

To Work or Not to Work

The challenges and choices facing parents of young children when they are deciding whether to stay at home or return to work.

When you've had a baby, making the decision about whether to stay at home or return to work is a complex one. There are so many things to take into consideration - and what you thought you'd 'decided' when you were pregnant is not necessarily what you want once you've had the baby!

Is there a 'right way' and a 'wrong way', or simply a 'right way' for you, based on your own unique set of circumstances? And how can you find out what that 'right way' is for you? Parents who have already faced the choices for themselves tell us how they reached their decisions.

Stay or Go?

Stay

Looking back on my childhood, I can honestly say that the person I most admired was my mum. My ambition was to be like her. When my teacher asked the class to draw a picture of what we wanted to be when we grew up, I drew a lady surrounded by children and the trappings of domestic life. I wanted to be a mummy.

Now, through adult eyes, I wonder what it was that was so attractive about my mum and what she did. The overriding memory I have is that she was always there. We went everywhere together. She was my best friend and my favourite person. Now that I have children of my own, a girl aged two and a boy aged three, I want to be there for them too.

Best of both worlds

I was very happy with my career, assuming I would want the best of both worlds by expertly, and enjoyably, juggling a career and motherhood. Once my daughter was born, I simply felt differently.

Do I think women who go back to work don't want to give their best to their children? No. I just know that I had the choice and chose to stay at home. I had been successful in my job, and now I wanted to be a successful mother.

Interestingly, I found most people assumed I would go back to work. No doubt - returning to work would have considerably increased my kudos. Although people said they 'admired' my decision not to go back, I felt it was a euphemism for incredulity! I don't think people admire you for staying at home to be with your children. I think many women find their identity in their work and, without it, they struggle. "I don't want to be seen as just a wife and mum!" was a phrase I often heard. But I'm glad my mum instilled into me that, for her, looking after me and my sister was the most important thing in the world.

Harder option

There's a rumour that going to work is the harder and nobler option. It really isn't true. I miss regular coffee breaks, lunch breaks wandering around the shops, people to talk to about things that don't revolve around the house and kids' TV! I'm on call 24 hours a day and am required to sort out arguments, apply first aid, manage the household, and provide care, entertainment, attention and meals.

So why do I occasionally feel guilty about the choice I made? Sometimes I feel that society and the government don't value what full-time parents actually do. I often think that if more parents were enabled to stay at home and look after their children, then more parents would choose to do so and that would be a positive thing for many families

Perhaps women feel it is too demeaning a role? Perhaps they feel they would rather enjoy a higher standard of living? I don't know - every choice is individual. In the short time I've been a mum, I've learnt that having and bringing up children is a gift and a privilege and I'm fortunate to be able to do it full-time.

Louise



Why did I decide to go back to work full-time after having children? It certainly wasn't a rejection of my upbringing (my mum stayed at home to bring up her children), nor did I have an unquenchable ambition to succeed at a career. I don't think my work is more important than my family, but I do know that it enhances my moral, social and physical well being and that it does the same for other women too. I'm grateful that I have the choice.

When I think about the time I've missed with my children, it's not without regret. Yet, on balance, I'm glad that my partner and I didn't assume that I would stay at home with them. I'm sharing the tasks of parenting, earning money and responsibility for family life *with* my partner.

Adult company

Being at home with no adult company can be lonely and boring. I believe that action-packed, quality time - making every second count - can be just as important as the quantity of time that we spend with our children.

The Best of Both Worlds?

I worked full-time in the Health Service for many years before getting married and starting a family. I really loved my job. However, I fully intended to give up work once my first child was born. I imagined myself as a real 'earth mother', at home full-time, breastfeeding indefinitely and maybe even using Terry nappies - kinder to the environment!

Suffice to say, breast-feeding lasted three weeks and I found myself mum to a baby who slept very little and cried an awful lot! Fortunately for me, I had a very kind boss who kept in regular touch after the baby was born, and she gently encouraged me to consider part-time hours. She even negotiated this with the Health Service on my behalf. I was very reluctant to go back, but my husband encouraged me to at least try. When my daughter was seven months old, I returned to work 18½ hours per week, feeling some guilt and a lot of relief! It was the best thing for all of us.

Developed friendships

Outside work, I had minimal contact with other mothers of young children, but the women at work were great. They advised and supported me through all the ups and downs of having a first baby. I had a great childminder and loved going to work.

When my child was three and a half, I had a second child and, 15 months later, a third. I'm now at home full-time and content. Through various parent and toddler groups and school contacts I eventually developed friendships with other mums of young children. But I'll always be grateful to my boss who, eight years ago, coaxed me back to work part-time. I think part-time work can be the 'best of both worlds' for some mums, especially those who have worked full-time for many years and enjoy their job.

Vicky

I really don't see that going back to work and arranging other forms of childcare is bad for a child. Is there only one way that a child can have a successful upbringing? And is staying at home with your children the best thing for you?

It can be as big a challenge for parents at home to spend quality time with their children as it is for those who go back to work. It can be hard doing things 'one to one' with your child. Even if you go out to playgroups, friends' homes or the park, it can be hard not to spend all your time talking to your adult friends. You could argue that the children would get more stimulation from a nursery.

Decision

I think the decision about returning to work or staying at home needs to be made by the individual parent. Every case is different and has its unique merits and drawbacks. I know that many women are eminently suited to full-time motherhood, but there are many who are not. It's about choice and about making the right decision for you and your whole family.

Helen

Living a Different Kind of Life

I really enjoyed the first year of motherhood. Most of my fellow first-time mums were at home with their children and seemed committed to staying that way. Then, as the first birthdays loomed, I noticed many going back to work. I began to wonder what I should do.

There was a nagging feeling that perhaps I was wasting my life looking after a baby. I talked with some trusted friends, who had older children, about my crisis of confidence. Their words struck a chord with me: 'It will be a good investment in the future of your family.'

Confidence gap

I knew then that, for us, this was the best choice for our family, even if my career prospects were dented. I held on to this conviction for five years until both children were at school. I kept my brain vaguely active by reading avidly whenever there was a bit of calm. Admittedly, there was a 'confidence gap' when I went for my first job interview. I wondered if the skills and abilities I possessed before I had children would still be there! I was greatly encouraged that, when the conditions were right, those things which had lain dormant were coaxed back to life.

Looking back, I found those pre-school years difficult because the things I love (order, efficiency, being able to concentrate) aren't too compatible with babies and toddlers! However, having to live this life, without ditching my own preferences completely, actually rounded me off as a person. The key for me was being certain about the choices I had made and not constantly wishing I was living a different kind of life.

Samantha

One Man and a Little Baby!

I'm in a minority and cause more than a little intrigue as I go about my day, living out what is the 'traditional' role of a mother, even though I'm a very masculine, football-loving man!

I was made redundant and couldn't get a job that paid more than my wife's. We had always maintained that we wanted our children to be at home with their mum but, in our situation, mum turned out to be dad!

I can't say it has come naturally to me, but I have learned to adapt and make friends in the places I now find myself. It means that the pressures we face in our relationship are uncommon and we don't easily find people who can identify with us. However, we are delighted that our children are having the benefit of being with one of us in their pre-school years.

Paul



Single Choice

After my husband left home five years ago, my two children and I were permanently short of money. I had to decide whether to go back to work (which seemed as if I was depriving the children of their mum's time as soon as they'd lost their dad) or staying at home and being very badly off. I also knew that if I went out to work, I would be more tired and stressed, which wouldn't be good for the children. In the end, I compromised and worked for three days a week. We don't have all the things that other families have, but we've got each other and we're a settled family unit again.

Gillian

“Women can have it all; I'm just choosing not to want it all. It's been a brilliant time, but I have three children under the age of nine who don't really see me that often.”

Lisa Gordon, the youngest woman to be appointed to the board of a Stock Exchange-listed company.

Making the Choice

You're trying to decide what's best for you and your family. What should you take into account?

- Make a 'For' and 'Against' list to see how the options look in black and white.
- Work out your budget. If you really want to stay at home, decide whether you can make ends meet. Think about whether some 'necessities' are really 'luxuries'.
- Ask yourself whether you really enjoy your job and if you will feel a great sense of loss if you don't continue with it.
- Talk to other people who have made the decision: find out the good points as well as the bad.
- Try not to be rushed into making your decision. And remember that once you have decided, you can always change your mind if it isn't working out.
- Find out facts before taking a tentative decision any further – such as location, cost and quality of childcare options; whether you could have part-time or flexible hours; whether you could take time off when your child is ill; how your career will be impacted if you stay at home.
- If you are going back to work, decide as a couple on the division of labour at home so that one of you doesn't appear to be doing 'everything'.
- Be prepared to deal with guilt - whatever your decision. Motherhood and guilt seem to go together like a horse and carriage. Once you've made your choice, face the guilt, deal with it, and then work hard - whether in the home or the workplace!

Facts and Figures

- Research from *Pregnancy and Birth* magazine showed that most pregnant women thought they were compromising their careers by having a child. Of the thousand working mothers-to-be, 60% thought they were not in a financial position to have a child and 64% said they would go back to work because they need the money. Just 2% said they would choose to return to full-time work after the birth, 55% would like to work part-time and 43% would choose to be full-time mothers.
- Meanwhile, *Mother and Baby* magazine suggests that women are stressed out from trying to juggle work and home lives. Out of the 2,000 women with young children who were interviewed, two out of three said they would rather be a full-time mother than return to work. Of those working, many were racked with guilt and 92% wished they were at home with their child.
- One third of women taking paid maternity leave don't return to work as they are unable to work suitable hours (Women and Equality Unit).
- The 1996 Maternity Rights Study found that 67% of mothers returned to work within 10-11 months of childbirth; this figure has risen from 24% in 1979 and 45% in 1988. Of those returning to work, 53% switched to working part-time.
- The 2002 Labour Force Survey found that women with a youngest child under five have an employment rate of 53%, compared with 73% for women whose youngest is over five.

“The key for me was being certain about the choices I had made and not constantly wishing I was living a different kind of life.” Samantha

Soapbox

Anthea Rowan, in her article *'Can't have it all? Then give it your all'* (*The Times*, 21 May 2003) included some comments from women she had spoken to:

Carolyn, full-time worker, mother of one son, wife and manager of two homes: *"It's impossible to give each area of my life the focus I'd like to. I feel a constant division of my loyalties... and we have committed to a lifestyle that would be difficult to maintain without two salaries."*

Cathy, mother of two, likes to say she has had it all – just not at the same time: *"I kept reminding myself that one day I would be able to afford the same things as my working friends, but I'd never be able to buy back my children's early years."* Cathy believes that not working when her children were young gave her time to maintain a happy and healthy relationship with her husband.

The article concludes with comments from a Roman Catholic nun (who is also a doctor of clinical psychology): *"The notion of choice is central to the human experience, and when we make choices we need to understand the notion of what is lost and what is to be gained. Living with the gains and the losses calls for maturity and a capacity to weigh up the ever-changing family and wider societal realities."*

Extra Help

Support groups

Full Time Mothers

PO Box 186

London SW3 5RF

Email: fulltimemothers@hotmail.com

Web: www.fulltimemothers.org

Aims to enhance the status and self esteem of mothers at home and campaign for changes to employment policy and in the tax and benefits system, in order to give more women the choice to be full-time mothers.

Working Families

1-3 Berry Street

London EC1V 0AA

Tel: 020 7253 7243

Email: office@workingfamilies.org.uk

Web: www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Helps children, working parents and their employers to find a better balance between responsibilities at home and work.

Daycare Trust

21 St George's Road

London SE1 6ES

Tel: 020 7840 3350

Email: info@daycaretrust.org.uk

Gives free advice on childcare issues, promotes affordable childcare and helps you decide what type of childcare might suit your circumstances.

ChildcareLink

www.childcarelink.gov.uk

National information on childcare facilities around the UK.

Bookshelf

How to Succeed as a Working Parent

Steve Chalke, Parentalk/Hodder and Stoughton, £7.99,

ISBN 0340861207

(Available from Care for the Family. H861207)

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