

Mothers at home Matter.

Autumn 2018

The Missing Piece

Adults used to complain that children had become disrespectful and lazy. Now, we worry that they are harming themselves, considering suicide, struggling with self-esteem, relying obsessively on social media, suffering from anxiety and developing type 2 diabetes through obesity. And they are still disrespectful.

We are very clear what the problems are, but what could possibly be the answer? The excellent 'Bringing up Britain' programmes by Mariella Frostrup on Radio 4 cover a number of current concerns, and I listened with interest to 'Parenting in the smartphone age' and 'Dealing with aggression'. These programmes are typical of media coverage of 'youth issues' in that they are long on identifying the problems and fairly short on finding answers. I would suggest that the failure to find answers is because of the pathological fear in society of identifying the essential role mothers play in a child's development and self-esteem, not to mention their ability to manage their emotions, opportunity to enjoy regular family meals, encouragement to spend time on anything other than a screen, likelihood to get enough sleep and any other number of factors relevant to their general well-being.

The reason for this is because it is not seen as an option for children to be cared for primarily by their mothers any more.

And because it so often isn't an option, it *can't be a solution*.

The reality for most babies and toddlers is that they will have to spend several hours a week in nursery, or other care, outside of the home. School children have to go to after-school activities. Teenagers have to be at home on their own, or with other siblings, after school. Weekends have to be taken up doing all the jobs that parents don't have time for during the week because they are working. Mothers don't have the time or availability to be the constant presence in their children's lives that their children need or, in fact, would like.


In many cases it is absolutely not the mother's fault that her children have to be cared for outside the home. Some of our reticence to discuss the problem comes from the valid desire not to add to a mother's sense of guilt at the lack of choices she has.

Society is now set up to assume mothers will work as many hours as possible. This is so that mothers can 'contribute' fully to society. It is assumed that mothers at home are 'wasting their skills', or ducking out of their much more important role of paying taxes. The cost of housing is linked to two salaries. Some families won't even be allowed to rent a property if the mother isn't working as well.

A mother's love for her child is not seen as a unique and essential factor in childcare. Apparently anyone can look after a baby, as long as the ratio of adults to children is correct; it is assumed that it doesn't make much difference to the baby who that person is.

None of the working mothers in the media - or the fathers in the media whose partners work, or the mothers who are politicians, or the women without children who are MPs, or the male MPs whose wives work - would dare to cite the research that finds that children who receive consistent, attentive, loving care from their mothers in a home environment are less likely to suffer from anxiety or poor self-esteem.

They ignore the fact that children with a mother at home are more likely to be able to eat home-cooked food at a table with their family. They are more likely to be offered alternatives to screen time. They have more time with their fathers, which is absolutely essential for a happy life as well, because jobs at home can be done by mothers during pre-school hours, school hours or even during (limited, managed - OK, on most days -) screen time.

Of course mothers at home are fallible, lose their temper with their children, may be too busy cooking or cleaning to drop everything to play well-being-enhancing games. But mothers at home at least have more time than they would have, if they had to be out of the home at work, and are available when their children need them. This is the crucial gift mothers at home can give. They are 'Available Mothers' (a much better term than a stay-at-home mother), not a mixture of a childcare guru and a saint. And being with their mothers brings a whole host of benefits to children from hormonal oxytocin surges (see article on p 4) to one-to-one conversations, to time being the centre of someone's universe. Removing these benefits from children's lives can lead to a whole host of negative consequences. But it takes a brave soul to say this in the public eye. 

Claire Paye, Editor



From the Chair

‘To every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose...’

Our Chair, Anne Fennell, reflects on the role of MAHM in this uncertain political climate and thanks those who have contributed so much.

This summer has provided a little time to ponder Mothers at Home Matter, reflect on who we are, what our purpose is, and what our way forward should be.

With the present climate and all focus on Brexit negotiations, it is not the time to launch any major campaign to change family policy. And that feels right for our organisation too. I feel it is a time of consolidation for us, a time to prepare the groundwork, so that when the time comes to push for change, we are ready.

We are a group of mothers who see a need in society and hope that we can be of service. There are many needs but the one that is the *raison d'être* of our organisation is the need for someone to speak up for the value and importance of the mother-child bond, the value of the work, and the time and consistency that is needed for raising children and to combat the language and the fashionable trends which undermine this.

Mothers at Home Matter is here to provide support for those trying, often against the odds, to raise their children themselves by being at home, and for all those who would like to do so but find the barriers too hard, whether they come in the form of ‘what society thinks of me’ or whether they are the very real financial stresses and strains.

I have spent some time reflecting how best we can deliver this support. In this light I have looked at our website and am redesigning it so that, although our aims remain very much the same, there is a clear path for mothers to find that support, to offer specific help, and for people to understand what our campaign areas are.

Outline of Website Re-design

To give a very brief outline, our website will have three key areas: News, Support and Campaign. The News section will keep you in touch with our Newsletters, our blog, any events we hold and those we are attending. Our Support page will be broken down into five sections: online mothers group; Working around the family; Maternal mental health; Research; Our Community. These sections are in early development, but I hope in time they can provide real help for many mothers.

We launched our online mothers group last term led by committee member, Katharine Boddy. We hope to expand on it next year. This will be a free, weekly, online video discussion

group at the same time every week during term time that mothers/grandmothers around the country, or even the world, can log into. The group will look together at the key qualities of a mother from many angles. Through open dialogue, mothers will better understand the importance of their role for themselves, their family and their community, and also develop greater resilience to juggle the many demands of motherhood.



Working around the Family: this section will look at all aspects of the consequences of taking a break from paid work to raise the family. We hope to develop links with organisations such as Careerbreak People or Daisy Chain, who specialise in helping mothers who would like to take a career break or who need to return to work after caring, or who need to work around the family, or would like to work from home so that they can be there for their family.

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Maternal Mental Health: we are delighted that Emily Tredget, founder of MummyLinks, has agreed to be our mental health representative. We are working with Emily to create ‘buggy tags’ saying “Fancy a chat?” on one side and ‘MummyLinks’ and our logo on the other side.

The idea is that mums (or dads!) can pop them onto their buggy so that when they go to the local cafe/park/softplay other mums can see they are open for a chat and approachable. The ultimate aim is to change motherhood from being quite solitary and lonely, even when in a public place, to where mums chat to each other and build local support and friendship. More of this at our Conference (8th Nov, London, all welcome, see back page.)

Research will be a place mothers can go to find full research into the areas we campaign for such as child development and mental health. Our Community will be a link to our social media pages.

Our Campaign page will be broken into five key areas: A Taxation system that supports the family; Housing that families can afford; Childcare that puts the needs of children first; Speaking up for motherhood, and a section on ‘Your Voice’ – valuing the role of care. We have now edited various videos of your testimonials. They are most moving and will be ready to watch on our website.

From the Chair, contd.

It is an exciting time, full of potential and much work to do. If anyone feels they can help develop any of these areas please drop me a line on chairmothersathomematter@gmail.com


Goodbyes

On a sadder note we are really sorry to be losing Claire Paye as Vice-Chair and Newsletter Editor. Claire wishes to dedicate more time to the Mwezi Foundation charity of which she is Director. The quality of the newsletters since Claire took over as editor has been outstanding and she has spent much time understanding the research into child development, working alongside Diana Dean at WATCH? She has also been a great support and tireless campaigner. I am delighted that she will stay on as media spokesperson.

There are few prepared to stick their head above the parapet and Claire is one of them.

We are also sad to see Kerry go, but delighted she has now become a qualified yoga teacher. Kerry has had the task of moderating our social media pages, a thankless and certainly not always easy job. Zoe is also stepping down to finish her PhD and we wish her good luck and thank her for her support and encouragement.

We look forward to welcoming Liz Sydenham on board who will help Sine with membership and to Emily Tredget who will be our mental health spokesperson.

Thank you for your continued support and we are keen to welcome any more wishing to take on a more active role. 

The Cost of Childcare

As Anne has said, I have decided to step down from the Mothers at Home Matter (MAHM) committee after several years, only so that I can give more of my time to the Mwezi Foundation, a charity which I find myself running, which gives solar lights to school children in Kenya to do their homework (plug over). However, I sincerely hope that others will step forwards to carry on the amazing work of MAHM. I will be carrying on as a media contact because I believe that is one of the crucial areas where MAHM can speak up. I believe firmly that MAHM has an essential and unique role in society today in supporting mothers who want to be, or who are, at home, and in giving a voice to the many babies, toddlers, children and teenagers who thrive on spending time in a home environment where their mother (or father, for older children) is present.

One point the interviewers like to make is that 'not everyone can afford to be at home'. What they mean is, only very rich people stay at home, most people have to work. What they don't highlight is the injustice in the tax system and the way all financial assistance is directed towards those who are in paid work, to enable them to make more money (and pay more tax) by working more, while someone else is paid to look after their children. They don't mention the fact that many mothers at home are actually in the poorer half of the income distribution of the country.

This is because single income families can only take advantage of one tax-free allowance. So a family with one earner earning a total of £40,000 would pay about £3,000 more in tax than a family with two earners on the same total. The two-earner family would also be entitled to more financial childcare assistance, which ignores the fact that a mother at home full time means the family have sacrificed a whole salary to pay for that care. There is a cost to all childcare, whether in the home or outside, but in single-income families, they bear all the cost themselves. Mothers at Home Matter campaigns for fairer family taxation: taxation which takes into account family responsibilities.

In the binary world of media interviews, it is hard to bring out nuances in different people's situations. This is one reason we


have uploaded a number of interviews with 'real' mothers to our YouTube page. They are well-worth watching. One I found particularly poignant was the interview with Marketta. Here is a flavour of what she said:

"I had to return to work when my daughter was only 10 months old. My partner took on extra work to try to make ends meet. We are supposedly high earners [Marketta works in the NHS, her partner works for Transport for London] so we received no benefits, only tax credits for childcare.

We're renting so all my partner's money goes on rent, my salary as a nurse goes on food. There is nothing spare for any extra bills such as when the car broke down.

I feel very attached to my daughter but I felt forced to let her go to somebody else. It was very difficult for me to understand. In the Czech Republic, where I'm from, you can stay at home for up to four years – why in England did I have to leave her so early? In the Czech Republic you have maternity leave for six months, then parental leave. If you don't return to work after six months, you lose your job but the government will pay parental leave. You can choose how much out of a total amount you will be paid each month. If the father is working he gets tax relief according to the number of children he has, so he pays less tax. The money stays in the family.

I had a friend whose partner was made redundant when she was heavily pregnant and they ended up much better off than us. Firstly the partner was around to help with looking after the baby and they got benefits, which meant they didn't have the financial burden we have. We have ended up in debt, having to borrow on the credit card for repairs to our broken-down car. Our non-working friends on benefits are better off than us. Motherhood is a gift which we should cherish."

Mothers at Home Matter speaks up for mothers at home, mothers who would like to be at home, mothers who work part time and are at home as much as possible, any mothers who are feeling under-valued and that their role at home is not important. It is important. You are unique in your child's life. You are irreplaceable. You are their mother. 

Claire Paye, Editor



OXYTOCIN: The Essential Hormone

MAHM looks into the truth behind why it is that children actually *NEED* their mothers to look after them. Without maternal care the hormone levels that keep them mentally healthy become unnaturally low.

Thank goodness I'm back at nursery. Those two days at home with my mother have been exhausting and I just need some time to myself

back at nursery with children of my own age.' I suspect almost no child in the world feels like this. Yet most interviews on the topic of working mothers will include mothers confessing, light-heartedly (yet with an undercurrent of self-deprecation), how happy they are to get back to work after a day or two looking after the children.

Media comment always centres on the 'needs' of mothers. They need to feel fulfilled, they are better mothers for spending three days or more a week away from their children, they need the money – this last one implies they wouldn't work if they didn't need the money, yet that is glossed over in favour of the joy of the office (a joy which is never celebrated, for example, by radio presenters whipping themselves up into a frenzy about it being the weekend).

The needs of mothers to be supported emotionally, financially and practically in order to mother their children in a stress-free environment at home, not worrying about money or feeling pressured to do their bit for gender equality and the gender pay gap, are glossed over and ignored, reflected in increasing issues with maternal mental health. Mothers absolutely need to be valued and supported in the vital, unique role they play in their children's lives.

What do the children need?

But the comments about who needs what are almost never framed from the child's point of view. Does the child feel relieved to be back in nursery after two days being with their mother in a home environment? Does the child feel their mother is so much better quality when she has been at work all day and they are, frankly, fed up with the poor service she offers when she doesn't go to work? In order to move the debate away from the 'right' of mothers to a career to the 'need' of children to be with their mothers, we have to look at what it is that goes on when babies and toddlers are in the presence of their mothers, as well as what happens when their mothers aren't there.

This is where the delights of oxytocin and the dangers of cortisol come in. When they are in physical contact, especially during breast-feeding, mothers produce oxytocin themselves

and stimulate it in their babies. But even the sound of a mother's voice down a phone can produce oxytocin in the child. Mothers are very powerful oxytocin producers. The more time a baby spends being nurtured by his or her mother, the higher the level of oxytocin they will enjoy.

Oxytocin is a very positive and powerful hormone that acts as a neurotransmitter in the brain, helping the brain pass messages from one nerve to the next. Oxytocin produces a sense of calm and well-being. It improves children's ability to read other people's moods, which helps with empathy and social behaviour. Oxytocin helps babies become securely attached. Oxytocin has the effect on mothers of making them become more caring, more sensitive and better able to read nonverbal cues.

The presence of oxytocin on a long term basis promotes lower blood pressure and reduces the heart rate, which means it protects against heart disease. It even affects the activity in the gastrointestinal tract.

"Babies and mothers are designed to be with each other"

So the more time mothers and babies, or children, can spend together, particularly with physical touch, such as is natural when you're changing nappies, putting the baby in the car or pushchair, playing games together, breastfeeding – all the things mothers can't actually avoid doing when they're with their children – the higher the levels of oxytocin in the baby and in the mother. Babies and mothers are designed to be with each other.

The negative effects of cortisol

The corollary is that when mothers spend less time with their children they both experience fewer opportunities for raising their levels of oxytocin. Often that separation is caused by toddlers having to go to nursery while their mothers work. When babies are separated from their mothers, especially when they have to go into a difficult nursery situation, the stress hormone, cortisol, kicks in.

Cortisol is an important hormone to help us in difficult situations. However, high levels of uncontrolled cortisol on a regular or long term basis, which can happen with long hours in nursery every day, can create a number of potentially serious difficulties for an infant. One of the consequences of these high levels is that it causes a reduction in protein synthesis, which is needed for brain growth. Sustained, high



Oxytocin - contd.


levels of cortisol raises the possibility, therefore, of introducing some negative effects on the development of the pre-frontal cortex, an area of the brain that is developing most rapidly in early infancy and is associated with impaired control of emotions.

This area of the brain is responsible for many of our emotional, social and cognitive behaviours. High levels of cortisol are associated with higher levels of aggression in young boys and higher levels of anxiety in teenage girls. Cortisol levels can be reduced by a release of oxytocin, which dampens it down. However, when babies and toddlers aren't with their mothers they are denied the higher levels of oxytocin her presence would normally cause, which would in turn help them to manage their higher levels of cortisol.

The ideal scenario

Babies and children need to learn to spend time with other children in group settings outside the home, which is stressful for them. But if they can do so with their mothers present, her presence will raise the levels of oxytocin in the child, which will counteract the effects of the cortisol. In addition, her very presence would remove a source of stress, which is her absence. This is why playgroups with mothers are an ideal opportunity for children to develop their social skills. The children's enhanced oxytocin levels from having their mothers with them enable them to 'read' those around them better, and the cortisol produced by unfamiliar situations and the need to share toys is mitigated by the release of oxytocin their mother's loving attention produces in them.

So, long hours each day spent with the mother raises the level of oxytocin in a baby or child's body, which helps with well-being, calmness, the ability to read non-verbal cues, the management of stress and other positive outcomes. But long hours each day spent at nursery not only removes a vital source of oxytocin, it also raises the level of cortisol in a baby or a child's body, increasing the likelihood of putting the child into a state of stress.

The mother's absence from the child reduces oxytocin release in both the mother and the child. This makes it harder for mothers to read their baby's gestures when they are with them. So at the end of a long day at nursery or work, a stressed baby is picked up by a stressed mother. Due to less time with the child, she is less able to understand the baby's attempts to communicate, because her lower levels of oxytocin make it harder for her to pick up non-verbal cues - and the evening is hard work all round. No wonder some mothers feel a sense of relief at dropping off their baby at nursery and heading for the relative calm of an adult workplace. It is not, however, a sense of relief shared by the baby. 

Claire Paye

Many thanks, as ever, to Diana Dean from the fantastic charity *What about the Children?*, who helped with some of the scientific sources for this article, including:

Kerstin Uvnäs Moberg "The Hormone of Closeness: The role of oxytocin in relationships", (2013) published by Pinter and Martin Ltd.

Bonding Matters...The Chemistry of Attachment by Linda Palmer, www.babyreference.com

Denmark - A Child-Free Place

A British mother in Denmark shares her experience of trying to care for her children herself, in a country where children are expected to be in formal, external childcare from the age of one. We featured her story in the last newsletter, as 'Sarah', when she was shouted at for having her toddlers at home and when putting her 2 year old into nursery for 'only' 2-3 hours a day was regarded as scandalous. We catch up with her as she tries to claim an income from the unemployment insurance scheme she paid into when she was being paid to care for her children at home as a private daycarer - for which she had to submit to monthly inspections, including an enforcement of the requirement to provide organic bread.

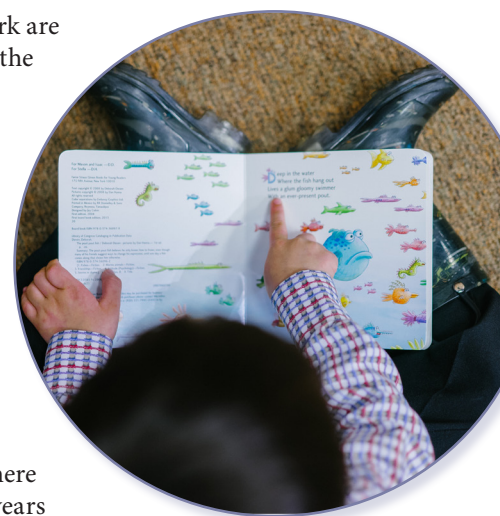
Children in Denmark are expected to be 'in the system' from age

one. We have to enrol them on a waiting list for daycare by the time they are 7 months old. They then go to nursery (Vuggestue) from one (or earlier) until they enter pre-school (Børnhave) at 34 months. School starts at 6 years old. There was a little clip that went viral here on Facebook a couple of years ago of a girl on her first day at school

looking very serious and deflated, she said 'So, I go to work in Vuggestue and then at Børnhave, then to school and then I get sent to work some more forever after that?!' I find it soul-destroying that the children (and adults) here only see that there is value in a person who is seen as 'working' and contributing to the financial gain of society by paying tax.

I don't know any other mothers with pre-school age children at home. There is not one near me. I used to have a couple of friends who worked as a private daycarer for their own child/children as I did and we met up occasionally when I was at home with my first child. They all returned to full time employment again before their children started school. The second time around when I was at home with the twins I didn't know of anyone else near me who had their children at home. One reason I enrolled my children in the Børnhave is that I cannot imagine isolating my children from other children until they are 6 years old when they start school - there are no children at home on weekdays for them to play with at all, other than babies whose parents are taking maternity leave.

If I did not enrol the children into Børnhave, I believe that I would be under great(er?) scrutiny and investigation by the kommune (local council). There is a push in the government trying to make a point system requirement for all families with children. It is already in place in some areas of the country. The more points scored in each family the higher risk they are seen as for the children and requiring closer involvement from the kommune. The points are given on



Denmark - A Child-Free Place, contd.

things such as if the parents are immigrants, unemployed, or have a record of mental illness etc. Currently I would score highly on this assessment, which I think does not reflect my parenting abilities accurately at all.

When the twins turned 34 months old I was no longer permitted to be employed as a private daycarer for them and I learnt that the program, which I used to do so, is no longer an option to parents. It was absolutely expected that my children start in nursery now and I received notice of the starting date and the institution that they would go to.

I receive child benefits quarterly from the Government, but they are now capped at two children and I also now have to contribute to healthcare payments, even though we pay very high levels of tax. So I decided to claim on the unemployment insurance policy (called A-kasse) that I had been paying into while I was working [similar to job seeker's allowance except that we only contribute through National Insurance payments in the UK]. It would allow me about 80% of my monthly earnings for up to two years while looking for work so long as I was seen as eligible and followed their rules (of which I have been told there are around 800).

I was off to a shaky start, thrown into the deep end so to speak. After being at home with the children for seven years I was having as much discomfort adjusting to the new routine as our children were. The same week that the twins were starting Børnhave I was to attend an A-kasse meeting and start looking for work.

I arrived at the joint introduction meeting with about thirty others. We were given a presentation, which made clear exactly what was expected of us. The meeting was not the encouraging support I had imagined. The stiff-faced woman presenting repeated several times to us that we weren't to go home and sit on the sofa eating chocolate. To receive our money each month we must attend ALL meetings that we are called to. There would be a minimum of two meetings each month: one meeting with them - the unemployment insurance company where they would review our skills, availability and efforts to look for work - and a meeting at the job centre where we would receive advice and they report back to A-kasse on our being approved as appropriately seeking and available to work.


We were to go to every job interview we are invited to and do exactly as we are instructed to do so by our A-kasse leaders - any courses or classes etc. We had to apply for at least two jobs each week and log onto the A-kasse's system the jobs we had applied for with all relevant files attached including the job advert, where we heard of the job, the address and details of the company, a copy of the CV and cover letter that was

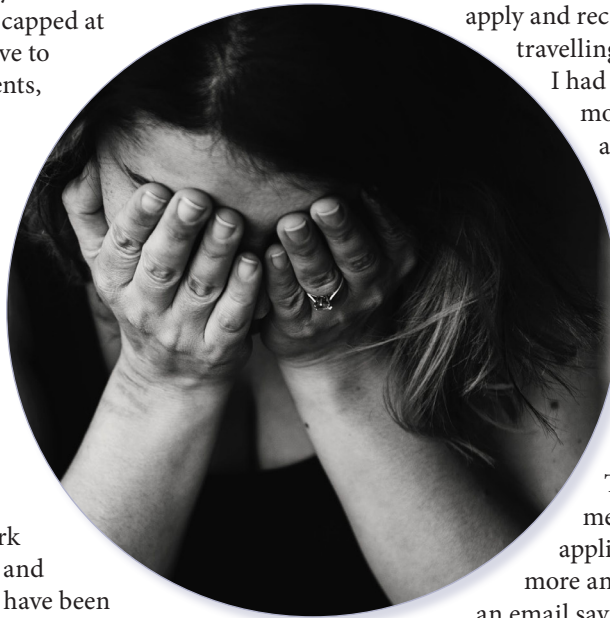
used to apply for the jobs and what follow ups were expected or had occurred. We were to upload one new cover letter each month and we must be seen to have logged onto the Jobcentre webpage and pressed a button on our personal page every week to show that we have looked at the jobs recommended to us.

I suddenly found that I had a full time job now looking for work or rather proving that I was. It was a big life adjustment while trying to ease the children into daycare. With such little time to process things, my mental health began to slide. I wasn't prepared for the identity crisis. I dropped the children at daycare and went straight to the library to look for jobs, apply and record all applications. My husband was away travelling with his work one week every month. And I had no family support to call on. My husband's mother, who disapproves of my efforts to look after my children outside the system, rather than go out to work, on her last visit in our home had physically intimidated me in front of the children. She isn't someone I can call on. I started to feel anxious about doing anything but search for work until it was time to collect the children.

A-kasse enrolled me to go to Danish lessons to improve my language skills. Three-hour classes, four days a week, weekly meetings, job search and recording jobs applied to was still expected. I felt the strain more and began having anxiety attacks. I received an email saying that my payments were being stopped as I had not attended a meeting, which I had not been fully informed of. At this point I was starting to have symptoms of depression. On calling A-kasse they could see they had made a mistake as there was no record of an invitation being given to me for this meeting, yet they never owned the mistake nor apologised for the stress or inconvenience to me.

A few weeks later I was called in for a meeting for having taken too many sick days after that time and had my money stopped again - whenever one of my three children were sick, I had to register as having a sick day so that I could look after them at home. This happened quite frequently as many Danish parents will send their children to nursery when they're ill rather than take time off work to keep them at home so my children picked up lots of bugs.

I arranged to see my doctor who confirmed that I appeared to be suffering from stress and showing mild symptoms of depression. As it was only weeks until summer break, I decided to let myself have a breather and heal naturally without thinking of A-kasse and looking for employment. It took a few weeks until I felt back to myself. I have not yet returned to registering back onto the unemployment insurance system again and have no immediate plans to. Instead I'm looking after myself and my family as we need right now. I understand the children will not be so young for long and there will be a time when I will have hours to dedicate to searching for work and logging them in detail, possibly even returning to my own education. This is not that time for us just yet. 



The Swedish Utopia Myth - work before family

Madeleine Wallin, FEFAF representative and inspirational speaker, on how she came to wake up to the brainwashing of mothers to put work before their children in the supposedly ideal society of Sweden.

I am a mother who lives in Sweden. My children are now between 15 and 29 years old, so it's been a while since I had the experience of having small children, being a stay at home mother and having to struggle to be a part of society. The modern Swedish woman is supposed to work full time, share the parental leave 50/50 with her partner and therefore she is not supposed to have maternal instincts that last longer than, let's say, 6-7 months, according to political correctness.

I woke up from following the main stream, doing what I was told as an obedient citizen. Leaving my three children in daycare and working part time. At least I didn't go all the way with full time and I have stayed at home at least the first 1.5 years and my two youngest have never attended daycare.

Our house was a meeting point rather than a home and the rhythm and feeling in the family was quite bad, as we never had time enough to create the deeper bonds as a group. It's not only relationships between parents and children but also it's the family group itself that need time to figure out how to work. And the best thing to do is to have time enough to be together.

Something happened with me when I was pregnant with my fourth child, my only daughter. I suddenly realized I didn't lead my life and my family the way I wanted and actually it made me furious. So I changed everything. Quit my job, took my children back home and made the best choice ever.

Looking back, I would do it again and earlier and more. I wouldn't let anyone else define my maternal instincts or raise my children for me. They are my children and I want to be their favorite role model. Childhood is passing by so quickly and you can't go back and be present afterwards. The now is all we have and for a child it is even truer.

But making that choice, in 2000, made me realize how difficult it is, how determined and convinced you have to be, and if you are not strong enough yourself it might be too hard. Even my husband argued with me about staying at home. He thought we couldn't afford it and that "people don't do that". Of course he changed his mind and realized that it was one of our best life choices for the family. My guess is that it has become even worse today as gender equality is the new religion and it doesn't include motherhood or the needs of children.

I changed my life completely and I also started campaigning about the importance of being there for your children, the right to choose your own life and to recognize and value the unpaid caregiving work that mainly women do all over the world. I founded the Swedish organization Haro at the same time and am still active in the board.

I also work for FEFAF - the European Federation of Parents and Carers at Home - where the main issue is the remuneration of the unpaid caregiving work, which for me is one of the most important questions there is for women and equality in the world. Everywhere in the world it's mainly

women who do the unpaid work and that should be recognized and valued.

It is one of the most important jobs we can do and it's made invisible. Women are made invisible and we have to change that.

Sweden


Today more than 50% of the 1-year olds and 84% of all children between 1-5 years are in pre-school. We don't even have daycare any longer, it is all pre-school, as an education for children from the age of 1 is seen as necessary for the development of the child and more important than attachment and care. Fifteen hours a week is free from the age of 3. You can use the pre-school even if you are at home with a newborn sibling and in Stockholm it's now even possible to leave your child for 40 hours a week. It is affordable as we have a maximum cost and parents only have to pay 8% of the real cost. Children who are taken care of at home get no economic support at all. There was a small contribution but the Government took it away, as it was a "women-trap".

The welfare is generous when you behave correctly - and most people do, as the trust in the state is extremely high. There is no family-first approach. Work comes first. The role of the family is weak when compared to the right of individuals. Most politicians don't use the word family today and the strive to reach gender equality is more important than the needs of children, parents and families. Individualism, personal careers, economic growth and what we produce is what we want.

From this autumn, the pre-school class for children aged 6 years has become compulsory (school used to be compulsory just from age 7) and some political parties have suggested that pre-school from the age of 2 or 3 should be compulsory. So it's not really going the way I wish.

Pre-school is more and more seen as a right and parents find it difficult to care for two children at the same time. They are also convinced that children need to be activated and play in larger groups with children at the same age. They don't trust their own competence and this is really sad as we all have to practice to become better at what we do. We are not born as parents, we have to learn and that takes time. Time spent together, and it isn't all easy, but that's part of the development.

Parents are confused and do as they are told, despite their own instincts and feelings about what would be the best for them. Women are more on sick leave than men, especially in the age when they have small children.

I am hopeful even though the situation is really bad for both children and mothers. I think it can and will change. But it's up to us to make that change happen. 



The Choice to be a Parent at Home Full Time

Tara, a Mothers at Home Matter member, argues that the Government should give mothers at home the same financial assistance as working mothers, to enable young children to enjoy the best quality care possible.

A few months ago I wrote a submission to the parliamentary enquiry on childcare provision. I was feeling full of passion about the injustice of our tax system and worried about a future in which our smallest citizens are raised outside the home by a bewildering array of child-care providers. I felt absolutely convinced I had done the right thing spending 20 years raising my own two children, full of confidence that I was launching them out into the world on a path that would undoubtedly be successful.

This week finds me sitting at home in tears worried about my 19-year-old daughter who seems to be too ill to start university next week, despite this being what she has worked towards for the last 7 years. The ups and downs of being a full-time parent are so totally unpredictable, it is impossible to know what is around the corner. Plans are made and ripped up, remade and modified. We always blame ourselves for any set-backs. Once the children have left home – what then? Was it really the right choice to have spent 20 years outside the employment market? Would my education have been of more benefit to society if I had not made this decision? Am I any good at anything? I imagine I am not alone in feeling the empty nest looming ahead of me. The point is that we have to remind ourselves constantly that what we have done is valuable because society, government and the Inland Revenue try to make us feel otherwise. This should not be the case and at times it is exhausting. We should be celebrated for our contribution to society not just to our own family.

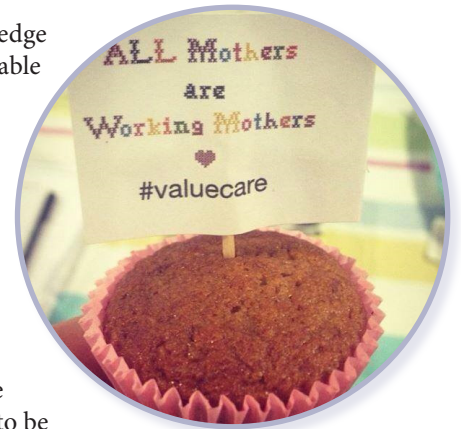
Here are a few extracts from my submission to Parliament written when I was feeling so much more confident:

“In the eyes of our society I have been “just a mum” for 20 years. At times it has been the most wonderful job in the world and at times the hardest. I had no qualifications for this job other than the ones every parent is provided with by nature. I would not change the choice I made and feel sad when I speak to young parents today who are encouraged by our own government and tax system to think that two working parents should be the norm and preferred situation for every family.

Subsidised early years child care is part of this problem. By financially encouraging parents to delegate child care to institutions and, worse still, peddling the incorrect assumption that young children do better if they are put into a day-care environment, young parents are encouraged by the government to begin to doubt their own parenting skills. A two year old has never learned to speak and read just by spending time “socialising” with other two year olds in a day-care environment. One-to-one interaction with a special adult is how these skills are learnt. Children learn good behaviour from their adult role models not each other.

My request to our government and tax system: Do not make single-earner families with a stay-at-home parent pay more tax than is paid by a family with the same household income where both parents choose to work. Make it a level playing field.

Above all please acknowledge that the best, most affordable and highest quality early years childcare is provided by a stay-at-home parent. We all know that, really, the politicians are just too frightened to say it out loud. Unless the government finds a way to support and encourage all those who would like to be full-time-parents while their children are young, children growing up in affluent families where parents are financially able to make this choice will have a lifelong advantage. Is that the policy outcome the government wants?”



Since writing these words I have thought more about education. During August we are bombarded with school league tables and good news articles celebrating outstanding successes. WHAT IF educational outcomes were more influenced by family environment than the schools and government would like us to believe? Anecdotally, what I see in the affluent community my kids are growing up in, are very many highly-educated mothers who are able to be at home full-time and who can devote their time and energy to their children for many years without having to worry about the income lost through this choice. The fee-paying schools would like to take all the credit for the young people that leave at the end of their sixth forms and head off to stellar careers or further education but maybe it is also to do with the parenting??

Those mothers I met who were unhappy taking a career-break to bring up their children were able to employ full-time nannies so long hours in nurseries were not necessary. I also knew two lovely stay-at-home dads whose wives' earnings made this choice possible.

In sharp contrast, it has been really interesting observing how successful my husband and his two sisters have been. Even though they came from what would now be called an economically deprived background, they were brought up by a woman who was 100% focussed on their emotional needs. Having watched how super-gran behaved with my own two children when they were young (they still call her super-gran!) I think it is so obvious she is the reason her own children have such high emotional intelligence, along with the confidence which has helped them be successful in their lives despite coming from a background where many of their peers ended up in prison or surviving on benefits. My husband was the first person ever from his village to go to university, closely followed by his two sisters.

My amazing mother-in-law returned to work - lifting hot bricks out of a furnace for 8-hour shifts in the local brick works - when her three children were at secondary school. She continued to do this in order to help with the university costs for all three of them. Luckily she was no longer working when my two babies arrived so she was able to spend time with us,

The Choice to be a Parent...contd.




which was very precious. I learnt so much from her. So maybe parenting should be given more credit for the emotional and economic health of the next generation than it currently does.

There are parents who manage to be at home from all walks of life, but are there any studies that look at this in detail? If we could correlate having a parent at home full-time, especially during the early years, to the emotional wellbeing of our future adults, would that help the government decide to make the tax system work more fairly for those who wish to make this choice? [Yes – see research by Garcia, Heckman and Ziff 2017, cited in the Spring 2018 newsletter p7. It identified a 13.7% annual return on early-childhood programmes for disadvantaged children, which, it realised would ‘basically do what a good middle-class loving mother would do’. Ed] Is this simply too toxic an idea for any politician to consider? If so, is staying at home to raise children an option that will increasingly only be available to the affluent? What can we do

right now, assuming our pleas to government fall on deaf ears? We could change the vocabulary we use:

We do work! We are not planning to go back to work as we are in work.

It is important work, it is often enjoyable and often difficult, but it is work that has financial value if the next generation become emotionally stable, caring and considerate, productive adults. Our voluntary activities in communities all over the country are important and appreciated. We are not “just a mum” and should promise never to say it again. Not everyone chooses this path but those that do should not be made to feel as if they are less valuable to society than those who prioritise their careers. Baby steps lead to bigger strides as every mother knows. 

Once a Mother, always a Mother

Two letters from mothers of older children

The Joy of Finding Mothers at Home Matter

*Dear Mothers at Home Matter,

I am just writing to say I am so glad I've come across your organisation and wish I had found it years ago.

Having given up my job in March to become self-employed so I can be more flexible to help two of my daughters with child-care, I found myself struggling financially as I set up my business, with one of my daughters exhausted and stressed and missing her child because she has to work full time because her employer doesn't do part-time work. There are such social and financial pressure for both parents to work. And of course no recognition from society that what I am doing is valuable, simply that I've 'given up' work and have to watch my daughter struggle with this social pressure for mothers to work.

After years of single motherhood, demeaned by my ex-husband, members of my own family and others for choosing to stay at home to look after our children, humiliated by the stigma of being 'on benefits', in my self-soul searching I have been trying to get to the bottom of my low self-esteem. I have accomplished some great things as well as being proud of being a mother, then a carer of my parents. I have realised at last that it is down to this grinding away of a woman's value because of the judgement of many people, and the way career and gross national product is placed on a pedestal by our society, so that if you stay at home to look after your children, or grandchildren, or parents it's somehow taking a lazy or self-sacrificing role.

In my recent journaling to myself it finally went through my head to wonder if there were any groups who campaign for mothers' rights to be at home? Thank heavens for Google! Finding that you actually campaign for things to change is magnificent, in my view. I am so fed up with seeing signs for 'Free nursery places' or women actually being penalised if they are unemployed with small children for not seeking work. I would go as far as to say I believe it is a sick society that doesn't see the value of mothers at home full time with small children,

and part-time even until their children are teenagers. Excuse the rant but I am overjoyed to have found this site.


It is great to feel I can join something that gives a voice to my minority beliefs. It is great to read of all the research that is available to back up what I instinctively feel is right for children and families. It will do wonders for upturning my self-doubts that I am in some way a failure because I haven't got a full-time, high income job which seems to be the pinnacle of success to aspire to in our society. I will definitely join as a member - and support any efforts to bring about change and sleep very well tonight!

**This letter has been altered to protect the identity of the author.*

Why I'm Still Available for my University-Age Children

Hello MAHM!

MAHM is, quite rightly, centred on the importance of mothers at home when children are young, especially in the first 3 years. But we sometimes forget that teenagers, indeed 'children' of all ages, often need the support their mother can give. For example, while at university, two of my offspring developed quite different health problems (joints/skin) requiring many months of NHS involvement. I was able to support and advocate for them throughout this process. This was especially important when one was diagnosed on the bases of gender, location and being a student, rather than actual medical investigations, and the other needed to have timely treatment so as not to interfere with exams.

When, later, one was on the brink of giving up on a master's degree two weeks before the end due to stresses from various directions, I was able to go and spend a week ensuring the reestablishment of an even keel - and a master's degree. Some might ridicule me for this - by that age they need to 'learn to fail' - but my view is that, if I can be, I am there for my children at whatever stage of life they are in. If, as their mother, I can help them succeed in their endeavours merely by giving love and support, well, how wonderful is that! This is why I continue with my membership of MAHM. 

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Cally, a high-flying lawyer, explains why she decided to take a break from work and how she is returning to the workplace.

It was the end of 2002. I was a 31-year-old lawyer about to go off on maternity leave from the City law firm where I had worked very hard for the previous 5 years. My boss turned to me and declared, “When you come back to work, you’ll really need to prove yourself!”

“You must be kidding!” was my unarticulated response... I was highly conscious that there were plenty of areas in which I was about to have to prove myself, but work was certainly not going to be one of them.

Things were very binary in that career. At that time: either you took just a few months off to get this “motherhood malarkey” out of your system, got yourself nannied-to-the-hilt and returned to work on fire, demonstrably more committed than before – or... you didn’t.

So, I didn’t. I wish I could say that I made a conscious, principled choice to be the perfect stay-at-home mother with my babies, but in fact that wasn’t the case. Being a working mother in that career was not an option, short of opening my cheque book to delegate motherhood and relegating my kids to the same status as the smart house, expensive car and state-of-the-art stuff I never had the chance to buy.

Luckily, I loved being at home with my two children. They were special years. Due to more than our fair share of unforeseeable difficulties in more recent years, as a family we have fully drawn on those precious bonds that were formed when the children were small. Not for one moment do I regret taking time out to be at home with the children.

But it was hard, and at times lonely. My husband was in a demanding job involving overseas travel. After a week of wining and dining in hotels, all he wanted was to be at home with a simple TV dinner. For me, after a week of (guess what?) being at home with simple TV dinners, all I wanted to do was to go out, have a grown-up conversation and preferably... be wined and dined!

I look back on this period of my life as one of great fun and creativity, but also low self-esteem. I was used to being financially independent and it weighed heavily on both my husband and me that I (and, of course, additionally our children) were now so dependent on him.

The real cause of the low self-esteem was the sense of being on the scrapheap career-wise. I had had a wonderful education, years of training and then a good career and now it had all come to a halt, with no prospect of resumption. At least not in the form of the job I had left behind...

I’d love to go back in time and reassure my 30-something-year-old self. “Life has its seasons” I would say, “and the seasons pass. Enjoy the season that you are in; enjoy it to the full and fret less! Of course, it’s not perfect: every season has its limitations and its frustrations, but they usually pass, just as the seasons pass. Things change. Life changes.”

When I was at home with the children, wondering if I would

ever even want to go back to work (being under pressure to do so from an anxious husband), an older and wiser friend pointed out that I should trust my instincts: I would know when the time was right.

And she was right. Once the children were settled at school, I started to get itchy feet. I had been out of law for ten years by this time, and so felt very de-skilled. I had done some fundraising for a large national charity and so I wrote to them, asking if I could volunteer in their legal department in order to regain some experience. It was humbling to be a ‘trainee’ again, and this time to somebody much younger than me, but we got on well. Surprisingly quickly, I got into the swing of things. That voluntary job led to a very interesting (but poorly paid!) job in another large international charity.

I found it very valuable to get back in touch with the world of work. The AWS (Association of Women Solicitors) was very helpful. They run various back-to-work courses geared towards lawyers, but nowadays for a more general course, try CareerBreak People! [Sponsoring our Conference, more details on opposite page] Staying in touch is vital, at least so that you know what your options are and how the world is changing. I buried my head in the sand and ignored the world of work, which undoubtedly made it harder (but not impossible!) when the time came to return to work.


From my poorly paid international charity job I moved into the freelance legal work that I now do, fitting short-term contracts around my family life. Yes, I have paid the price in terms of seniority and pay, but the flexibility and quality of family life have been far more precious. And now, as my two teenagers start embarking on their GCSEs, it’s all change again, as I begin theology training, ultimately to become a vicar. A whole new career and another, exciting change of season. M

“Enjoy the season that you are in; enjoy it to the full and fret less”



Making the most of your 'career break'



Ronnie from CareerBreak People,  sponsors of the Mothers at Home Matter conference, provides some essential advice to help mothers make the most of their career break.

The need for businesses to appreciate the balance of skills gained whilst on career breaks is becoming more important, as employees move in and out of the workplace more often. CareerBreak People offers people support every step of the way.

At the beginning of your career break

Be prepared by:

- updating your CV;
- summarising your achievements to date;
- finishing any professional qualifications;
- updating your LinkedIn page (it is respectable to refer to your career break);
- updating any professional membership subscription rates and contacting a financial adviser who specialises in female clients.

Continue to maintain your inner confidence

1. Stay true to yourself

You do not become any less capable just because you are out of the (paid) workplace. With 1.9m women on career breaks, up 6% from 1999, you are not alone.

2. Your choice to take a break is valuable

The pressure on people to contribute to GDP does not consider the LOSS of their economic contribution through caring, volunteering, school and community support, mental health and well-being and so on.

3. See local friends regularly

Find activities that involve meeting people and try not to live your life online. Apps such as www.mummylinksapp.com help those with young children.

4. Prioritise some "you time"

Our Personal Skills Log helps you identify and track the skills you develop. Set aside time to keep your mind active; read journals related to your business and attend local networking events. Our 'Pondero, Pilates for the Mind', talks series is designed to keep you in touch and enables you to expand your knowledge whilst networking.


Returning to work after a break

Make returning a project: set a budget, allocate time, research, meet people. Do you want to: return full or part time; re-train; become an entrepreneur; travel; work long hours; commute?

Consider joining one of our Return to Work or Entrepreneur workshops. There is a growing trend for start-up companies, and a lot of support for flexible working and working from home, look out for specialist recruitment companies. Returnships are paid, short-term employment contracts supporting returners, sometimes with a subsequent offer of full-time work. The nature of jobs is continually changing, but do not be put off if you have been away from technology for a while, as technology skills can be learnt. Accenture has the following recommendations for returners:

- 1) having digital fluency (using digital technologies to connect, work and learn)
- 2) having a career strategy (making informed choices and proactively managing your career) and
- 3) immersing yourself in tech (acquiring greater technology and stronger digital skills).

We know that investing in a new work wardrobe can be daunting. www.smartworks.org.uk help you choose your (often designer) return to work outfit, which you are then able to keep.

Congratulations, you have the job! Keep your confidence up: your skills and potential have been greatly enhanced by a break from (paid) work. Above all, keep sight of your aspirations. 

For more information and support go to www.careerbreakpeople.com

MAHM Annual Conference 2018




Mothers at Home Matter Conference

Thursday 8th November, 10am - 4pm

11 Mandeville Place, London, W1U 3AJ

Cost: £15 MAHM members, £18 non-members

Sponsored by CareerBreak People 

CareerBreak People provides support, activities and guidance at every stage of a career break to help people maintain confidence, skills and knowledge that will make life transitions and returning to work easier.

- 10am Tea and coffee, and an opportunity to mingle
- 10.30am Chair's welcome, Mummylinks, CareerBreak People
- 11am Speakers: Allison Pearson and Diana Dean
- 12.45pm General discussion and feedback on being a mother in today's society
- 1.15pm Lunch
- 2pm Mothers at Home Matter AGM. Feedback on our activities. All very welcome
- 4pm Close

Speakers

Allison Pearson, award-winning author and journalist: A Mother's Worth

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that women make the world work in order that men can run it. If that's the case, why is the vast contribution wives and mothers make to our society still not properly valued? Time and again, polls reveal that most mothers would like to stay home with their children when they're young, yet all political parties continue to boast about how many mothers they have got into work. Isn't it about time that the UK valued the remarkable contribution made by mothers as they raise



the good citizens of the future? Allison Pearson challenges the notion that more mothers in the workplace is automatically good for women, or their children.


Allison Pearson is an award-winning author and journalist. She writes a weekly column for the Daily Telegraph. Allison has written two acclaimed novels about combining motherhood and work, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, made into a film starring Sarah Jessica Parker and, the sequel, *How Hard Can It Be?* The latter is soon to be a TV series for Netflix and is available to buy at half price at the conference.

Diana Dean, Research Director, What About The Children?: What I have learned about infant stress, and its consequences

In this talk, I will first of all take you back to my earlier days when I ran a Mother & Baby/Toddler Group for 14 years. During this time I observed a general change in the behaviour of the children attending over those years.

Why did these behaviours change, and in what way? In an attempt to answer these questions, I was introduced to an understanding of the biochemistry

of the brain, and how the way an infant is treated affects its neurobiological development. Research showed that infant stress, and its management, was playing a central developmental role in these early days. What might be the short and long term consequences of this early stress?

Diana has been Research Director at What About the Children? (WATCh?) for 12 years, having joined not long after it was founded in 1993. She was appointed a Trustee in 2002. The charity shines a light on the causes and consequences of early emotional neglect, and the pressure that today's culture is placing on family relationships, in particular as it affects the first three years of a child's life. 



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Subs Renewal

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.

For any additional information, including our bank account details so you can set up a standing order yourself, please contact info@mothersathomematter.co.uk