed in speech only begins to develop between four and seven months. Voices, but not other sounds, led to increased brain activity in three areas on the right side of the brain in seven month old babies, but not in four month olds. The strongest response was to angry voices. Happy voices caused a response in the area of the brain associated with detailed information processing. It is thought that infants pay particular attention to the happy, singsong voice used by mothers (known as 'motherese'), which activates



the right side of the brain, which is the area associated with processing emotions in speech.

Mother's voice stimulates brain areas associated with social communication in 7-12 year olds

Neural circuits underlying mother's voice perception predict social communication abilities in children, Abrams et al 2016

This fascinating research, which is worth reading in more detail on the WATCh? website, identified that many different parts of the brain, mainly associated with social communication and self-regulation, were stimulated more by hearing the child's own mother's voice than hearing that of someone else's mother or anyone else. Recognition of the mother's voice plays a vital role in helping children manage their emotions and helping them learn. The mother's voice can reduce a child's stress and increase their feelings of well-being. No one else's voice has the same influence as the mother's voice, even for 7-12 year olds.

Parents are vital in helping children succeed in school and in life

Poor children are closing the gap on rich children due to better parenting

Socioeconomic Gaps in Early Childhood Experiences: 1998-2010, Reardon et al

This Stanford University study has found that there is less of a gap on entering kindergarten in maths and literacy between richer and poorer students than there was in 1998, despite the fact that the poorer children are getting poorer. This is important because gaps on entering kindergarten tend to be

maintained throughout the school years. The crucial time is therefore before they start kindergarten.

It appears that the gap has narrowed because of richer home environments. The US Government has invested in programmes encouraging parents to read to their children and help their development, which has disproportionately helped poorer children. For example, going from 0-10 books in a home has a greater effect than going from 100-110. Interestingly, Reardon did not find strong evidence to suggest that public preschool participation made a significant difference.

Children who enter kindergarten a year later have better ability to self-regulate

The gift of time? School starting age and mental health, Thomas Dee et al, 2015

This particular study doesn't address whether pre-school days should be spent at home or in external care settings. However, it does look at the ability to self-regulate: 'In the psychology realm, the measure of inattention and hyperactivity – the mental health traits behind Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – effectively reflects the concept of self regulation. A higher level of self regulation, which describes a person's ability to control impulses and modulate behavior in attaining goals, is commonly linked to student achievement.'

Self-regulation is primarily developed by children through a strong attachment to their parents. See the following:

Parents play a key role in facilitating 'affect regulation'

DeGangi 2000a, cited by Jane Barlow

Professor Jane Barlow at the Parent Infant Partnership conference outlined the connection between constant, sensitive parental care in the early years and a child's ability to manage their own emotions. 'Affect regulation' refers to the ability to tolerate and cope with strong positive or negative emotions, otherwise known as emotional resilience. Parents can help children to manage their emotions and find healthy ways to express themselves by responding appropriately to their own children and to others. This in turn helps their academic and social competence. On the other hand, the failure of infants to learn how to regulate their emotions is strongly linked to delays in motor, language and cognitive development and ongoing parent-child relational problems.

Longer hours in day care result in worse behaviour in children and poorer quality of mothering

Developmental risks (still) associated with Early Child Care, 2001, Jay Belsky's Emmanuel Miller Lecture

The more hours a week children spend in a day care setting, the greater the negative effect on emotional development and on behaviour. One reason for this, which is almost never

highlighted, is the impact on the relationship between mothers and children. The longer children spend in non-maternal care, the less likely their mothers are to respond sensitively to them and the less likely children are to respond well to their mothers. This was found to be the case particularly where children spent more than ten hours a week in childcare, there was more than a single care arrangement in the first 15 months of life and the quality of childcare was poor. In other words, where babies didn't receive the loving, sensitive, consistent care that the mother can usually provide.

An early study (Howes, 1990) found that poor quality care introduced within a baby's first year (rather than later) was linked to bad behaviour in the preschool years and less consideration of others, heightened distractibility and lower task orientation in the first year of school. A 2000 study (NICHD-SECC) found that 17% of children who had spent 30 hours or more in care showed high levels of problem behaviour (compared with 9% of children who had spent 10 hours or

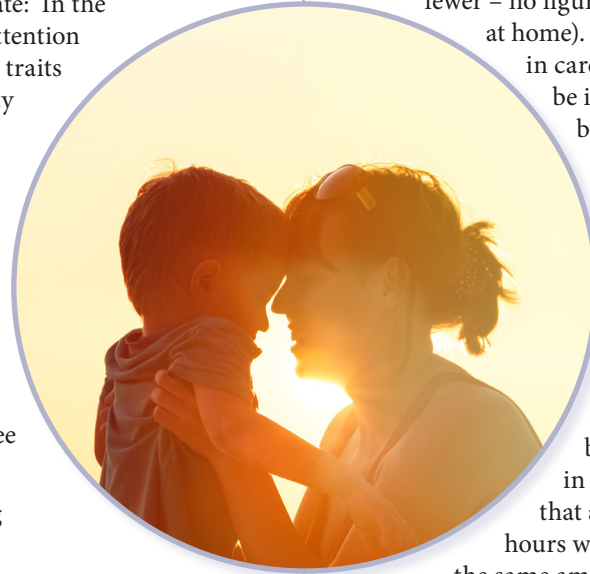
fewer – no figures for those who had been cared for at home). According to Belsky: 'The children in care for a long time were not found to be independent and assertive as posited by some scholars but showed signs of neediness, assertiveness, disobedience/ defiance and aggression. Equally important, quality of care failed to moderate this effect.'

MAHM comment - Time for Parenting

It is self-evident that the longer people spend practising a skill, the better they generally become. However, in the world of mothering it is assumed that a mother who spends just a few rushed hours with her children each week will have the same amount of practice as a mother at home full time. It is not a question of who loves their children more. Sensitive and attuned mothering, although initially instinctive for most, requires time and practice. Babies can be particularly tricky because they can't say what they need (and they don't always know themselves what is wrong) so they communicate through body language, which mothers (or fathers at home) can learn to interpret.

Childcare workers have told MAHM about mothers losing confidence when they have spent long hours at work and their children have spent long hours with 'professional' carers. Coupled with potentially worse behaviour (known as 'non-compliance') by their toddlers and children because of their long hours in daycare settings, this lack of confidence and difficulty in picking up cues results in a more difficult mother-child relationship where mothers may well feel their children are cared for better in childcare and they themselves appreciate the relative peace of work. Ironically, the more time the mothers spent with their children, the easier it would become to respond well to their children's needs and the more responsive their children would be. M

Claire Paye



In the News

The MAHM Team have scoured the headlines for interesting and relevant news topics so that you don't have to:

**Stressed, depressed, lonely and anxious.
Is your teenager OK?**

The Times, 19 March

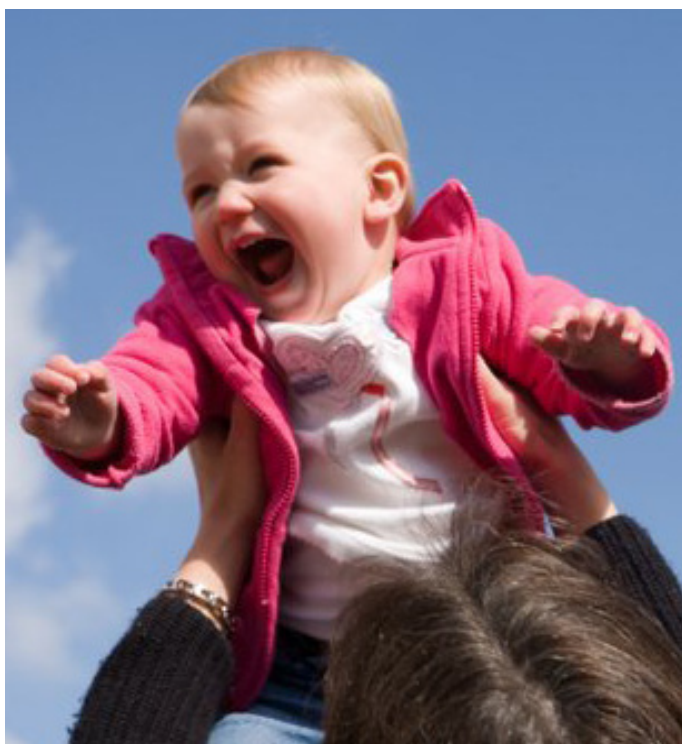
In a fascinating overview of a range of data about teenagers' mental health, Rachel Carlyle brought together a plethora of studies to outline the threats teenagers face, including:

- a World Health Organisation report revealing that British teenagers are amongst the least satisfied with their lives.
- a conference, organised by Parent Zone, linking teenagers' use of the internet with the high number of teenagers talking about self-harm, suicide and depression.
- the rise by **600%** in ten years of teenagers struggling with anxiety, depression, self-harm and eating disorders.

Natasha Devon, the government's former mental health tsar for schools (allegedly sacked for arguing that the government's own education policies were contributing to poor mental health amongst young people) attributed the decline in mental health to excessive use of the internet, reduced quality of family time and too much focus on academic achievement. The focus on achievement is particularly harmful for teenage girls, who feel they should be succeeding at school, in their extra-curricular activities and in their social lives.

The article makes a number of helpful suggestions as to how parents can help their teens:

- Be involved and interested in their online world, without following them too closely. Their online world is what they leave to interact with family, it is their reality. It's the same parenting advice about setting boundaries and expressing an interest in them. We should ask about their online life the way we would about school.
- Don't pressurise them to overachieve academically. Sir



Anthony Seldon, a former headmaster, is quoted as saying that you can move a student from a B to an A* but it may come at great cost to his mental well-being.

- Talk to them about sexting and pornography. Discuss why they think someone would ask for an explicit photo of them.
- Make sure they get enough sleep. Enforce a no screens an hour before bed policy, and no phones in the bedroom.
- Help them to question the image they project. Online identities are an added complication for a teenager trying to work out their evolving identity.
- Persevere with family time. One counsellor said that the best buffer against teenage pressures was to have sit-down family meals and to make sure Dad's home on time. Meals create space for speaking. Build in family structures that avoid teenagers spending endless solitary hours in their bedrooms, such as takeaway nights, family bike rides, games [*our youth group loves playing Bananagrams/Articulate/card games - ed*].

According to Jane Downshire, author of *Teenagers Translated*, 'Having a sense of family is incredibly important for teenagers'. And according to MAHM (not that we were invited to contribute), 'it all comes down to having enough time for each other'.

Letter to The Guardian


*from Kareem Roitman, MAHM committee member,
1 August*

As a woman and as a mother I take issue with several arguments put forth in your article on attachment parenting (Never let me go, Weekend, 30 July). I am most disturbed by the presentation of attachment parenting, or AP, as "maternal masochism". This comparison mocks the life-and-death struggles of millions of women and undermines the gains of so many more.

Growing up in conservative Latin America, I saw at first-hand how the domestic can be used to oppress women – women who had no choice when to have children and who were then captive to all household work with no choice, recognition, voice, or joy.

To compare this in any way to the vast array of parenting methods that fall under AP is preposterous. Women following attachment parenting are, first and foremost, choosing their role in parenting. They are active agents, researching data (so much for anti-intellectualism), weighing up options (because in our current patriarchal society, we cannot have it all at the same time) and making hard choices – but their choices. This is crucial: AP is feminist; it acknowledges women, men and children as agents with value, and seeks methods that respect these agents. And quite often the choices of AP are wonderful – I have yet to meet a person who thinks "I wish I'd had fewer cuddles from my babies".

Moreover, other parenting gurus who decry AP are not setting out to liberate women. More often the schedules are set out so women will not be disrupted from the burden of household chores and/or paid labour while their partner is not inconvenienced.

Parenting is hard, and it is harder when it challenges the status quo. This is AP's greatest crime. 

Parenting the In-Betweenagers

I've been asked to write a piece on the value of being around for your older children and teenagers. This is ironic, as I've spent the last few weeks of the summer holidays threatening my children with my imminent departure to a permanent place of work, in order to be around people who appreciate me. My children are 11 and 9, and they are generally thoughtful, kind, funny and bright, but I have to say that I'm finding the latest phase of their development a challenge.

As all full time mothers know, the summer holidays are an intense amount of time to spend 24 hours a day in the full care of one's children, however delightful. In the light of this knowledge, as usual I'd planned the summer holidays in advance, to include going away, seeing friends, seeing family, going on outings and having quiet days at home too. Last summer, this tactic worked, and when it got to the end of the holidays I felt quietly bereft. I would miss my son and daughter and our contented days together.

Not so this holiday. We have always counted the fact that we have 'one of each' as a blessing. But they seem to have just reached an age where the gender difference is a genuine barrier to them playing together any more. The huge Lego collection languished un-played with in my son's room. The vast cuddly toy menagerie stayed in the basket. My son wanted to be on a screen, whilst my daughter took to plastering herself in lashings of experimental makeup. Their interests are diverging and they are no longer able to just entertain themselves. As a consequence of this, they were only really happy when we were out and about doing things, or on holiday. By the last week of the holidays I had had enough of being a live-in chef, laundrette and entertainment provider and rampaged around in a simmering rage. The children took to asking me tentatively if I was 'alright', in other words, not about to fly off the handle.

This was coupled with a rumbling anxiety about my firstborn son starting at secondary school. I wanted to enjoy the last summer with my boy, but, mentally, he had kind of left already, just wanting to talk to me about the latest computer game or be outside kicking a ball about.

As the first day loomed nearer and nearer, and my anxiety levels soared, Facebook kept unhelpfully offering me 'memories' of pictures of the two of them seven years ago, on my son's first day of primary school, making me all nostalgic about when they were little and straightforward. Sure, they'd wee on the floor occasionally, and I'd struggle to remember the last time I had a full night's sleep, but at least their faces lit up with I offered them a homemade fairy cake or suggested going to the playground. Also, they were safe, and their world was controllable and containable. I walked with them to school and back, I picked them up, held their hands, wiped their eyes.

Now my son would be travelling on his own on public transport into the big, wide world, with nothing more than his wits and a brick-phone to defend him. I needed to look at my son during the long summer holiday and be reassured by seeing a responsible, engaged and organised young man. Of course, being a normal 11-year-old boy, he showed me none of these things.

I realised that being a full time mother of children this age is a constant opposing internal battle. 'They need me/ they don't




need me', 'they're old enough/they're still little', 'they're tired and hungry/they're old enough to know better!'

However, the long summer holidays finally drew to a close, and the return to school, along with the benefit of hindsight, has allowed me a moment to take stock, and to see that there are still so many reasons why, more than ever before, I'm so grateful to be a mother who can be there for my children.

Last Wednesday, my boy and I travelled in to school on the train together on his first day. I was able to chat to him as he learnt to navigate the trains and buses. I went with him for the next four mornings until this morning, when he felt happy to do the journey on his own. Having checked his school bag two or three times, he stepped outside the front door. He set off, looking suddenly grown up in his black blazer. As I watched his blonde head marching away from me, out into the world, I felt that age-old pang of parting, coupled with a heart-wrenching pride. To quote Cecil Day-Lewis' poem, 'Walking Away':

*"I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be."*

And now it's time to go and pick up my daughter from school, bring her home for a snack and then off to ballet. She'll moan, I'll make her go, the job continues. But underneath the humdrum domestic routine, is a great depth of gratitude for being able to witness my half-fledged things gradually learn to fly. 

Poppy Pickles

Book Review

The Gentle Parenting Book: How to Raise Calmer, Happier Children from Birth to Seven

by Sarah Ockwell-Smith

Published by Little Brown Book Group

Sarah Ockwell-Smith is the UK's best known advocate of 'gentle parenting'. She has published several successful books on this topic including 'Baby calm', 'Toddler calm' and 'The Gentle Sleep Book'. Her new book, 'The Gentle Parenting Book' is a general introduction to gentle parenting techniques from birth to seven years of age. For those unfamiliar with 'gentle parenting' it is a child-led style of parenting. The idea is to move away from authoritarian parenting with its punishments and rewards and instead to focus on building a connection with your children, listening to them and responding to their needs.

How to be a 'gentle parent'?

Ockwell-Smith explains in the introduction to her book that there are no specific things that gentle parents do that other parents don't do. The difference with gentle parents is that 'their choices are all informed, educated and made out of respect and empathy for their children, as well as themselves. This is gentle parenting – nothing more, nothing less'. She is keen to point out that gentle parents are not perfect parents. We all make mistakes as parents. Gentle parenting, she writes, 'is about accepting our imperfect selves, forgiving our mistakes and striving to grow as parents'.

Authoritarian vs responsive parenting

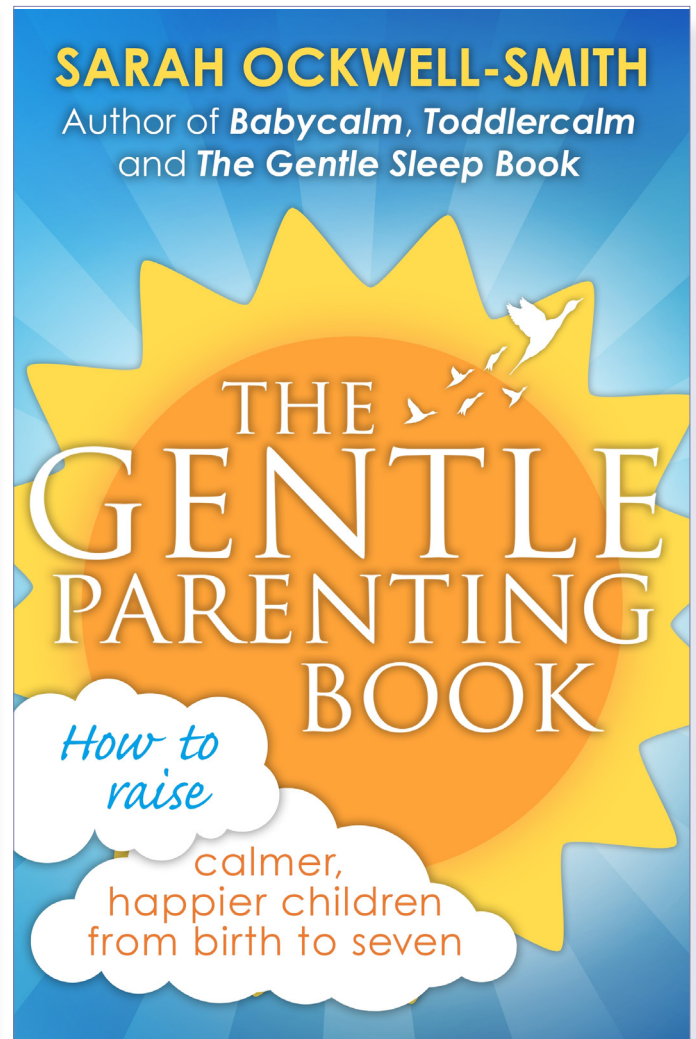
In her introduction the author takes a look at popular attitudes to parenting and the self-styled 'parenting experts' of the last century. Interestingly, she sees that we seem to have come full circle, with the authoritarian style of parenting promoted by the physician Truby King in 1913 being echoed by our current parenting 'gurus' Gina Ford and Supernanny, Jo Frost, despite the fact that much scientific evidence supports the argument that a more responsive style of parenting is better for our children. She also points out that gentle parenting is not a new idea and explains how it builds on the work of psychologist John Bowlby on 'Attachment Theory' and approaches to parenting championed by Dr Benjamin Spock and psychologist Penelope Leach.

The value of friends

The rest of the book is divided in chapters dealing with different age groups and their common challenges for parents. The author explains how to use gentle parenting techniques from birth to age seven. She also covers pregnancy and birth. She emphasises the benefits of creating a tribe for yourself by surrounding yourself with likeminded parents. This is particularly important when so many of us live away from family networks. She reminds us that we are not meant to parent in isolation and how vital it is to have support from friends.

Being physically close

Chapter three deals with the first three months of a baby's life which the author refers to as the fourth trimester. She emphasises the importance of physical closeness in this



time and offers usual, practical advice on safe co sleeping, swaddling and baby wearing (in a sling, etc.). Subsequent chapters cover teething and weaning and I really enjoyed reading such a positive account of the benefits of natural term breastfeeding in this book.

Parenting decisions and challenges

In chapter five the author examines choices around childcare and expresses a clear preference, based partly on the recommendation of psychologists, for family based care in the home until at least the age of three. Common parental worries such as tantrums, sharing, punishments, rewards and praise are explained from a gentle parenting perspective and screen time and starting preschool and school are also examined.

All in all, this is a great, all-round, general introduction to gentle parenting. I particularly enjoyed the section on 'how other parents cope with tough days' and the chapter on taking care of our own needs as parents. Ockwell-Smith recommends eating well, practising mindfulness, building yourself a support network and ultimately, 'treating yourself with the same empathy and respect that you would treat your child'. M

Kerry Hedley

Thoughts for the Day

Musings from a Grandmother

As we become mothers we suddenly become much more aware of what our mothers did for us. We also realise that we may be grandmothers one day (and mothers-in-law!). Here's one perspective on the new challenges of being a grandmother.

"Your daughter is pregnant, oh joy! The precious bundle arrives amidst much billing and cooing, cards and presents and flowers are sent, the new grandma is photographed proudly holding her first grandchild, wreathed in smiles (the infant only has wind-smiles at that stage). Most grandparents imply that becoming a grannie after years of slogging it out at the home-face, matching socks and cooking spag bol night after night, is a doddle: "So nice to hand them back at the end of the day!" "All the fun and none of the responsibility!" One huge love-fest. Or is it? Gradually, you come to realise that this is not your child, you have no jurisdiction over her up-bringing, what she eats, wears or does. Over and over again you have to bite your tongue: 'mouth shut, purse open' is how one friend puts it. You smile and say nothing. Your hard-pressed working daughter is prickly because she knows you stayed at home to bring her up - and besides, you subscribe to MAHM, so she knows your views on professional day-care full well. Her daughter won't suffer from having a working mum - in fact, she will thrive on it, she will shine and make her parents (and grandparents) proud, just you see.

The years roll on and that precious bundle becomes a schoolgirl with decided views of her own. Tantrums sometimes occur and her mother (your daughter) feels that you are looking on disapprovingly at this badly-behaved child because she was not home-reared. (Actually, nothing is further from the truth as I know how hard it is to get independent-minded little ones to obey you.) Sanctions are issued: If you don't do X you won't get Y, so the child complies with bad grace. There are sulks and tears. Couldn't a little more psychology be used - carrots, not sticks - to side-step confrontations? This is more like breaking in a wild pony or dog-training, but I say nothing. Again, it is not my place to say anything, but I suffer with the little girl; is this storing up problems for the future?

My daughter has to work, there is no question about it. Times have changed since I was a full-time mum with small children, but we made decisions - like moving to a more affordable location - which enabled me to work only a couple of evenings a week while looking after my children full time. We had space and a large-ish garden where the paddling pool was a boon in summer and where birthday parties could be held. My daughter chooses to spend money on having her hair done and goes to posh cafes with her friends on her days off - a 'yummy-mummy', you might say. Her choice.

Worst of all, however, is the breakdown of the easy relationship that we used to enjoy. She seems to have 98% of her attention focussed on her children; my only value is as a baby-sitter. What has happened to the easy chats we used to have? I continue to smile and say nothing, because any sentence I begin will inevitably be interrupted by a small voice demanding this or that - as my daughter flies to answer it. My sentence is left in mid-air, unheard and unheeded.... I sigh and say nothing."

MAHM Supporter, Name Supplied

What's in a name?

'Mother' - a mother by any other name would smell as sweet. Would it be the same sweetness if the name was 'father' or 'parent' or progenitor number 1 or 2, or primary care giver?

Although the person in question would indeed be the same regardless of name, no other name would describe the sweetness of the role. Names are powerful and evocative. A name contains the essence, the universal quality of the thing, the treasure of experience, likes and dislikes, relationship, potential.

There is a rich history to the word 'mother'. In Sanskrit the word 'mother' originates from Matri meaning 'measure, to measure out, grant, help anyone'. The English Etymological dictionary states: 'Woman who has given birth to a child. To mother, to give birth to, be the source of, give rise to, produce'. Throughout literature the word 'mother' is applied to things more or less personified, with reference either to a metaphorical giving birth, to the protecting care exercised by a mother, or the affectionate reverence due to a mother.

It describes a quality, condition or event that gives rise to some other. "For tis despair that is the mother of madness." Johnson. "Necessity thou mother of the world." Shelley. We use the terms 'mother earth, mother church, mother country'. "O Beloved Earth, dear mother..." Shelley

Mother is also applied to Nature, focusing on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature by embodying it, in the form of mother. "Nature, a mother kind alike to all." Goldsmith

Mother is truly feminine, the carrier of life, the source of nourishment. When I think of my mother (and get past some differences of opinion!) I think of tenderness, sacrifice, unconditional love, the person who wants the best for me but ultimately accepts me as I am, pulling up the pieces when I am down. These qualities are universally recognisable.

The word mother evokes emotions different to father, sister, friend, colleague, carer. It is a powerful word. A beautiful name. **M**

Anne Fennell



About Us: Social Media

Facebook

We run the Mothers at Home Matter Too page and two closed groups: MAHM Members Community and Mothers at Home Matter. They are a safe space for parents to discuss the issues they're facing, with lots of encouragement from others in the same situation. The MAHM Too public page has over 8,000 followers.

Recent discussions on Mothers at Home Matter Too include:

- School Readiness
- Childcare charity 4Children goes into administration
- Gender Pay Gap

Recent discussions on Mother at Home Matter include:

- My 3yr old currently attends nursery P/T and wants to go full-time. I'm not sure if I feel guilty to send her or sad she's so confident and doesn't need me as much any more.
- Tax-free childcare only under 12's. It's a bug bear of mine, this assumption that once kids are at secondary school they no longer need care. I'd argue they need more emotional care than toddlers.
- Mental Health in young people.
- 11 small things which would make a difference to caregivers.

Twitter

We are MothersatHomeMatter@mumsdadsmatter. Recent tweets and retweets include:

- @ResFoundation #100yearlife looking forward to hearing how we can live longer and differently.
- Retweet: An open letter to Jeremy Corbyn on equality and women. We Are Mothers. We Too Are Women.
- @margarethodge,@VOlorenshaw let's have the debate. A Mother's care is undervalued. Let's celebrate it, not deny it.
- Retweet: WhatAboutTheChildren? The Under 2s learn best in a loving environment with lots of one to one engagement essential.

How YOU can help

How you can get involved

Please do contact us on info@mothersathomematter.co.uk if you can help with any of the following:

- Write and edit the **newsletter**. This will be Claire Paye's last newsletter.
- Attend **policy meetings** in Westminster as a voice for mothers
- Carry out **media** interviews
- Write **blogs** or viewpoints for our website
- Offer a one off **donation** to help with our costs of representing mothers at policy meetings, posting the newsletter or anything else.
- Identify relevant **research** – we would love to put together a resource list for anyone interested in mother child relationships, child development, global family taxation policies etc.

Or if you have any particular **expertise**, or interest, please feel free to contact us to discuss how you could help.

Subscription Renewal and Membership of MAHM

Mothers at Home Matter is a non-political campaigning group so all our finances come from our supporters: YOU! We couldn't do what we do without you, so please don't forget to renew your membership.

If you've already organised payment of this year's membership subscription or have joined in the last 6 months please ignore the request for membership renewal. However, if you're a long-standing member, **please don't forget to increase your Standing Order at your bank to £12.50 for single members or £15 for couple membership.**

If you have changed your address or email, please let us know. If you would like to set up a Standing Order please print out and send us the Renewal form and Standing Order form together with your cheque payable to Mothers at Home Matter to our PO Box. Alternatively you can [pay online](#) using Paypal.

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