

## Working-Mother Guilt

By Zsuzsi Gartner

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“So, has daycare turned Dexter into a juvenile delinquent yet?”

There we were, having such a nice time, sitting in the lounge of the Wedgewood Hotel, the satisfying buzz of adults in the flush of conversation all around us. If someone else had said it, I would’ve been tempted to tip my glass of Rosemount Shiraz into her lap before adopting the body posture of a cornered rat and launching into a guilt-fuelled rant. But I knew that my friend, who has a son a year younger than my two-year-old, was undergoing a crisis of conscience of her own. She had tried to make a happy time of her one-year maternity leave, but by nine months she had started suffering the boredom and overwhelming feelings of isolation that many women alone with infants 10 hours a day are prone to, as well as a longing to get back to her invigorating media job.

So, instead, I took another sip of the wine, smiled, then launched into a guilt-fuelled rant while adopting the body posture of a cornered rat.

It turned out that my friend had, in fact, already entered the parallel universe dominated by what the cognoscenti know as “the lists”. The waiting lists for the city’s licensed group daycares have taken on a mythic quality, spoken of with equal parts disbelief, awe, and frustration. “They’re getting to be like those waiting lists at New York preschools,” one mother marvelled the other day at the Templeton Park playground while our charges howled at each other for a turn at the tube slide. An urban legend circulated last year about Manhattan parents getting letters of reference for their three-year-olds from the likes of Madeleine Albright and the Dalai Lama—and I actually believed it. Here in Vancouver, it’s evidently still a deli counter–ticket kind of thing, and that’s for those of us who can afford prosciutto instead of baloney in the first place.

The waiting lists for some of Vancouver’s well-regarded, larger nonprofit centres with several facilities for different age groups—such as the Vancouver

Society of Children's Centres (Library Square, Dorothy Lam, and Quayside, the latter two giving priority to families who live or work in the False Creek North–Yaletown area) and the daycares out at UBC—top 1,100. My son's wonderful little (15 spaces) stand-alone daycare for 18- to 36-month-old toddlers has a waiting list of 200; there were 30 children on the list for March 1 alone. One child got in.

Parents find themselves contemplating extreme measures in order to find decent childcare. When I finally decided daycare was the ticket, it took more than eight months to find a space. Meanwhile, I paid more monthly for a part-time nanny than I now do for full-time daycare. Maggie Beers, now an instructional-development consultant at BCIT, was savvier than me. She started registering at daycares when she was four months pregnant and trying to complete her doctoral dissertation. But she still had to scramble at the last minute. “We were even seriously considering buying or renting something in Concord Place, only because it would give us priority on the [Dorothy Lam and Quayside] waiting lists.”

At the Vancouver Society of Children's Centres, executive director Sandra Menzer says wryly: “The chances of your child getting a space before he or she starts high school are pretty slim.” Out at UBC Childcare Services, which has 16 daycares serving 330 children, 85 percent of them the kids of students and faculty, director Darcelle Cotton says the demand is ever-increasing but spaces are not. “We're choking on our own success.”

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Exactly two years ago, during the March 15, 2000, provincial speech from the throne, the late NDP regime announced a system of universal, publicly funded childcare that would be phased in over five years. This was greeted with jubilation by daycare advocates as the dawn of a new era and derision by then–Opposition leader Gordon Campbell (“[The program] sounds to me like a huge promise with a huge cost to it”).

Quicker than you could say “Bye-bye Ujjal,” the NDP’s ambitious child-care program was deep-sixed by the Liberals. The universal before-and-after-school program that had already been phased in will be eliminated this June, funding for all child-care resource and referral centres (for most families, the only way to access information about childcare) ends effective April 2004, and there have been substantial cuts to the child-care subsidies for lower-income families.

As for plans, Lynn Stephens, who oversees the child-care portfolio as the Minister of State for Women’s Equality, will only say in an e-mail: “We will replace current programs with a new child-care system for families in British Columbia.” (Stephens, who labours under the new megaministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services, refused to be interviewed for this article.)

B.C. is hardly unique, though, in its high demand for childcare coupled with low availability. The lack of political will to recognize that in order to achieve equality, women need access to affordable, quality childcare is uniform across North America. The exception is Quebec, which has instituted a system of universal, five-dollar-a-day daycare—affordable, yes, but not yet available, as waiting lists there continue to grow apace.

There are a number of reasons that universal childcare has yet to be addressed seriously, besides the oft-cited big price tag. There is an ongoing ideological debate about whether or not childcare should be strictly a personal responsibility or a public good, like education. Then there’s the fact that, as Sandra Menzer points out, “Historically, the decision makers, policymakers, corporation [heads] were typically men in their 40s, 50s, 60s who had spouses at home and grew up with a mom who stayed home. We have that attitude among our decision makers—political and corporate.” There’s clearly something wrong when those of us willing to pony up about \$900 a month for regulated, full-time daycare for infants and toddlers can spend more than a year trying to find someone to take our money. And where does that leave single mothers and families that are less financially secure?

I believe that at the heart of the daycare dilemma lies the fact that North Americans of all ideological stripes harbour a deep ambivalence about mothers of young children working full-time. The truth is, many of us trying to “do it all” harbour this ambivalence, too, buried inside of us like a caged hyena pacing back and forth, ready to pounce. And that’s why a comment such as “So, has daycare turned Dexter into a juvenile delinquent yet?” made even in jest, can bring on the mother guilt like nothing else.

“Despite our degrees and our assumptions and expectations about equality,” Naomi Wolf writes in her recent book, *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected Journey to Motherhood*, “our generation of new mothers was a train wreck waiting to happen.” That sentence should read: “*Because* of our degrees and our assumptions and expectations about equality...”

We were the generation who were told we could have it all. This was back in the late '70s and early '80s, when Superwoman was all the rage on university campuses, back before anyone had heard the terms *glass ceiling*, *second shift*, and *backlash*. Back before national newspapers started running headlines like this mid-'90s one from the *Globe and Mail*: “June Cleaver–Style Moms Back in Fashion” (as if different ways of mothering were hemlines or handbags). Back before we had ever held our own babies fiercely to our breasts and wondered, with no small sense of panic, how we could have imagined that something so wee could survive without us, thinking that if we glanced away for even a second, let alone dared leave it with someone else, a changeling would take its place. Back before “the lists”.

What happened is that our expectations slammed up against reality. I remember one reality check as if it were yesterday, it seemed that electric with meaning. My son was about four-and-a-half months old and I was making myself crazy, going back and forth between anxiety about his well-being and anxiety about the well-being of my writing career. I loved him immensely yet found being by myself with him all day draining and unsatisfying. My identity as a writer felt

subsumed. I wanted desperately to get back at my work, but I believed he was too small for daycare, and a full-time nanny (\$1,600 a month under the table, closer to \$2,000 if you're doing it legally and paying the benefits) was well beyond our household budget.

So there I sat, in a big circle of Commercial Drive—area mothers and their babies at our weekly health-unit drop-in—my lifesaver during my first year of motherhood—while we took turns revealing what had been the most difficult aspect of being a parent so far. Around and around we went, voices deranged with fatigue, talking about the loss of sleep, the loss of a sex life, the loss of friends. By my turn, almost 20 women had spoken, and not a single one mentioned missing her work. “I miss doing my work so badly, I could scream,” I said and choked up with tears. Finally another woman, who’s since become a friend, said, “I’m going back to work next month and I’m really looking forward to it. I haven’t dared admit that to anyone up until now.”

As a reward for expressing my dissatisfaction, I was urged by a well-meaning nurse to attend a postpartum-depression group for counselling. Pamphlets were pressed into my hands. The message was, it’s not normal to crave your former identity so intensely, so there must be something wrong with you. But I didn’t need counselling; I needed childcare. The following week, I hired a part-time nanny and things got a tiny bit cheerier, albeit tighter, around the old homestead.

Seventy percent of Canadian women with children under six are in the workforce. Eighty-five percent of working women return to the workforce within a year of giving birth. These are the facts, taken from census information. After that, things get murky, as groups with vested interests trot out contradictory polls to support their positions, polls that give the impression of a conflicted populace.

Daycare advocates like to quote national polls such as a 1998 one by the Canadian Council on Social Development that found “81% of Canadians think governments should develop a plan to improve child care.” The family-values people favour polls like the 1994 Angus Reid survey that found “70% of parents working outside the home, who had preschoolers, would choose to have one

parent at home if they could afford it” (although I’ve seen that one morph in various newspapers into the plural “polls say” and “70% of mothers”).

Both sides use economic arguments and various cost-benefit analyses to bolster their positions, as if money were the bottom line. But here’s a dirty little secret: it’s not always about the money. Many women say they “need” to work outside the home when they actually *want* to, but they are reluctant to admit it in a culture that’s quick to label you a bad mother. Over and over, the women I talked to told me things like: “If I had to stay home full-time, I would be about 400 pounds, totally depressed, and a mental case.” That was from a mother of four, who added: “I have to work, but if I didn’t, I still would. My kids know I like my work, I’m good at it, and as they get older they’re proud of me.”

Lee-Ann Garnett, a planning analyst for the City of New Westminster and my new friend from the health-unit drop-in, went back to her job when her daughter Sophie was six months old. “Sometimes at work they would say, ‘You’re back at work already, poor you. Don’t you wish you were still at home?’ So what can you say?” Garnett is “thrilled” with the family daycare she found for Sophie, who’s now two and a charming, affable little girl who, and this is important, doesn’t mind sharing her toys with Dexter when he visits. “She comes home clean and happy every day,” Garnett says, adding, “At home, you don’t have a stockroom full of toys for each developmental level, and it takes a lot of energy to get playmates together. There, it’s instant party.”

Social censure of mothers who work outside the home has largely gone underground, usually surfacing in indirect ways (lack of affordable, good-quality childcare and inflexible workplaces that make it difficult to be both a good mother and an employee who’s taken seriously) or in the ravings of neoconservative columnists and writers of letters to the editor. So it’s a shock when someone you know tells you to your face that what you’re doing is wrong. Garnett recalls an incident at work that left her reeling. “We were sitting around having lunch, and an older woman started talking about ‘Kids these days are so bad, blah blah blah, and if moms stayed home they’d have better values.’ I was listening in

disbelief and finally said, 'Excuse me, you're talking about me.' Now I just avoid her."

The stigmatization of daycare goes back decades, if not centuries. Early institutions operated largely as charities to care for the children of widows and immigrant women who had to work. A bit more recently, Dr. Benjamin Spock called them "baby farms" in his 1960s child-care bible, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*, before recanting in his 1976 edition. Today's overt attacks come mainly from social conservatives who cloak their underlying belief that mothers should stay at home with their children in policy papers on fair-taxation policies and assertions about women's right to choice, including the right to stay home. But beneath their carefully reasoned arguments, a real nastiness emerges.

Beverley Smith is a name familiar to letters-to-the-editor readers across the country. She's a Calgary mother who's become a vociferous stay-at-home activist. Her Web site opens reasonably enough, but after a few clicks of the mouse, you arrive at a page titled Health Concerns, listing more than two dozen "news" items that supposedly point to the ill effects of using daycare, many of them unrelated to daycare in any way. One item reads, apropos of nothing: "The *Times of London* August 4, 2000, revealed that teenage girls in Britain are showing renewed interest in witchcraft and paganism." (Aha, I *thought* that imaginative finger painting Dexter did at daycare the other day looked vaguely like a pentagram.)

A shift in attitude is taking place, though, as the semantics turn away from "childcare" and toward "early childhood education". The "Zero to Three" movement argues that a child's intellectual, social, and emotional life, the blueprint for his future, is set by age three. With improved standards in childcare—according to reports like "You Bet I Care!", a massive, federally funded 2000 study on daycare centres commissioned by three Canadian universities—attending a quality daycare with certified instructors can actually

give children a leg up when it comes to education and life. This is where the public-good argument comes into play.

Why is it, ask daycare advocates, that children are strictly a parental responsibility until they're five, at which point they miraculously become a collective responsibility? "It's kind of like kids don't exist until they go to school," says Christine Macleod, who has run a licensed family daycare in North Delta for 15 years and is a past president of the Western Canada Family Child Care Association of B.C. UBC educational psychology professor Hillel Goelman, one of the five authors of the "You Bet I Care!" report, says the same arguments were used against funding universal kindergarten in the '50s and '60s that are used against universal daycare today, and that it wasn't mandatory for school boards to provide funding for kindergartens in B.C. until the 1970s.

Not surprisingly, stay-at-home mothers use the "Zero to Three" argument to defend their choices. High-quality daycare may provide important intervention for children at risk, but I don't delude myself that daycare is better for my son than spending full days with his parents (although I believe the daily socialization aspect is invaluable, and the fact that one of his caregivers is male is a huge plus—and very rare, in fact, as 98.3 percent of Canadian daycare workers are female).

I just happen to be a much better mother when I have time to pursue my vocation. Never mind that I need to do even more work unrelated to fiction-writing to subsidize that writing now that daycare costs are part of the equation. I also believe that my son will benefit from having a mother who has work she values, and a father who does much of the housework and cooking. I'm hoping he'll be proud of me as he grows older, and that he'll develop healthy attitudes toward women.

"You're missing the best years of his life," a neighbour with a small son recently said, as if I'd bundled my own son up and shipped him off to a military academy in North Carolina. In fact, I'm with him about six hours a day and all weekend, and that's all quality time—reading, making art, making music, having outdoor



adventures, and lots of conversations. Non-work time, for both my husband and myself, is Dexter time.

Goelman cites a 1984 Stanford University study that examined mother-child attachment patterns by looking at four groups of mothers and babies: mothers who stayed home and wanted to; mothers who stayed home and had no other choice; mothers who worked outside the home and wanted to; and mothers who went back to work and felt they had little choice. The happy, healthy attachments had nothing to do with whether or not the mothers worked outside the home but everything to do with whether they were doing what they wanted to, and, in the case of the ones in the workforce, the quality of childcare they'd found.

Up until now, I've managed to avoid the term *working mothers*, which I like about as much as *woman writer*. Stay-at-home mothers resent the term for a different reason: it implies they don't work. And do they ever work. Tracey Carmichael, a librarian for the B.C. Securities Commission and the mother of two children, both in daycare, says: "It's an exhausting job staying home with your kids. In a way, working is easier than staying home, but nobody would say, 'I work because it's easier than staying home.' "

It's sad to me that the social conservatives appear to be the only champions of women who choose to stay at home, some of whom are friends of mine who wouldn't vote Alliance if a gun were pointed at their heads. There is a defensiveness between mothers who work in the home and those of us who use childcare and do paid work. Carmichael, who had a hell of a time finding childcare as her maternity leaves came to an end ("each time a complete panic at the last minute"), says: "My theory is that nothing ever actually happens to improve the daycare scenario because stay-at-home moms and working moms are pitted against each other in a political sense."

Part of the problem is the lack of social respect and value accorded those who care for children (both mothers and child-care workers). And part of the problem is inequities in the taxation system, as fiscal conservatives never tire of pointing out. And I happen to think they're right.

This year, I'll be writing off \$7,000 in receipted childcare—the maximum deduction, although I've spent far more. That comes right off the top of my income, like an RRSP, and I'm very grateful for the benefit. A family with a single wage earner, where one parent, usually the mother, sacrifices an income to stay home and care for the children, gets no childcare-related write-offs and is often taxed at a higher rate. (For example, two \$40,000 earners pay less combined tax than one \$80,000 earner.) It only seems fair to let families with a single wage earner deduct at least \$7,000 as well.

An added bonus would be that anti-daycare groups would be forced to come out from behind their carefully reasoned economic arguments and tell us what they really think.

If I wanted to list all the qualities I thrill to in my son—his musicality, particularly his rendition of “The Dirty Diaper Blues” on the harmonica; the peal of his little voice ringing across the hall between our bedrooms each morning, clear as a bell; his tongue wedged between his teeth in concentration as he makes a giant Play-Doh muffin; his mugging for the camera; his darling theatricality; his sleep-dampened curls rising in a penumbra around his head as they dry; the way he says, with a degree of urgency, “I don't hate rats, Mommy; I like them a little bit”; our shared love of fetching the mail; the way he lately insists on calling me Ribby, a somewhat pushy cat from a Beatrice Potter story—I could fill this entire newspaper and still go on and on.

How can you love a child so much that at times your heart swells beyond your chest cavity and pushes against your throat, so much that if someone attempted to harm him you would have no hesitation tearing off that person's head with your bare hands and throwing it to the hounds, how could you love someone this much and yet not want to be with them all the time? Such is the intense contradiction of motherhood, or at least my motherhood.

“I feel that motherhood has been life-shattering—it's stripped my identity to the bare bones,” a stay-at-home mom with two small children tells me. I have used

these exact words myself, more than once, yet our chosen responses to the cataclysmic effects of maternity could not be more different. She has evolved into a professional mother, with little societal recognition, a loss of liberty and personal space I find frightening, and an awe-inspiring degree of selflessness. Her path, one I never considered for an instant and still find hard to understand, is the more difficult one, and I hope the rewards will be substantial.

Meanwhile, I've been carefully reconstructing my identity as a writer who is also a mother (not as a mother who happens to be a writer). For a while, I struggled to compartmentalize the two, which was kind of like assigning peeing and nonpeeing sections to a public swimming pool. When I finally allowed the writer to recognize the mother, I felt like Humpty Dumpty miraculously put back together again.

Now if I could just jettison the damn guilt. "Are you kidding?" my husband says. "You feel guilty for breathing air." And he's partially right. I feel guilty, for instance, that I'm home writing while Dexter's favourite caregiver, who is also a writer, is taking good care of my child and getting paid the equivalent of what a parking-lot attendant makes, according to the "You Bet I Care!" report.

"You Dumbo. I mommy elephant," Dexter says, pulling my sleep-bewildered head into his warm flannel lap during a recent predawn visit to our bed. "My baby elephant," he says, stroking my hair, "my baby Dumbo." It is a deliciously comforting moment, and I feel that he maybe does, however inchoately, understand my still deeply conflicted self. Right now he's giving, not demanding, and something tells me there will be more and more scenes like this over the years, strung together and fluttering in the breeze like Tibetan prayer flags. As he gets older, I find myself wanting to spend more time with him.

Not all of us become mothers the instant our child is born. For me, it took more than a year, I think, more than a year of waking up some mornings and thinking, with no small degree of shock, exaggerated palms to cheeks like some dishevelled comic-strip mom in a Lichtenstein painting: "Oh my GAWD, I forgot I had a baby!" And now the question remains: What kind of mother am I? Good

mother, bad mother, or a woman simply trying her best to not lose herself on the way to becoming the best mother she can be? \_