



BY DR. JENN BERMAN

parentdevelopment

Baby or Career?

With Planning, You Can Make the Right Decision

According to the April 15 issue of *Time* magazine, if you are in your 20's and have chosen to be a mother, you will forever be behind your peers professionally and financially. If you have chosen to have a career first, you don't stand much of a chance of having a baby, much less a healthy one. Few pieces of writing have brought up as much anxiety and concern from women in my psychotherapy practice.

To make the best choice for your particular situation you need to weigh the pros and cons, taking into account your lifestyle, personality, goals, and energy levels as well as those of your partner. If your work schedule barely leaves time to keep your plants alive, your spouse is not ready to be a stay-at-home parent, and you are not willing to change, then you are not ready to conceive regardless of a ticking biological clock.

I have worked with women in my practice who have told me their mothers resented giving up their careers to raise their children. These mothers were wracked with regret and gave their children the impression that motherhood was nothing more than dirty diapers, drudgery, and self-sacrifice. Many of these women have chosen to not have children or dread the prospect of motherhood. I have also worked with women who were raised almost exclusively by a nanny. These women were completely deprived of one of the most significant relationships a person has—the relationship between a parent and a child.

However, these extremes are not the debate. There is no doubt that these adults raised without involved parents have struggles with their personal relationships as a result of their upbringing. What most women struggle with is how much work they can do while raising healthy children.

Make your decisions knowing that you can't have it all. This is not unique to being female. There are plenty of men who yearn to spend more time with their children but because they have made a financial commitment to their family, they cannot. You don't read articles about how "Men Can't Have It All." The truth is no one can.

We can only hope for balance, however difficult that may be to achieve. There are always times when the seesaw will be tipped more in one direction than the other.

To Work?

My mother is a great example of a woman who was able to balance a career and motherhood. She had help, but still managed to be there for me and take care of her business as well. I was always proud of her success and in turn this left me with a sense of self-efficacy, a sense of confidence and a belief that I could do anything I put my mind to.

While it is not an easy job to do, it is possible to work and be a mother as long as you are willing to make certain sacrifices. That sometimes means missing out on work events and sexy assignments, but in this era of telecommuting, job-sharing, and fathers who want for more time with their children, there are ways to find a balance if you are willing to try.

I have no memories of yearning for an unavailable mother. Sure, there were times when I wanted to talk to her or ask her a question and I couldn't, but I always knew that I would see her later that day and have the opportunity. Instead of being left with feelings of parental deprivation, I learned patience. I developed the ability to contain my own feelings and thoughts until I could see her and express them. It was important that I knew everyday I would have time with both of my parents where I would be their primary focus.

I am not advocating that parents ignore their work or leave their children to be raised completely by nannies. What I am proposing is that balance is more possible than you think, but it does take sacrifice.

Or Not To Work?

Recently, I saw an old friend walking her toddler. She had enjoyed my last *Los Angeles Family* article and starting talking to me about it. When I asked her what she had been doing lately, she apologetically pointed to her son. "I always feel a little funny when people ask me that question. It just doesn't seem like enough that I am a full-time mom." But it is. That was the right decision for her.

Feminism was never about negating motherhood; it is about having choices. It is about having the opportunity to have a career, or not to have one. Being a full-time mom is a very respectable and honorable job. Just like everything, there are less-than enchanting moments. But life is not all about glamour.

Here Are the Questions

The following are a list of questions to ask yourself as you struggle with these dilemmas:

1. How was I raised?
2. What was the best thing about how I was raised?
3. What was the worst thing about how I was raised?
4. How do I wish I had been raised?
5. What does my child need most from me? From my family?
6. Who are the six most influential people in my child's life? How well do I know these people?
7. Who would I like to be the six most influential people for my child?
8. What are three concrete proactive steps that I can take to make myself a better parent?
9. What will it take for my child to feel loved, heard, and understood?
10. If I am working, what kind of hours do I need to meet my child's needs? How flexible is my company? How understanding is my boss?
11. Could my partner stay home? Would they?
12. Do I have any friends with the same childcare needs who might be interested in alternating watching both of our children every other day?

There are no easy answers to this heated debate. The only way to avoid getting caught up in the panic-induced anxiety the media creates is to make healthy decisions for our children and our families. In the book *The Mother Dance*, author Harriet Lerner writes, "The toughest emotional challenge of motherhood is to get a grip on our anxiety—or on any form of emotional intensity—so that we can use the thinking part of our brain to sort out the real problems and what we need to do about them."

It is with that clarity that I hope you will make a plan for both your career and parenthood.

Berman is a psychotherapist, sports psychology consultant and speaker. She has appeared on such programs as 48 Hours (CBS), The Other Half (NBC), and Lifetime Now (Lifetime). She has also been featured in the Los Angeles Times and Parents Magazine. Berman consults for A Minor Consideration, an advocacy group that protects child stars and athletes, and for USA Gymnastics. She is in private practice in Beverly Hills and can be reached at BermanPsych@aol.com