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Written in collaboration with my wife, Pei Shee, a proud stay at home mum

It was very interesting talking to stay at home mums about their experiences in the preparation for this article. Perhaps one of the strongest messages that came across from them was that very few people truly appreciate the challenges and sacrifices involved in this role.

One of the mums I talked to was joking about the fact that before she had children, everyone she talked to (mostly people who had no children yet!) gave her the impression that being a stay at home mom would be such an easy, relaxing experience compared to her corporate job.

It's like a job ad that reads: "Be a stay at home mom! Rewarding experience, flexible hours, ample room for creativity and experimental fun!" Like many job ads, perhaps the pitch above is a little misleading because it clearly misses out the really challenging parts about being a stay at home mom.

If I were to get an actual stay at home mum to re-write the job description it would probably read something like this; "Highly demanding, 24/7 on call, forget about personal space, play multiple roles and multi-task a thousand nitty-gritty assignments, mostly misunderstood and underappreciated at large."

No one fully appreciates

One stay at home mum I talked to shared that the most annoying perception the rest of society had was that being at home meant that she had a lot of free time, and that it didn't really involve a lot of work.

"Sometimes, I think my husband gets the impression that I just sit around on the sofa all day watching soap operas and eating snacks," she said. "They think it takes about 1 hour to do all the housework and to tend to the children and then it's just fun. They have no idea just how intense and how continuous the work can be."

Husbands are the prime culprits in this regard, often coming home from work and expecting their wives to wait on them hand and foot because "I've been working in the office the whole day while you've been just bumming around in house the whole day."

"Many husbands just don't realize that looking after the house and the kids are just as tiring, physically, emotionally and mentally as any job out there," shares a mum who previously worked as a senior partner in an accounting firm, "let me tell you, being a full time mum was every bit as tiring and draining as being an auditor during the peak period of business".

A stigma?

Many stay at home mums I talked to shared how they felt awkward and even a little embarrassed when people asked them what they did for work. "When I say I stay home to look after the children, I get all kinds of funny responses, most of them very condescending", shares one mum. "Some say how wonderful and relaxing it must be, others look down on me as though I am wasting all my talents and training."

Some mums had shared how others made them feel as though they were weak or less capable because they chose to stay at home, as though they were "quitting" the working world because they could not handle the pressure or juggle the roles of motherhood and career woman. As one mum put it, "just because I choose not to juggle my role as a mother and my role as a full time employee, does not mean I can't do it."

Interestingly, a lot of pressure and stigma come from other mums who have chosen to work fulltime instead of being at home. "I think we should respect each other's life choices. I respect their choice to work full time and leave their kids in the care of relatives or maids, but they should also respect my decision to stop work and stay at home," argues one mum, "I should not be made to feel second class, or second rate, just because I don't have a paying job. It does not make me any less intelligent or competent or independent."

The joys that make it worthwhile

"My parents were clearly disappointed when I decided to leave the law firm", shares Linda, stay at home mum who has two children aged 1 and 5 years. "After all, they worked really hard to put me through university. It really hurt when they said I was throwing my career away. But the strangest thing is, all it takes to make me beam and forget about these criticism is simply, a smile or a kiss from my child."

Linda's experience mirror what many mothers have also shared with me. Time with the kids, while stressful and infuriating at times, can also be magical. It is hard to fathom how something so "small" can outweigh the bigger gains in a mother's heart, it cannot be explained logically.

The danger of making your child your "project"

Some mums who used to work full time, especially in the ultra competitive corporate environment where KPIs (Key performance indicators) and other performance measurement goals rule the day, may slip into the habit of making their children's development their motherhood KPI. They, therefore, may be overly disappointed if their children do not meet the developmental milestones, as others will question if the sacrifices they made have been worth-while.

To justify her choice to stay at home, a mother may start seeing childrearing as a particular project and forget that this child is unique and has his/her own pace in learning or growing.

It's not the best choice for every family

Not all women are suited for the role of staying at home full time and children are sometimes better off being looked after by more patient caregivers, than by a mother that is not happy about her choice of staying at home.

Mothers should not be "bullied" or "shamed" into staying a home out of guilt. It should be a free choice. No point staying at home if you are miserable, angry, frustrated and resentful because you have to give up your job. This resentment rubs off on the kids and makes for a very unhappy home environment.

What about working from home?

Some of the mums I talked to had managed to do some part time work from home. There are professions that allow this kind of flexibility like sales, and writing, especially in this internet age when a computer can link you with the office.

However the strong word of advice I got from these mums was that mums with young children don't have time for work (part time or home-based) unless supported by extended families or engaged domestic help. Most of the mums who worked from home began after their children were about 4 years or older. The kindergarten time, or pre-school hours created more time for the mums to work, plus older children need less moment to moment attention as they are less dependent and this also frees up resources.

Ensure personal space

The fact that there is no clear delineation between their "work space" and their "rest space", as well as their "work time" and their "rest time" means many stay at home mums feel like they're on duty ALL THE TIME!

One of the most important tips I got from mums was the importance of ensuring some time "for myself". "I get my husband or my in laws to take the kids for a 3-4 hours block at least twice a week so that I can have some time to do something I enjoy, like go out with friends, or catch a movie, or have a long bath, or go to the spa," shared one mum.

Conclusion

Whether to stay at home is a choice each mother should make without fear or pressure. Those who have selected this path have experienced great rewards, but also have had to face great challenges. The rest of the family can help provide a more supportive environment when they start to appreciate the challenges that stay at home mums face.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010