

CHAPTER 6

EXTREME PARENTING AND THE NEW FAMILY NORMS



The most important thing she'd learned over the years was that there was no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one.

---Jill Churchill

... The Twenty-First Century Model: Parenting on Steroids

In the new millennium, parenting feels like an extreme sport. While children used to be seen as generally resilient, and life experiences—both good and bad—were considered helpful to prepare them for the inevitable ups and downs and unpredictability of adulthood, the modern perception is that children are fragile and require intensive focus.¹ We worry that a single decision, such as a child not starting a sport early enough or not taking enough advanced placement courses to get into a top college, could have serious negative consequences. Even our language embodies our intensely child-focused approach. We describe ourselves as stay-at-home mothers and fathers rather than homemakers because so much of our focus is spent managing our children's lives, almost as if parents were their children's agents. Our home lives, like our work lives, have been dramatically altered by technology, which is speeding life up and expanding the world of possibilities. All this has resulted in heightened anxiety, a sense of

acute busyness in our lives outside of work (as well as at work), and a feeling that home is not the respite it used to be. The stakes feel high all the way around, and far too many parents feel stressed, overwhelmed, and exhausted.

We are further burdened by an idyllic picture of the way it used to be. Mothering and guilt have become close bedfellows, with modern mothers, particularly those working outside the home, wondering and worrying if they are spending enough time with their children. Francie Latour, the author of the article “The Bad Mother Complex: Why are so many working mothers haunted by constant guilt?” shared her personal experience of feeling guilty about not being able to play a game with her six-year-old because she needed to work, even though she had traded the long commute and rigid world of a newspaper reporter for the far more flexible world of a freelance writer and editor working from home.²

It turns out that the guilt women feel while juggling is a much bigger issue than their competence at doing the actual juggling.³ Yet modern mothers—working outside the home or not—spend more time with their children than mothers did forty years ago. In addition, fathers spend more than twice as much time with their children as fathers in the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s.⁴ Our kids are getting a lot of our time! This was a surprise even to the researchers who studied the historical time data, as illustrated in the passage below from an article highlighting the study results.

It seems reasonable to expect that parental investment in child rearing would have declined since 1965, when 60 percent of all children lived in families with a breadwinner father and a stay-at-home mother. . . . The researchers found, to their surprise, that married and single parents spent more time teaching, playing with and caring for their children than parents did 40 years ago.⁵

Where has this extra time come from? Well, our houses are perhaps not as clean, since women have significantly cut back the

time spent on housework. Men do more, but not enough to cover the loss. We also do a lot of multitasking and spend less time on ourselves, recharging our parental batteries. Despite an enormous body of evidence that the bonds between children with working (versus stay-at-home) mothers are similarly strong,⁶ and despite the empirical data that we spend not less but *more* time with our children than mothers in previous decades, mothers (and increasingly fathers) guiltily worry they are not doing enough for their children.

Multiple factors contribute to the intensity we experience as twenty-first century parents: a proliferation of media and electronic devices, heightened security concerns for our children, outsized expectations of our kids' enrichment needs, and a high-pressure and test-focused approach to public education. In addition, rampant expert advice reinforces the notion of a "right" way to parent and has contributed to the erosion of our parental confidence. The good news is that the Libra work and life model helps parents confront and manage the reality of these external forces so as to create a more relaxed and saner approach to family management. The Libra approach helps keep parents focused on what they can influence and on the well-being of the whole family, children and parents alike. ...

¹ Based on the transcript from the radio show "What Do Kids Really Think about their Working Parents?" on Fem 2.0 Wake Up? The program was aired on February 10, 2010, and was moderated by Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute. The guests included Lisa Belkin and Josh Coleman.

² Latour, "The Bad Mother Complex: Why Are So Many Working Mothers Haunted by Guilt?"

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pear, "Married and Single Parents Spending More Time with Children, Study Finds," retrieved July 19, 2011, at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/17/us/17kids.html?pagewanted=print>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Barnett, "Women and Multiple Roles: Myths and Reality," 162; Pruett, *Partnership Parenting*, 83, 205.