

# The Washington Post

## **A WAR INSIDE YOUR HEAD; Stay-at-home mothers criticize working moms for neglecting their kids, while office-going moms disparage stay-at-homes for getting some sort of retro free ride. As a new mother looking for a place in between, she entered the battle zone unprepared -- and struggled to find a way out**

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"Do you see her? Do you see her?" I kept asking David. The sterile drapes blocked my view. "No," he'd say. Then, finally: "I see her head." There was no sound in the operating room except for the doctors muttering to each other. And then: a tiny gasp.

I think she must have been too amazed to cry. I was. At 8:06, there were seven people present. At 8:07, there were eight. Just like that. The emotional force of this ordinary event obliterates the intellect. You try out the words, to see how they sound, and it is as if you are experimenting in ancient Farsi. "We have a daughter," you say. "I am a mother now." You look at her: She is fabulous. It does not seem real.

My old life was gone -- blown away more completely than if a bomb had destroyed my home and my workplace and everything I owned. The universe narrowed to three: me, my husband, this child. I am a new person, I thought, as raw to this world as if my skin had been peeled away. Emma is here.

I was at Ground Zero of the Mommy Wars. By then, I'd already gotten my draft notice.

In my eighth month of pregnancy, I had gone to a party in honor of a friend who had written a book about the war on drugs. In his irreverent way, Danny took me around the room introducing me to guests as "my friend Tracy, a pregnant crack addict." "Actually, I work for The Washington Post," I would add, hoping to clarify things, and people would say, "Really? What do you cover?" and then I had to say, "Nothing at the moment, I'm on maternity leave." And there conversation would stop. After this happened three or four times, I began to get the distinct impression that it would have been better, conversationally speaking, to have come to this affair as a pregnant crack addict.

Six weeks after Emma was born, I encountered one of my old news sources at a social gathering downtown. "Hey," he said. "Haven't seen your byline lately. What are you working on?" Nothing, I said; I was taking a year's leave to stay home and be a mother.

"Oh." A pause. A very long pause. "Do you have children?" I asked -- a question I never even thought to ask before -- and he answered me, but his eyes were searching the room. Within 60 seconds, he'd eased away and found somebody else to talk to. That was when I started to put two and two together. Showing up at a Washington social gathering as just a mom is like showing up in your underwear: revealing and chilly.

This sudden social demotion is the way many women get inducted into the Mommy Wars, my shorthand for the cultural and emotional battle zone we land in the minute we become mothers. It is a war fought inside your head, on soccer fields or in PTAs in the wary undercurrent between working and stay-at-home moms, in the car when you leave your child for another long day at day care, at play groups, at work and in your own bedroom in those lights-out talks with your spouse. It involves many different social and moral and financial issues, yet it often boils down to a personal question: How does this child fit into my life, or should my life now fit around this child?

The seriousness of this question is, quite often, the inverse of the seriousness with which society now regards you. One woman I know, who used to practice corporate law with a prestigious K Street firm, recalls being asked the usual what-do-you-do question by a female partner at an equally prestigious New York firm. Upon finding out

my acquaintance was now a stay-at-home mom, the other woman simply turned her back and walked away. Another lawyer-turned-full-time-mom says that used to happen to her, too, but she learned to fight back. "Now I say, 'I'm in-house counsel to a small family firm,' and people can talk to me." Before her children were potty-trained, she used to add that her specialty was "environmental cleanup." This being Washington, that could jump-start a conversation.

In retrospect, I don't know why I was so shocked at suddenly finding myself in the middle of a cultural battlefield. Everybody told me a child would change my life, and I had no trouble believing it; I'd seen it happen with friends. I knew this little person would change my body, my marriage, my work habits, my finances, all in unsettling and profoundly emotional ways. I expected a roller coaster, and that's what I got: first euphoria, then loneliness. In the mornings, my husband, David, would leave for work, the neighbors' cars would pull out of their driveways, and I would be left with this new person, she of the inscrutable and never-ending needs. I would think of the newsroom, crackling with gossip and inside jokes, and then Emma would start crying again: I traded that for this? One day I was a big-city newspaper reporter; the next, I was wearing stretch jeans and comparing diaper prices at Wal-Mart. In my old life, I'd written a book; in my new life, I was just one of those generic maternal units referred to by the nurses in my pediatrician's office as "mom."

Perhaps it was a question of the context in which my motherhood was unfolding. I was 41 when Emma was born, happily married, with a husband who is a physicist. I was a veteran of nearly two decades as a working journalist, the last nine years of which had been spent in Washington, the Valhalla of the working woman: According to the Department of Labor, 67 percent of all women in this region work, more, even, than in New York City. And Washington reveres mothers who go to the office. It's the city of Hillary Clinton, perhaps the country's most famous working mom, who juggled law and politics with raising a daughter; of Madeleine Albright, who learned Russian while rocking her babies to sleep; of Supreme Court justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sandra Day O'Connor, whose careers barely paused when children came along; of Marian Wright Edelman, who created the nation's leading advocacy group for children while managing three sons; of congresswomen and countless others, black and white, of lesser fame, who have managed to change diapers, make lunches, help with homework -- and put in a full day at the office.

My first ambition, after the ballerina dream got ditched, was to avoid becoming the heroine of Marjorie Morningstar, a 1955 bestseller I read as an adolescent, in which Marjorie dreams of becoming a Broadway actress but instead winds up living a mundane life on Long Island as Mrs. Milton Schwartz, housewife and mother of three. Please, God, I thought when I was 16, don't let that happen to me. And then one day I found myself living in Washington with a job that entailed staying at home and spending a lot of time dealing with baby vomit and dirty diapers. Is it any wonder that few people thought of what I did as important anymore? And how could I blame them?

That this attitude thrives in a culture that frets endlessly about the welfare of its children is just one example of the doublespeak we are drowning in on this subject. We say we value motherhood, but in fact what we value is jobs with power and paychecks, especially in status-obsessed Washington. We structure the workplace to give women money and feedback and perks they would never get at home, and then we expect them to say they'd rather be at home with the kids. We say men and women are free to swap roles, that greater involvement by men would solve some of the child-care problems, but unwritten rules of the workplace penalize fathers who take extended parental leave, and stay-at-home dads are considered weird. Experts tout the cognitive benefits to children of mothers staying at home while their children are very young, yet the solutions to the "child-care crisis" political leaders come up with mostly have to do with creating more government-subsidized and corporate day-care slots. We say teenage pregnancy is bad because young girls are too immature to handle the heavy responsibility of children, but every year thousands of teenage girls imported from abroad are given virtual full-time care of somebody's offspring. Feminists say they value sisterhood, but behind the scenes, stay-at-home mothers often criticize office-going moms for neglecting their kids, and working mothers often disparage their at-home counterparts for getting some sort of retro free ride. We say mothers on welfare should work, but when they do go to work, we give them dirty, crowded nurseries for their children, or nothing at all. Meanwhile, upper-middle-class moms who work are somehow blamed if tragedy strikes their child while they're at the office.

Given this kind of dissonance, it's not surprising that we are always looking for hidden agendas. And while the number of working mothers with young children continues to surge, there is an undercurrent of venom on this subject these days that seems new. When British au pair Louise Woodward went on trial in Massachusetts last year for shaking 8-month-old Matthew Eappen to death, the nation was transfixed not so much by the horrendous nature of the crime, but by the debate that sizzled around a much murkier issue: the morality of a mother who had left her young children in the care of a 19-year-old to pursue her career as a doctor. (Somehow, Matthew's father never came in for the same opprobrium.) "It seems the parents didn't really want a kid," said one caller, cruelly, to a Boston radio talk show. "Now they don't have one." Hearing that, I remembered a story I covered for The Post in 1990 -- a sentencing hearing in D.C. Superior Court for a nanny who, in a fit of rage, had

killed the 9-month-old girl in her charge by beating her head against the wall because the baby wouldn't stop crying. The infant was the firstborn of Lawrence and Amy Banker, who are both lawyers. I remember watching Amy Banker in the courtroom, and wondering how anyone could survive that kind of loss. Now, I suddenly wondered: Were people saying that kind of thing seven years ago? "No, thank God," Amy Banker says. "Nobody breathed a word like that to us. All we got was sympathy."

Somehow, in the 1990s, the issue has stopped being just child care and started being the ethics of parenting choices as well. In 1994, 8-week-old Brenton Scott Devonshire, of Ashburn, died while in the care of his Dutch au pair, who admitted prosecutors had enough evidence to convict her of shaking him to death and eventually pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge. Yet, it was Brenton's parents who found themselves in the spotlight, quite literally. Stephen Devonshire remembers walking out of the courthouse one night and being blinded by television lights, hearing a voice from behind those lights shouting, "Your parenting skills have been called into question. Do you have any comment?" After a Post article appeared referring to their house as "spacious," they got at least one anonymous letter -- maybe more, Sharon Devonshire tries not to remember -- telling them they'd obviously placed a higher priority on having a nice house than on caring for their child, that it served them right their baby had died.

What was it like to be on the receiving end of some of our cultural anger and angst? Sharon Devonshire and her husband have become media spokesmen on the subject of "shaken baby syndrome," the name for what killed their son as well as Matthew Eappen. The Devonshires seem more baffled than angry about the hate mail. "People were just looking to find fault," Sharon says, and she seems disinclined to probe the mind-set of those letter writers any further. She kept the letters for a while, but eventually threw them away. "I thought, 'Why am I saving these? This is sick.'"

But the truth is, those anonymous letter writers are onto something, in their own malicious way. What motherhood boils down to, quite frequently, is a series of choices, and sometimes they are quite agonizing. The only thing worse than making those choices is not having a choice at all.

Ana Kinney is someone with no choice.

A tall woman of 38, with long, cascading dark hair and an upbeat manner, Ana is the daughter of Cuban immigrants. She lives with her husband and two kids, 4-year-old Alexander and 19-month-old Josefina, in a small house in Columbia, where they moved after Josefina was born and their one-bedroom apartment in Alexandria began to seem like a holding cell. It was a stretch, but they found a place they felt they could afford and were surviving -- until Ana's husband, Hal, lost his job when a business venture with a friend went sour. Since then Ana, a hairdresser, has been the family's main breadwinner.

Hairdressers at the better salons generally keep only about half of whatever the client pays, plus tips. On her best days, Ana has made \$400; on her worst a mere \$75. Because hairdressers are independent contractors, they get no health insurance, no 401(k), no sick leave. When Alexander was born in 1993, Ana was able to take three months off by saving up vacation days and using Hal's holiday bonus. By the time Josefina arrived in April 1996, there was no cushion whatsoever: Ana was back at work when Josefina was 2 weeks old because they needed the money. "I was breastfeeding, and it was very important to me, but I had to give it up at six months with her," she says. "That was devastating. I had no quality time with her. I hardly got to hold her when she was a baby."

Finding child care has been agony. Because Ana and Hal work irregular hours (he has found part-time work at night as a gym manager), they faced unaffordable before- and after-school surcharges at every day-care center they investigated. At the moment, Hal stays home with the kids during the day; in the past they have relied on some of the recent immigrants who live in their area. Mostly, their hires have been disasters: One older woman beat Alexander, Ana says, and another woman fed the children nothing but plain boiled macaroni and ignored the kids until Josefina's diaper rash became one big open sore.

Since Hal's job ended, they've had no medical insurance. When Josefina and Alexander get sick, their pediatrician gives them samples from her medicine closet, and charges a reduced fee. Ana hasn't been to a doctor herself since Josefina was born. The past year has put a major strain on the marriage, too. Eight months ago, Ana recalls, she and Hal were "at each other's throats." Divorce was in the air. And then one night there was an extraordinary heart-to-heart talk at the kitchen table, just the two of them, and from that talk emerged two people more strongly committed to each other than before. Hal, a tall, dark-haired man with an athletic build and an easy smile, gets watery-eyed when he recounts the same story.

The more I hear about Ana's life, the humbler I feel. Being tortured about the choices before you, I realize, is a

luxury.

What would Ana's ideal life be? "I'd work out of my home, doing my bridal consulting business," she says promptly. It's clear she's given this extensive thought. "I'd work here maybe two days a week and use this place as my base. I'd still be a working mom, but I'd have the joys of going on vacation and not having to worry about money." Could she ever imagine being a full-time stay-at-home mom?

She laughs. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

I had never thought of myself as a full-time stay-at-home mom, either. But it was lovely, being at home. "You're so lucky," my friends in the newsroom would say, and even if some of them thought of maternity leave as a kind of vacation, they still had it right. When Emma was about 2 months old, I found a new-moms support group, and it was a lifesaver. I met new people; Emma made it past the newborn stage and became a settled baby; and, like countless mothers before me, I discovered this new job could be fun. I spent a lot of time every day lying on the floor next to her, making nonsense sounds, watching her discover her toes. I'd put my face up to hers, and she would try to bite my nose, making little baby pants the whole time -- Hah! . . . hah! -- and squeals of delight. Some mornings, I would steal into her room and find her quietly awake, amusing herself. When she saw me, her whole body would go rigid with anticipation -- mouth a perfect O, arms and legs outstretched, waving: Pick me up! Come play!

Once Emma and I had recovered from her birth and my Caesarean section, I turned into a low-rent Martha Stewart. I loved cooking. I even loved folding laundry, making neat, sweet-smelling piles out of what had been a mound of dirty clothes. My house was clean, windows open to those first glorious days of spring. It reminded me of my childhood, when life was ordered and time seemed expandable and the house smelled of broiling pork chops and the dinner table was set with a cobalt-blue bowl of nasturtiums in the center. A whole new world was opening up to me, and it had a new cast of characters; several of the women in my support group were becoming close friends.

What struck me about these women was how kind they were to one another -- kinder than I was to other people in my head, lots of times, and far kinder than I usually am to myself. On a couple of occasions someone in the group wept over some problem, and there was no orgy of pity, no competing to see who had a bigger problem, no wallowing in "what-are-the-childhood-roots-of-this." Just a piece of tissue and a moment of genuine sympathy, and then collective brainstorming: What would help here? Motherhood was an intense and all-consuming job, I was learning; it was easy to get mentally backed into a corner, too stressed to think. We helped one another out that way.

I never wept in that group, though I sometimes felt like it. Mostly, what made me want to weep was an increasingly urgent question: What was I going to do with the rest of my life now that Emma was here?

David and I had easily agreed that I'd be the one to stay at home for a while; I wanted to, and he was just reaching cruising speed in his career. But I needed to work. I needed to do this not just for the money, which was becoming tight without my salary, but also because work had defined me for the last 20 years. Being a writer was almost as intrinsic to my identity as my gender. Yet the kind of writing I had always done had meant long hours in a downtown office, tramping around the city. How could I reconcile the demands of that life with the delight my days with Emma had become? It was a problem we talked about often in support group; the consensus was that dealing with a colicky infant was a piece of cake compared with figuring out how to pick up your old life where you left off.

The most obvious answer to my dilemma, though by no means the easiest, was to persuade The Post to give me another unpaid leave to write another book -- at home. I had had no trouble getting my first book published, and if sales didn't exactly set the charts on fire, the experience convinced me that I could at least make a little money.

That spring, I set to work on a book proposal about motherhood after 40. "I thought the market was pretty much saturated with books about motherhood," said my friend Danny, the war-on-drugs author. I paid no attention to the warning; my agent was enthusiastic. I spent weeks reading, refining my ideas, figuring out whom to talk to, coming up with a rough outline of what I hoped to accomplish. As I pushed Emma in her stroller on long walks through the neighborhood on those sunny June days, I revamped and rewrote in my head. The day that I finally shipped off the proposal -- my future and Emma's in a plain manila envelope -- I stopped on my way to the mailbox to rub it on her little bald head. "For luck," I said.

I had prepared myself for the possibility that I wouldn't get a terrific advance; I told myself all I needed was

something. What I never expected, in my eager innocence, was to fail utterly. But I did. Not a single publisher made so much as a low-ball bid. I had put all my psychic eggs in this particular basket, and managed to narrow the future down to one of two melodramatic possibilities: a successful book, or a dreary life of getting up at 6 a.m., hauling Emma off to some faceless day care, returning home exhausted at 7 p.m. after fighting the rush-hour traffic, getting to spend maybe half an hour with her before she went to bed. Now that Plan A was gone, it was July, and Plan B loomed like an execution date.

The day the last hope of the last publisher died, David came home to find me sitting disconsolately on the living room floor. Emma, then 8 months old, was playing nearby. "Talk to me," he said, and all my self-doubt and fears and anguish came pouring out. I saw exactly two bleak options: either consign my daughter to long days at some impersonal day-care center, or give up my cherished career. No rational thought about other options could penetrate that fog, at least initially. So I sat for a long time on the floor, sobbing, David holding my hands. After a while, Emma came scooting over to us on her bottom and started lightly patting my leg. David said later that if he hadn't known better, he would have sworn she was trying to comfort me.

I framed my dilemma in melodramatic terms, as is my unfortunate nature, but there are times when it really does boil down to this: Only one person's needs can be met in this situation, so who's it going to be? That's how Cheli Figaro thought of it: "It was me, or it was him."

At the time, she was a new mother with a colicky, high-need baby. She and her husband, Michael, had recently moved to Prince George's County from New York, so she had no friends nearby. Her husband had a demanding job as an Air Force doctor, and between the two of them they had not a single relative within 250 miles to lean on.

Before her son, Brandon, was born, she had thought she would return to the office quickly. That's what society seemed to expect, and as an African American woman she felt that expectation doubly. Black women had always worked outside the home, had done so in the face of formidable obstacles, and were proud of it. "Very few women in my generation or my mother's generation were stay-at-home moms," she says. "My husband's grandmother had seven kids and never missed a day of work." Cheli also had a considerable investment in her career: A degree from Columbia Law School could take you a long way. At the time of Brandon's birth, she was a staff attorney at the Commerce Department, and had worked as a corporate lawyer for a big firm in New York. A decision to get off the career ladder at this point would probably mean playing catch-up with her law school classmates from here on out. "But I asked myself: When I'm 90 years old and dying, what choice could I live with? What am I going to feel least guilty about?"

On one recent day, Cheli is moving around in the kitchen of her modest town house in Bowie. Brandon, now 4, is sitting at the table contemplating a bowl of spaghetti noodles, which he is too sleepy to eat. His mother, 34, an athletic-looking woman dressed in black jeans and a red turtleneck, her hair in neat braids, fields telephone calls from the real estate office where she works a few hours a week, sees her husband out the door, cajoles Brandon into at least drinking his juice and manages to keep talking, all more or less at the same time. The kitchen is adorned with a plaque that reads, "Cheli's Bed & Breakfast: Open 24 hours, year round. Caterer, chauffeur, laundress, moneylender, seamstress, psychologist, tutor, nurse, etc. Gifts and other recognition greatly appreciated."

In retrospect, the groundwork for her decision to stay home had been laid when she and her husband bought this town house instead of a larger single-family home. It was a conscious decision to keep their options open, to live below their means, in a neat but modest development where the front yards are approximately the size of a walk-in bath and the neighbors are just a wall away. Sometimes she gets house envy. "All my friends are in nice homes," she admits, "and that's rough."

What Cheli has done might look to some like an abdication of a promising career; a clear case of downward mobility. So why does she make this sacrifice? What does Brandon get from a stay-at-home mom that he wouldn't get any other way?

As she drives him to Watkins Park for a weekly science class for preschoolers, Cheli answers: "The main benefit is to me," in knowing all the minutiae of her son's life, becoming part of a community of stay-at-home mothers, many of them black women like herself whom she discovered in that first lonely year at home. "Brandon gets the benefit of knowing his mom. No matter how much your caregiver loves your kid, no one is going to love him like mom and dad. Mary Poppins doesn't exist."

Still, the sacrifice looks substantial. The science class this week is about recycling, and the kids' project is to make Christmas ornaments from recycled and found objects. As Cheli and Brandon struggle to affix some glitter

to a spiky sweet gum ball, she mutters, "I'm out of my comfort zone here." And I wonder: What would her law school classmates at Columbia think of her now? "I don't know," she says. "But I have a better life than they do . . . Hopefully, I'll live a long time. There will be time to catch up. And if I die young, I'll know I spent the most important years with my son."

Later, en route to a meeting of Cheli's at-home-mom network, a group of black women who call themselves Mocha Moms, she thinks about this issue some more. Brandon's wide awake now, interrupting his mother with questions: Are we going to play group now? (Just as soon as we go home and pick up some things.) Can I play with Austin? (Yes.) "I don't dwell on what the benefits are to him," she says, "because I have too many friends who work full time -- and, frankly, it's not PC. I won't preach."

What does rankle, though, is the perception of some people that stay-at-home moms are some kind of pampered, privileged class. "You have to have some serious self-esteem to do this," she had said over breakfast. "You have an infant who's not going to pat you on the back. You get all the scut work." So when she hears parents say they can't afford to stay home with their children -- as if money were no consideration for the likes of her -- she has an answer ready in her head: "People make choices. You know what? If you hadn't bought that big house for \$300,000, you wouldn't have to work."

Some people look at those houses and see the American dream. Cheli sees "golden handcuffs."

For the working poor, for single parents, the choices are limited or nonexistent; for the truly wealthy, maybe, or those who knew, just knew, that motherhood was their only calling, the choices are easier. It's the rest of us who wind up making the judgment calls. Many working mothers who say they "have to" work could, strictly speaking, stay home. They could move to a less expensive house or even rent an apartment; they could shop at thrift stores; they could forgo vacations and new cars. Their children might also have to forgo that private school, a home computer, those enriching summer camps -- but it could be done, if money were all we were talking about.

But, it is not. Work isn't just about money. Men and women do get yoked to their jobs, and what began as a choice may easily become a mind-dulling necessity. In the best of circumstances, though, work reflects other values every bit as all-American as motherhood, and chief among them is ambition. Ambition to be something -- to make your mark on the world. Work can be, should be, something that gives meaning to the arc of a person's life.

The trouble comes in reconciling ambition to reality. I heard a story once about Leonard Bernstein's father, who had balked at first at paying for his son's music lessons. Much later, when his son was a renowned conductor and composer, somebody asked Mr. Bernstein about his early reservations, and the old man shrugged. "How was I to know he'd grow up to be Leonard Bernstein?" he said.

Put the shoe on the other foot, and you have the mother's quandary. Can your child do without your constant presence so that you can go to grad school, work on that important brief, crash that deadline? Of course your child can. And later on, when your work yields great rewards -- even fame -- people will congratulate you for making the right choice. You could be a Madeleine Albright, walking proof that you can be a devoted mom and have a brilliant career.

Or you could just spin your wheels. Maybe your ambition exceeds your talent; it's been known to happen. Maybe, 40 years from now, you'll realize your time would have been much better spent playing jacks with your 4-year-old than attempting to write that godawful novel, but so it goes. You took a gamble and it didn't pay off, and who knows how much your children missed out on? How were you to know you'd grow up to be Mrs. Milton Schwartz?

But that's the point: You don't know. All you can do is take what you do know and plod ahead. That's the conclusion I came to as I emerged from that bleak period, after my book proposal sank without a trace. I asked myself: What's important to me right now? The answers: Emma and my work and my marriage, in no particular order because they were all so interdependent. Do I want to be a full-time stay-at-home mom? Not forever. Was I ready to go back to a full-time job downtown? No. Maybe next year. But at 9 months, she needed me utterly -- and I needed to be with her.

All I had to do, then, was invent some way I could stay at home a little longer and earn enough money to get by, while still staying attached to my career. In this, I found, I had a lot of company.

Jayne Lytel distinctly remembers the day she went back to work after her son was born. Her boss at a trade

publication, which had hired her to create a newsletter for the financial services industry, called her in to tell her that her job had just moved to Manhattan, and that she could either move with it or quit. She quit. It wasn't even a tough decision. Her son, Lucas, was only 3 months old at the time, and if finding good day care for him had been hard, leaving him there had been harder. She had some severance pay, and a husband whose job as an online business consultant would keep the roof over their heads. So at 42, Jayne decided the next phase of her career would be at home.

In doing so, she joined a group of women the Department of Labor is having a hard time tracking.

According to the department's statisticians, Jayne falls under the broad category of working mother -- one of a group of women whose numbers have swelled every year for roughly the past 20. In 1997, 65 percent of women with children under 6 worked. Thus, the public perception that the "working mother" is the norm.

What, then, is a "stay-at-home mom"? Jayne would call herself one, and so would I. So, in fact, would every woman in my eight-member new-moms support group, a group that includes two technical writers, one journalist, a nutritionist, a sign language interpreter for the deaf and a schoolteacher. All but two of us are doing some kind of work on a freelance or part-time basis at home. But, because we are working and getting paid for it, the Department of Labor counts us as being in the labor force -- just as if we were punching a time clock and working 50 hours a week in an office.

The department's mandate is to keep track of people who work, regardless of how they choose to participate in the labor force. By its definitions, I've never left the work force: People who are on leave -- like me -- count as being employed, because we have jobs to return to. Women on maternity leave count, as do people on sick leave, seasonal workers, people who work without pay for a "family-operated enterprise," and women who provide child care in their homes for other mothers, among other categories.

This way of counting the labor force -- which doesn't distinguish well between part-time and full-time, home-based and office-centered -- is an increasingly bad fit with the real world. More people are using untraditional arrangements to structure their workweek. The line between work and home is being blurred by voice-mail pagers and portable faxes and laptop computers. Upheavals in the corporate world, combined with "family friendly" company policies that exist mainly on paper, have created an incentive for people like Jayne -- with the skills and savvy and confidence -- to become self-employed entrepreneurs and resign from the ranks of the commuting hordes.

This could explain why conversations at my play group center as much on software and modems as they do on teething and ear infections, and why every parenting magazine in my pediatrician's office has at least one article on running your own home business. Put simply, the term "stay-at-home mom" is much more a matter of self-definition than of government statistics -- and there are a lot more out there than you might think.

One conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that the more divisive Mommy Wars stories -- from the stay-at-home mothers who gripe that office-going neighbors never pull PTA duty and the working moms who get irate when their kid and nanny can't join a moms-only play group -- will remain a social undercurrent, but perhaps a less virulent one. These corrosive battles do happen, I know; a book agent friend who has a son a year older than Emma tells me about trying to deal with the other mothers in her son's day-care center, who are all stay-at-home-moms. "They all know each other, and they're home all day, and I work," she says, sounding disheartened. "And I feel that there is this door that is closed to me." It gnaws at her; these seemingly trivial social interactions determine who her child's first friends will be.

But, increasingly, such combatants will have a hard time choosing uniforms: Today's working mother may, like me or Jayne, be tomorrow's stay-at-home mom, and vice versa.

So, will the future bring us millions of moms cycling in and out of the labor force as they please? Yes and no. The millions of working mothers who, like Ana, make their money in the service industries will still find themselves at the mercy of clients and corporations; only the technologically elite will be able to surf the waves of change. And even then, it will take a lot to succeed. Jayne Lytel will be able to walk up to the second-floor office in her Northwest D.C. town house and pursue a career as an Internet columnist for women's magazines because she has extensive experience as a financial journalist and as the creator of an online newsletter. She also has a husband with a stable job to provide a financial cushion. "It's a seller's market out there," she says, curled up in an overstuffed chair in her living room as Lucas, who is teething, contentedly gnaws his fingers in a bouncer at her feet. "There's a big demand for people with my skills. I'm not worried about finding work." There's just one major downside, she said: no co-workers. The new world of stay-at-home working moms is, at the moment,

looking pretty lonely. But I wonder how long it will stay that way.

Marian Gormley is convinced change is on the way. She is the part-time public relations director of Mothers at Home, a nonprofit organization founded in 1984 by three stay-at-home moms in Northern Virginia. Mothers at Home publishes Welcome Home, a monthly magazine with a circulation of 13,000, and employs a paid staff of 25 people -- all, naturally, part-timers. It is one of roughly half a dozen national organizations for stay-at-home mothers that have sprouted in the last 10 to 15 years. In some circles, Mothers at Home has an anti-feminist reputation, which Gormley says is unfair, and which may simply be a reflection of what feminist writer Anne Roiphe calls "this hard uneasy tension between motherhood and feminism."

Mothers at Home has no polling data, but its anecdotal evidence indicates that attitudes toward stay-at-home mothers are changing profoundly, says Gormley. The Internet enables women to work at home and still maintain a moment-to-moment connection to the outer world. Changes in the workplace will result in most workers switching jobs five or six times in a career, meaning women who cycle in and out of the work force to have babies will no longer be a special group. More women are having babies later in life, which means the creation of a group of mothers who have achieved enough clout in their careers to demand flexibility from their employers. These women are a select few, says Gormley, but she thinks there's bound to be a trickle-down effect.

When Brenda Barnes, the president and CEO of Pepsi-Cola North America, left her job to stay home with her kids, some people saw the adulation she received as part of a backlash against working women and the feminist movement. Gormley sees a woman using her freedom to make a choice -- and that, she says, is what feminism is supposed to be about.

"For some women," she continues, "work is easier. Home is hard. Raising children today, trying to keep marriages intact, trying to find downtime for yourself -- it's not easy. And when women make the choice to be at home, you have to redefine success." Those words undoubtedly will enrage thousands of office-going mothers who do not think their lives are one bit easier. But they also remind me of a colleague who, on the day she was supposed to return to work from maternity leave, made it as far as the Red Line subway platform, turned around and went home. And I wonder: How did we get here? It's not as if having babies is some astounding thing that just recently began to happen; it's not as if the phenomenon of working women has just been hatched. So how did we wind up here -- so harried, so pressed, making momentous life choices between the 8:11 and the 8:17 train?

The solution to my work/home dilemma, which had tormented me for so many months, arrived one day through the office grapevine: There was about to be a job opening on The Post Magazine. I immediately made a phone call. One week later I had an informal agreement to spend the next year writing articles for the Magazine, working from home. There was one drawback: I would not get paid as much as I'd hoped. David and I were dipping now and then into our savings, we had long ago eliminated luxuries like the health club membership and fancy meals out, and when I went to Nordstrom these days it was to use the baby-friendly ladies' room, not to shop. Clearly, we couldn't continue on this financial course forever. But the money was enough to make it feasible for now -- and, most important, there would be lots of time with Emma. I got my formal leave from the newspaper extended, and it was done. Not a permanent solution, but a huge weight lifted nevertheless, and one I felt incredibly lucky to have found. I drove home that day laughing.

One night not long after this, I received a visit from the spirit world.

Or maybe it was just my subconscious being interesting. At any rate, it was a dream, and in it I found myself standing in some public place; the surroundings weren't clear. When I happened to look off to my right, I saw three rather frumpy middle-aged ladies, two of them white and one black. There was nothing out of the ordinary about them. They might have been waiting for the bus, except for one detail: They were standing in midair, about three feet off the ground.

"You're angels, aren't you?" I asked, when I noticed this, and one of the three ladies turned and nodded curtly at me, as if to say, Yes, but please keep your voice down. Then she said, "You will see us again in your life, but for now we want you to continue on your journey, which is important." And then they left.

What a strange dream, I thought when I woke up. (I don't normally dream about angels.) But it was clear to me my subconscious was just trying to tell me to keep going. There was no point in trying to find some big answer to the question of how to fit life and child and work into one perfect piece again. "Women's careers don't go in straight lines," Madeleine Albright once told a Time magazine interviewer. "They zigzag all over the place."



And maybe that's the best image. Motherhood these days is like zigzagging around in bumper cars, except ours have kiddie seats. We're all behind the wheel -- Ana, who worked too hard to breastfeed her baby as she wanted; Cheli, who made her choice not knowing how much harm it might do her career; Jayne, whose solution is probably going to be lonely; me and a million other women, struggling to figure out a way to be good mothers and still stay connected to work we love. The fun-house music keeps getting louder and faster, and the moms in the bumper cars keep going in tighter little circles, and though some cars are fancier than others, we are all prisoners of the apparatus, which is a culture that treats children as sentimental objects or consumers or inconveniences -- as anything but people. And I wonder: How do you stage a bumper car revolt?

Tracy Thompson is on leave from The Post's Metro section.

**[Illustration]**

PHOTO-COLOR,,D. Gorton; PHOTO,,Lise Metzger CAPTION: Jayne Lytel of Northwest Washington with her son, Lucas, and her husband, David. Jayne left an office job to work at home. CAPTION: Hairdresser Ana Kinney of Columbia attends to customer Beth Smith. Ana's husband, Hal, stays with their children, Alexander, 4, and Josefina, almost 2, during the day and works part time at night. CAPTION: Cheli Figaro, right, has put her legal career on hold and made material sacrifices to stay home and care for her 4-year-old son, Brandon. Above, she waits with other parents seeking to enroll children in kindergarten at Holy Trinity Episcopal School in Bowie. Sharon and Stephen Devonshire, below, received mail critical of their lifestyle after their 8-week-old son died while in the care of an au pair.

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