

## **CHILDREN NEED THEIR MUMS THROUGH THE MOST FORMATIVE YOUNGEST YEARS**

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Editor's note: Happy Mother's Day to all our Mums. We love you, appreciate you, and as the following article points out, we cannot live without you.

Jan emailed me a while ago saying "I hope you don't mind my writing to you like this, but it seems that my generation is never given the chance of telling our side of our story. We are not trying to criticise life now, just saying there is another side, and it was good." She wrote that she never felt a lesser person because she stayed at home with her three young children. "In my mind, being able to stay with your children (at least when they are young) shows them that you think they are important, and this gives them stability and roots. Then you give them wings. We all had our children when we were young, so by the time they were at high school we were still young enough to stretch our own wings, either by refreshing our own skills or taking up something new."

Then Jan wrote something that I often think about when I look at my own three children. She recalled that after her kids had grown into three remarkable young adults, a man asked whether she had spent a lot of time with them at home. When she said, yes, he said: "Well, it shows." We, the current crop of women, have a lot to show for ourselves. A stellar education, great jobs, careers that take us interesting places, enlightened men in our lives who parent more than their fathers did. Increasingly, we have policies and workplaces that are, let's face it, female-centric, checking in on women's advancement. We have bureaucracies and lobby groups that do our bidding, and senior businessmen who join the women's bandwagon too.

Lots of people looking out for us. And it shows. While there are gripes at the edges over gender pay gaps and not enough women in parliament (maybe we have more sense than men), women have assumed centre stage, and why shouldn't we? There's a lame joke about feminism being a great idea until something goes wrong with the car. Maybe feminism was a great idea until something went wrong with the kids. Women don't need a man to fix a car. Not as a matter of strict biology, anyway, though I'm grateful to the blokes in greasy overalls at my local garage. But children, especially babies, do need their mothers.

Before feminists have conniptions and demand equality between the sexes and equal parenting, is it too much to check in on how children are going? To check the science and to be reminded of our biology? Not as a female guilt trip or an attempt to turn back time but simply to remind ourselves that motherhood is important and, for that reason, is one heck of a privilege, in all its messy, demanding, beautiful, frustrating ways. I remembered Jan's email when reading the reaction to a new book. *Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters*, by American psychoanalyst and clinical social worker Erica Komisar.

This book made a splash for all the wrong reasons. As reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, one agent told her: "No, we couldn't touch that. That would make women feel guilty." A conference organiser who rejected her as a speaker said: "You are going to make women feel badly. How dare you?" One woman at a charity gathering told her: "You are going to set women back 50 years." Komisar's book is controversial only if overlaid with a weird and unnatural women-only filter that blocks out the welfare of children.

The 53-year-old Jewish clinician developed a passionate interest in the role of mothers in early childhood development when she started noticing more absent mothers and motherhood being undervalued, along with boys being diagnosed with ADHD and an increase in depression diagnoses in young girls.

Komisar also noticed more young children being diagnosed with "social disorders", having trouble relating to others and lacking empathy. Lots of studies tell us about babies suffering separation anxiety when their mother leaves them and babies reacting to strangers by producing increased levels of cortisol, the hormone associated with stress.

But the science that literally strikes at the heart is Komisar's discussion about oxytocin. This is a neurotransmitter known as the "love" or "trust" hormone. Komisar explains that mothers produce oxytocin when they give birth, breastfeed and are emotionally present with their babies. The more a mother engages with her baby through touching, gazing into newborn eyes and using sweet gaga talk, the more oxytocin she produces, and "the more oxytocin she produces, the more she bonds with her child". As adults, we know what it's like to be loved and to love. The physical and emotional power of intimacy, from spending time together, is palpable.

Oxytocin is rushing around us when we look at each other, even think of one another, when we hug or touch or have sex. Oxytocin is the hormone that helps us bond with one another, it helps build trust and is described as an antidote to depressive feelings. If oxytocin produces all this between two adults, why is it hard for us to agree that it bonds and benefits a mother and baby? The release of oxytocin in the baby's brain from being nurtured becomes a buffer against the negative effects of stressful events.

Elaborating to *The Wall Street Journal*, Komisar explains that “every time a mother comforts a baby in distress, she's actually regulating that baby's emotions from the outside in. After three years, the baby internalises that ability to regulate their emotions, but not until then.” It's not the same with fathers because our magnificent biology means women produce more oxytocin than men. Women love to talk about differences between men and women in the workplace, how women bring female attributes to the workplace because they are more collegiate, better listeners, more empathetic and so on.

Yet when we look inside the family, women, especially those who control the debate, only ever talk about shared parenting, shared parental leave and so on. Biological difference is often ignored, along with the science that supports it. That is no surprise in women's studies departments that routinely deny women's biology in a blind rage to expunge difference. But the rest of us could be more curious as to why it matters for a mother to be there more for a baby. After all, we agonise over so much else about our kids. Should we enrol our four-year-old in Kumon lessons to get ahead in maths? What about piano lessons and taekwondo? Should we stop our teenager playing video games because it normalises violence?

We are endlessly curious, too, about new and existing social disorders, to the point where the diagnostic bible of mental and social disorders keeps expanding in width. Consider the current diagnoses for children, from neurodevelopmental disorders identified in early infancy to others such as disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit, hyperactivity disorders, reactive attachment disorder and disinhibited social engagement disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder.

Curiosity has its limits, though, at least among the political class, where it has become virtually verboten to discuss how mothers promote wellbeing in a baby. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported, while Christian radio stations and Fox & Friends interviewed Komisar about her book, she wasn't welcome on NPR, American public radio, and was rejected by the liberal press in her home city, New York. She told the *Journal* that seconds before she appeared on ABC's *Good Morning America*, the interviewer said: “I don't believe in the premise of your book at all. I don't like your book.”

Plenty of women won't like Komisar's book because it unsettles the new normal where highly educated women work full time, long hours, carving out brilliant careers from a young age, and babies and young children are placed in day-care or have two nannies, the weekday one and one for the weekend. Her call for a more child-centric society means demanding a government-mandated paid maternity leave and flexible work in a country that still denies that to the women who need it most, those who lack the financial power to stay home.

Komisar's book is important in Australia too, even with our generous paid parental leave schemes. A 2013 analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics figures by the University of NSW revealed that parents spent four hours less a week with their children than they did a generation ago. And research by UNSW associate professor Lyn Craig suggests that parenting is now more intensive, with parents squeezing in activities to smarten their children. Think Kumon for four-year-olds. But as Komisar says, concentrating on your child's cognitive development before their social emotional development is like putting on their shoes before their socks.

And parenting experts point to stay-at-home mums as often the most intensive parents. Their vision is constantly directed outwards, to tightly timetabled activities, making sure Billy is in the best footy team and Lucinda is in the highest English class, and complaining when their young genius doesn't get the mark that mum thinks they deserved. New words catch this new generation of parents, helicopter parents who hover and lawnmower parents who clear the way for their kids, and they all mean well.

But if children aren't doing so well, more boys on ADHD medications, more anxiety among young girls, a generation of young adults asking for safe spaces and trigger warnings at university, then perhaps it's time to check in and ask whether we've moved too far from Jan's generation, because maybe little children need to hang out more with mums who understand that motherhood is more than directing the daily traffic of activities. Just asking.

**Source:** *Article written by Sydney Columnist Janet Albrechtsen*