



# *The Changing Face of Motherhood*

**The Social Issues Research Centre 2011**

**Commissioned by**



*The Social Issues Research Centre  
28 St Clements Street  
Oxford OX4 1AB UK  
+44 (0) 1865 262255  
group@sirc.org*

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## Contents

Summary and conclusions.....	1
The changing nature of families .....	1
Divisions of labour within the family .....	1
Mothers' sources of support and advice and sense of value.....	2
Mothers' relationships with their own mothers .....	2
Improving mothers lives .....	2
The 2010s – the best days for motherhood? .....	2
1 Introduction.....	3
1.1 The evolution of human motherhood .....	3
1.2 The modern mother .....	3
1.3 Methods .....	4
2 How have families changed in recent history? .....	5
2.1 Family size and composition .....	5
2.2 Delayed child birth.....	5
2.3 Working mothers .....	5
2.4 The decline of the extended family?.....	6
3 Who does what in the family? .....	7
3.1 Child care and house work.....	7
3.2 The increasing contributions of fathers – the contemporary mother's view.....	10
3.3 The impact of domestic technologies.....	12
3.4 Mothers' time to themselves? .....	12
3.5 The work-life balance and guilt.....	15
4 Representations of mothers in magazines.....	16
5 Mothers' sources of advice and support .....	19
5.1 Keeping in touch with the support network .....	20
5.2 Isolation?.....	20
6 Are mothers valued?.....	21
7 Mothers and their mothers.....	23
8 What would improve mothers' lives? .....	24
9 The Golden Age of motherhood? .....	25
10 References .....	26

## Table of figures

Figure 1. Mothers' active involvement with their children – hours per week.....	8
Figure 2. Comparison between mothers and their mothers regarding active time with children .....	8
Figure 3. Mothers receiving help from others compared with that received by their own mothers .....	10
Figure 4. Mothers receiving help from their partners compared with that received by their own mothers. ....	10
Figure 5. Who helps most in the home with child care?.....	11
Figure 6. Amount of mother's 'me time' per week.....	14
Figure 7. Mothers' 'me time' compared with that of their own mothers .....	14
Figure 8. Reasons for more 'me time' .....	14

Figure 9. Reasons for less 'me time' ..... 14

Figure 10. Feelings of guilt about the work-life balance..... 15

Figure 11. Mothers' sources of advice ..... 19

Figure 12. Perceptions of empowerment provide by Mumsnet, etc..... 19

Figure 13. Communicating with sources of support ..... 20

Figure 14. Extent to which mothers feel isolated..... 20

Figure 15. Degree to which mothers feel valued within their families..... 21

Figure 16. Degree to which mothers feel valued by society as a whole..... 22

Figure 17. Frequency of mothers being thanked..... 23

Figure 18. How mothers would best like to be thanked..... 23

Figure 19. What would contribute an improvement in mothers' lives..... 24

Figure 20. The decades to which mothers would prefer to return ..... 25

## Summary and conclusions

### The changing nature of families

The number of households in Britain has increased substantially over the past 50 years (from 16 to 25million) but the proportion of households comprising families has fallen from 30% to 18%. Larger families, with 3 or more children, are now increasingly rare (3% of all families).

At the same time, the British population is ageing . The proportion of households now containing people over the state retirement age is 28% – doubling from 14% in 1961.

The number of lone parents, mostly single mums, has increased substantially and lone parent families now account for a nearly a quarter of all families.

Child birth is being delayed to a later age – the average age of mothers at first birth is now almost 30, compared with 23 in the 1930s.

These delays are partly explained by the increasing numbers of women going out work. The proportion of mothers in full- or part-time employment in 1971 was around 23%. Today it is 68%. Back in 1951, only around 16% of mothers worked outside of the home.

Although the role of grandparents in the family has been thought by some to be declining in recent times, 60% of additional child care in Britain is undertaken by grandparents – the value to the national economy being estimated at around £4 billion.

### Divisions of labour within the family

Today's mother with a child under the age of four spends 135 minutes per day caring for him or her and mothers generally are twice as involved in child care than fathers. Over three quarters of mothers say that they have the primary child care role.

Between 2000 and 2005 the time spent on child care by mothers rose by 14%. For fathers, however, it rose by 36%. The total amount of time spent by both mothers and fathers on housework (excluding childcare) fell over this period – a continuation of a trend since the 1950s and due mainly to increasing numbers of domestic labour-saving devices, convenience foods, cleaning and care products, etc.

Mothers are equally divided on whether they now have more time to themselves than in previous generations. Some feel that they have more 'me time' because of labour-saving devices and help from their partners. Others feel that they have less 'me time' due to pressures of work, children requiring more supervision and greater pressures to be an 'active mum'. Moderate levels of guilt are experienced by mothers in their attempts to achieve a work-life balance.

Today's mothers mainly feel that they spend more active time with their children than did their own mothers. They also feel that they receive more help from others, especially their husbands/partners. Both are consistent with the evidence.

In the 1960s women did three quarters of all housework, including child care, averaging 18.5 hours per week. Data for the 1970s and 1980s are unclear but the hours spent on housework including child care rose by 24% between 1974 and 1987. The contributions made by men during the 1970s/1980s doubled, but were still well below those of mothers. It is reasonable to suppose that much of the increase in 'housework' related to the child care element.

The 1950s were the years in which men's attitudes to what had previously been seen as 'women's work' began to change and their contributions began to increase. This was due mainly to the impact of the Second World War and the fact that many women had been employed during that time in occupations that were previously the preserve of men. Prior to the 1950s there is little evidence to show that fathers were actively involved in child care to any significant degree at all.

### **Mothers' sources of support and advice and sense of value**

The main source of advice on child rearing for today's mother is her own mother. Other female friends, especially those with children of their own, are more important in this context than the husband/partner.

While online social networking sites such as Mumsnet are not seen as significant sources of advice and support, they are seen as empowering mothers and are used to keep in touch with a wider network.

Despite the availability of such networks and more immediate support in the family and community, many mothers feel socially isolated, especially those aged between 35 and 44.

The majority of mothers feel valued by their families, but less so by society in general. While some mothers say that they are thanked by partners and/or children on a daily basis, the average frequency of being thanked is only once in 20 days.

Mothers feel that being given a hug is the best way of being thanked for what they do.

### **Mothers' relationships with their own mothers**

There appears to have been a radical change in the nature of the relationship between mothers and their grow-up daughters who are also mothers. Today, these are much more open and relaxed than in previous times. Mothers describe their relationships with their own mothers as being more like friendships than that of the traditional mother-daughter. While the ways in which mothers raise their own children have always been influenced by their own childhood experiences and the approach of their own mothers, these new styles of continuing relationship between daughters/mothers and their own mothers would seem to have a very positive impact on contemporary family life.

### **Improving mothers lives**

Mothers feel that the best way of improving their lives would be greater opportunities for flexible working. More help in the home and being able to live closer to their own mothers would also contribute significantly in this context. Equal maternity/paternity leave was not seen by the majority as a major way forward.

### **The 2010s – the best days for motherhood?**

While the hours spent by mothers on active child care have been steadily rising since the 1970s and before, and increasingly mothers are in paid employment outside of the home, most mothers would not want to return to family life in previous decades. While they might be happy with the 2000s, the 1990s are seen as being a decade to avoid – the 1960s to the 1980s were seen as preferable. Very few would want to be a mother in the 1930s or 1940s, for very good reasons. These were the decades that, compared with the present day, and on all measures, were much harsher times for families in general, but for mothers in particular.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The evolution of human motherhood

The origins of human motherhood date back to just under two million years ago when our most direct ancestors began to emerge as a separate species from other primates – the appearance of *Homo Erectus*. Unlike chimps and gorillas, these early human mothers began a new style of rearing their young – in particular, allowing others to assist with the feeding and care of infants. It was a step change that, according to the anthropologist Sarah Hrdy<sup>1</sup>, had a most significant impact on subsequent human evolution.

One reason for this change was the fact that human infants were, and are, much more dependent on adults, and mothers in particular, for survival in their early years. The young human, for example, requires around 13 million calories before it becomes nutritionally independent. In these circumstances mothers needed some help. In every known human society since this mid Pleistocene period, therefore, we find the phenomenon known as ‘alloparenting’ – involvement of the wider family and community in the early rearing and care of children.

This is not to say that the role of our earliest mother ancestors was, in any way, weakened. While the human baby can form more attachments than, say, the chimpanzee who spends much of its early years clinging to its mother’s skin, the position of its mother among the caretakers remained central to its development.

Throughout our evolution, then, motherhood has been positioned within supportive social frameworks – allowing mothers to develop the essential primary bonds with their infants and children, but also allowing them to be additionally productive members of the groups in which they lived. By the late Stone Age, when most of the evolutionary forces that have shaped our ways of living and even the manner in which the circuits of our brains are ‘wired’ had occurred, the role of women, including mothers, as gatherers of food was crucial to survival. The sharing of at least some of the child care responsibilities was what allowed this adaptive arrangement to flourish.

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<sup>1</sup> Blaffer Hrdy, S. (2009)

### 1.2 The modern mother

So, what, if anything, has changed over the 30,000 years of so since the Upper Palaeolithic days of our hunter-gatherer Stone Age communities? Can mothers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with all the advanced technology and communication systems and the modern conveniences that we now take for granted, now dispense with alloparents (or their equivalent) and happily raise their children single-handedly (or with just one male partner) within the much diminished ‘nuclear’ family size? Or do mothers have the same ‘primeval’ needs for support in their role as the primary guarantors of the future of the human species that they have always had?

It is, of course, impossible to trace the changing face of motherhood and the complex social networks in which mothers have found themselves over this vast expanse of time. The evidence from archaeology and anthropology may give us some clues, but without first-hand accounts from mothers themselves, and from those in their families and social networks, we can only make guesses as to what motherhood really looked like.

We can, however, plot the changing face of motherhood in more recent times and examine more precisely what has changed, on the surface at least, and predict where motherhood might be going in the future. From the 1960s we have witnessed an explosion in the collection of statistical data that have focused on population compositions, family sizes, working mothers, etc. From the 1970s we have also had the benefit of more fine-grained surveys that have asked questions specifically related to the roles of mothers and their relationship with families and the wider community.

There are also a number of ethnographic studies conducted prior to the 1960s that give a least a ‘flavour’ of motherhood going back to the days immediately prior to and after the Second World War – the mid 1930s and the late 1940s – that were particularly difficult times for the British population.

On the basis of these forms of evidence we have sought to answer some specific questions about the changing face of motherhood and determine the extent to which modern ‘solutions’ to motherhood are more or less beneficial than the solutions of the past. In particular we have raised issues such as:

- How have families, and the roles that mothers play within them changed over the years?
- How many mothers are now in paid employment outside of the home compared with the past, and what impact has this had on child care arrangements?
- Has the role of fathers changed in any significant way?
- Do 'modern' child-rearing patterns mean that mothers have more time to themselves?
- What has been the impact of modern conveniences, from pre-prepared baby foods and disposable nappies to washing machines and tumble driers, on the daily routines of mothers?
- What have been the changes in mothers' support networks, in terms of size, composition and function?
- Are mothers more or less detached from their own mothers than they were in the past, and what have been the effects of this change?

Finally, we conducted an online poll of over 1,000 mothers in the UK to see the extent to which our background and qualitative research was consistent with the national picture.

We have also explored issues relating to mothers' perceived quality of life. Do they see themselves as 'better off' than their own mothers? Or do they experience more guilt as a 'working mother' and would prefer to return to what they see as a more 'traditional' motherly role?

### **1.3 Methods**

In addition to collecting and collating the types of statistical and qualitative evidence noted above, we have also conducted a three-part group session with mums of varied ages and from different backgrounds. After the first session, in which discussion ranged over the questions we sought to pose, they were tasked to go off and 'interview' their own mothers about the same issues. A week later they came back with their research notes to discuss the differences they had identified between their role to day and that of a previous generation of mothers.

We also convened a group of grandmothers to discuss with us their perceptions of their child-raising days and how these compare with what they see in the families of their sons and daughters.



## 2 How have families changed in recent history?

### 2.1 Family size and composition

There are now over 25 million households in the country – a rise of nearly 9 million since 1961. Since the early 60s, however, the proportion of households comprising families with an adult couple and 1 or 2 dependent children has fallen from 30% to 18%. The proportion of larger families with 3 or more dependent children has fallen from 8% to 3%. In contrast, the number of households containing a single person over the state pension age has increased from 4% to 14% and those under state pension age from 7% to 14% over the same period.

The proportion of households occupied by lone parents with dependent children rose from 3% to 7%.<sup>2</sup> Lone-parent families now account for 24% of all families with children, with the single parent being female in the large majority (90%) of cases.

The average completed family size fell over the period 1900-1999 from 3.5 to 1.7 with the biggest decline occurring the depression years of the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, however it reached a temporary peak of 2.4 before dropping once more. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this overall decline has been slightly reversed and the average completed family size is now around 2.0.

During this period, of course, the number of children born outside marriage has increased quite substantially. This is not to say, however, that the increase is in children born outside of *families* – the rate of cohabiting couples has increased as marriages have declined but, despite the increase in single mothers noted earlier, the large majority of children live with both a mother and a father, even if they are not actually married. The proportion of all births outside of marriage registered jointly by two parents living at the same address (presumed to be cohabiting) rose from 10% of all births outside of marriage in 1986 to 25% in 2008.

### 2.2 Delayed child birth

This overall decline in family size has been accompanied by a trend towards having children

later in life. Over the last four decades the average age at which mothers give birth to their first baby has increased substantially and is now around 29.4 years. Since the 1970s the number of children born to women in their early 20s has decreased from nearly 140 live births per 1,000 to less than 80. At the same time the number of births among women in their mid to late 30s has increased from just over 20 to 60 per 1,000. The number of live births to mothers aged 40 and over nearly trebled from 9,336 in 1989 to 26,976 in 2009.

Looking further back in history we find that in the mid 1930 the most usual age to have a first child was between the ages of 20 and 24 – 430 first births per 1,000 women. The rate for those over the age of 35 was only around 2 per 1,000. A similar picture was evident in the mid 1940s. It is not until the early 1970s that we start to see a major shift with the most usual age at first birth now moving into the 25-29 category<sup>4</sup> – setting a trend that is continuing today.

### 2.3 Working mothers

There are, of course, a number of reasons for this shift towards childbearing later in life – the most obvious being economic constraints and the number of women in employment and establishing careers for themselves. The increasing number of women participating in higher education has also been a factor.

The Labour Force Surveys show a rise in women in employment from 10.8 million in 1978 to 14.8 million in 2008. Over the same period the number of men in employment increased much less – from 16.1 to 16.9 million.

In recent years the proportion of mothers in full-time employment outside of the home has increased from 25% in 1996 to 31% in 2008. The proportion of mothers in part-time employment has remained relatively stable at around 41%. Added together, this means that only a minority of mothers were at home all day in 2008 – 34%. Lone mothers tend to be less involved in the labour market, although their numbers are increasing – 22% in 1996 to 27% in 2008 in full-time employment. In 2009, 68% of all mothers were in employment compared with 43% in 1973.

<sup>2</sup> ONS (2008a), Social Trends, 40, (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Hicks, J. & Allen, G. (1999)

<sup>4</sup> ONS (2008b)



The employment rate of mothers, of course, varies with the age of their children – those with pre-school children are less likely to be in full-time or part-time employment than those with older children. Nonetheless, the proportion of working mothers as a whole has been rising steadily since the 1950s.

In the 1951 census, 1 in 6 (17%) of all mothers of dependent children were employed. This increased to 26%, 39% and 47% in the 1961, 1971 and 1981 censuses respectively. Employment rates of mothers with pre-school children remained lower over a longer period, increasing from around 15% in the mid 1950s to 54% in 2001, compared with 65% of mothers with older children – most of this rise occurring after the mid 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Today, then, the typical family comprises a full-time 'bread winner' (usually male) and a part-time or lower-earning full-time employed mother, with one or two children, most often over the age of starting school.

### 2.4 The decline of the extended family?

It is commonplace these days to come across news articles, commentary and features that bemoan the alleged disappearance of the 'extended family' – that which includes, typically, grandparents and, to a lesser extent, uncles, aunts, etc. as well as the two parents. There is the suggestion that first, the involvement grandparents in families is a 'good thing' and, second, that now there is less of such involvement because of patterns of internal migration – mothers and fathers who have moved to different parts of the country from where their own parents still live.

This reverence of grandparents, however, and of grandmothers in particular, and the nostalgia about their apparent absence in contemporary families, is relatively new. Peter K. Smith, in an article in *The Psychologist*<sup>6</sup> notes:

*"Nowadays, grandparents generally get a good press. That was not always the case. Clinical case studies from the 1930s to 1950s, such as 'The grandmother: A problem in child rearing' (1937) and 'Grandma made Johnny delinquent' (1943) ... berated the adverse influence of*

*grandmothers who interfered in old-fashioned and didactic ways with the mother's childrearing."*

Today, of course the general feelings in both psychological practice and among the public in general, is rather different. At the same time, data relating to contacts between grandparents and grandchildren, now and in previous decades has been rather scarce – a point stressed by the organisation *Grandparents Plus*:

*"We have an incomplete picture of family life in Britain. We are not yet fully aware of the scale of the contribution that the UK's 14 million grandparents are making."<sup>7</sup>*

Data from the 1998 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) indicate that 30% of grandparents saw their grandchildren several times a week while 32% saw them less than once a month. Geoff Dench and Jim Ogg, who analysed the BSA data also note the many studies showing that grandmothers through the mother's side are typically more involved than those through the father's side.<sup>8</sup> A slightly later set of data (2001) suggests a rather higher frequency of grandparent-grandchild contact.<sup>9</sup> Here we find that 61% of grandparents saw their grandchildren at least once a week.

The most recent study of grandparents and their value in families is that led by Ann Buchanan of the University of Oxford.<sup>10</sup> This was the first national survey of the contribution made by grandparents in families in England and Wales. It demonstrated very clearly the positive contributions made by grandparents to the welfare and development of their grandchildren and the authors noted the particular role that grandparents played in relation to teenagers. Adolescents, it seems, feel able to discuss their plans for their future with their grandparents who, in turn, can provide support in making, for example, educational or career choices. The report of the study also emphasises the particular value of grandparents in times of family crisis, breakdown and separation.

This study also identifies the quite astonishing (given the 'extended-family-is-dead' belief) fact that 60%

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<sup>7</sup> Griggs, J. (2009)

<sup>8</sup> Dench & Ogg 2002)

<sup>9</sup> ONS (2001)

<sup>10</sup> Buchanan, A. (2008)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Twomey (2002)

<sup>6</sup> Smith, P.K.(2005)

of all additional child care in Britain is provided by grandparents – worth, it is claimed, £4 billion to the national economy.

While the present-day contribution of grandparents to family life is quite clear from the available research, we are a little more in the dark about grandparenting in the past and the trends that have occurred over previous decades. For insights here we have to turn to the few ethnographic studies that have actually tried to measure grandparent contact with grandchildren and the value that these contacts have provided.

Among these is the celebrated study by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London*. Their research was conducted in the early 1950s when much of the population in the study area of Bethnal Green had been rehoused because of bomb damage in the Second World War. The authors found that of mothers who lived in the same block of flats as their own mothers, 100% had seen their mother in the previous 24 hours. For those whose mothers lived elsewhere in Bethnal Green, the contact rate in the previous 24 hours was 67%. Those with mothers in adjacent boroughs or further afield, the rates dropped sharply to 16% and 8% respectively. Young and Willmott comment:

*“The mother is the head and centre of the extended family, her home is its meeting place. ‘Mum’s’ is the family rendezvous, as one wife said. Her daughters congregate at the mother’s, visiting her more often than she visits any one of them: 68 per cent of married women last saw their mother at her home, and only 27 per cent at their own.”*

A similar pattern of contact between mothers and their own mothers was noted earlier in a study by Joseph Sheldon in Wolverhampton. Referring to grandparents in the 1940s, he observed:

*“In at least 40 per cent of cases they must be regarded as part of the family group, the ramifications of which bear little or no relation to architectural limitations.”*

We return to the issue of grandparents and their roles in modern families in section 5 together with the issues of mothers’ wider support networks.

### 3 Who does what in the family?

The UK Time Use Surveys (TUS) provide us with quite rich data on the amount of time individuals spend in a range of activities during the week and at weekends. The most recent of these surveys, conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was conducted in 2005 and comparative data are available for a survey conducted in 2000.

Analysis of the TUS are not without their difficulties – the data sets are large and responses given by each respondent need to be weighted in order to provide a more accurate representation of the British population as a whole. For this reason we have followed the reports by the ONS itself regarding these data.

#### 3.1 Child care and house work

The amount of time that parents devote to child care varies obviously, with the age of their children. Parents with small children – those under the age of 4 spent, on average, 135 minutes per day caring for their child/children. It is mothers, however, who, as we might expect, are more involved in child care as a primary activity than fathers – twice as much, in fact. There is some evidence, however, to suggest that fathers spend more time on child care as a ‘secondary’ activity than do mothers. A secondary activity in this context might involve, for example, ‘keeping an eye’ on children playing in their bedrooms or outside.

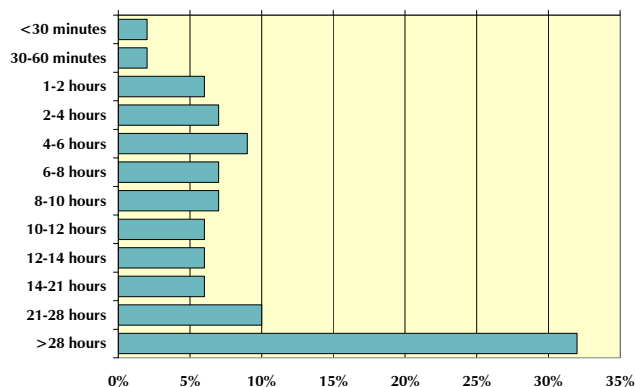
Data provided by a large scale survey conducted on behalf of the Equality and Human Rights Commission<sup>11</sup> tell a similar story. Here, over 75% of mothers said that they had primary responsibility for the day-to-day rearing of children in the home.

We can compare the TUS figures for mothers against those provided in our national survey. The categories of time spent by mothers in playing with children, reading to them, washing, etc. are illustrated in Figure 1. Here we can see that by far the largest category of time spent in this activity was over 28 hours per week, or 4 hours per day. The average time, however, is in the order of two hours per day. This is somewhat lower than the TUS 2005 data based on diary methods and it may be that mothers in our sample have underestimated the

<sup>11</sup> Ellison, E., Barker, A. & Kulasuriya, T. (2009)

actual time spent with children – a common error in research surveys that we discuss below.

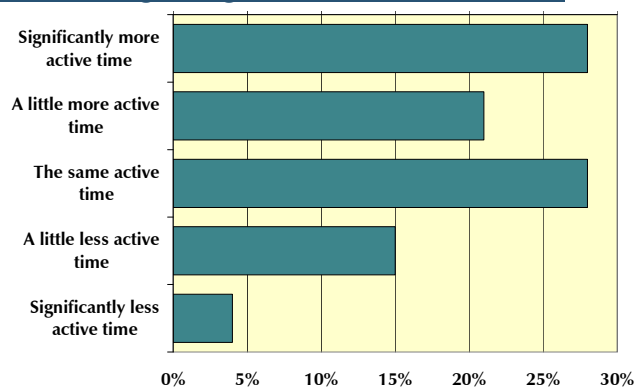
**Figure 1. Mothers' active involvement with their children – hours per week**



Older mothers, who tend in the main to have older children, reported less time spent on child care. Mothers in the age group 35-44, for example, reported spending 16.5 hours on child care per week while those over their mid 40s to mid 50s were occupied in this way for an average of 12 hours per week.

Mothers in the poll sample were also asked if the amount of active time they spend with their children was more or less than that spent by their own mothers. The responses are summarised in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Comparison between mothers and their mothers regarding active time with children**



From Figure 2 it is clear that far more mothers thought that they now spend greater amount of time with their children compared with their own mothers rather than less – 48% on the 'more time side' and only 19% on the 'less time' side. These perceptions are consistent with the trends we have noted earlier. The Time Use Surveys also indicate that there were some significant changes between

2000 and 2005. The amount of time spent on childcare by mothers (as a primary activity) rose over this period by 14%. It also rose, however, for fathers by a greater amount – 36%. While this may indicate a recent trend to a more equitable distribution of child care among parents, it still remains predominantly the mother's responsibility. The same is true of more general 'housework' duties. While the number of minutes per day spent on this activity fell between 2000 and 2005 for both men and women, the differential remained – 180 minutes for women compared with 101 minutes for men in 2005. In 2000 the durations were 215 minutes and 128 minutes respectively.

The 2000 TUS survey provides some more detail of the constituents of child care. The most significant of these was 'Physical care and supervision', which occupied mothers as either a primary or secondary activity<sup>12</sup> for 14.7 hours per week compared with 5.0 for fathers. For the second most significant component, 'Playing with, talking to and reading to the child, the weekly figure for mothers was 7.0 versus 3.9 hours for fathers.

A study examining data from the British Household Panel Survey of 1997 showed that in the late 1990s Women did three-quarters of all housework, averaging 18.5 hours per week, compared with 6 hours per week for men.<sup>13</sup>

Stepping back two decades, we find trends in time use for UK couples of working age. Within these is the category 'child care including related travel. The figures include childless couples so appear to be very much lower than we would expect, Nonetheless, there is no reason to suppose that the ratio of men/women across the two indicated points in time will be inaccurate.

Child care occupied the average woman (including childless women) for 34.9 minutes per week in 1974/5, rising to 43.4 minutes per week in 1987 – an increase of 24%. This was despite the fact that that the time spent, on average, in paid work outside of the home by the female half of couples rose by 20% from 126 to 152 minutes per week. The increase in child care undertaken by men over the same period was, however, very substantial,

<sup>12</sup> A 'secondary' activity is one that is undertaken in the 'background' while engaged on a separate primary activity.

<sup>13</sup> Man-yeek Kan (2001)

doubling from 8 minutes per week in 1974/5 to 16.4 minutes in 1987. On the other hand, their hours in employment fell by 14%.

Such data, as noted above, are not without their problems. As SIRC has found in past research, men can often exaggerate the contribution that they make to child care and running the home. If you ask the mother, for example, how much she thinks her partner contributes, it will generally be less than what the partner thinks himself. There is also an apparent tendency for women to underestimate the time they spend on certain tasks because of their greater abilities, compared with men, to multi-task. And so, even in the most carefully controlled studies, such as the TUS that uses diary methods, there is still room for 'enhancement' by the respondents, particularly the males. So well understood is this particular phenomenon that a current TV series, *Who Does What?*, which delves into the perceptions of married couples while discreetly filming their every activity, is enjoying some modest success.

Data for earlier decades are rather more difficult to come by. We find some evidence about the 1960s, however, in a study conducted by the Future Foundation.<sup>14</sup> The authors report that in this decade women spent around 110 minutes per day on 'housework', including child care, while the average for men was just 10 minutes. Specific breakdowns for mothers and fathers, as opposed to men and women, are not available. We might assume, however, that this gender divide in domestic duties applied equally to them.

Data prior to the 1960s are almost non-existent. We can glean from contemporary accounts why this might be the case – men/fathers undertook such few child care and domestic tasks that there would not have been much to measure. One study of family life in the 1940s suggested that while women spent around four hours per day looking after children and the home, men spent only about 10 minutes.

It is possible, however, that while the 1930s and 1940s were characterised by a sharp division of labour – men went out to work while women stayed at home looking after the children and doing household chores – this had begun to change by

the 1950s. We find in Young and Willmott, for example, the following observations<sup>15</sup>

*"Men like my father never did much around the house. He found it a strain to pour out a cup of tea. If he saw a man pushing a pram or carrying a kiddy, he'd say he was a sissy. It's all changed now."*

Much of this shift was undoubtedly due to recovery from the depression of the 1930s and the World War of the 1940s. During the war many men were absent from families and women were engaged in work that had previously been a man's preserve – in the munitions factories, on the land, driving lorries, and so on. Greater educational opportunities had also been available to girls since 1944. While much of gender-divided life returned to 'normal' soon after the war, the legacy of women's war-time experiences opened up new expectations about their roles and relations with respect to men.

The 1950s were also years of full male employment – the shadow of the dole queues of the 1930s had been almost obliterated in a booming post-war economy that sought to re-build Britain. Given the labour shortages that were evident in this decade, the flow of women into the labour market was both inevitable and desirable. This transition, in turn, opened up a quite new debate about roles within the family and between mothers and fathers in particular – Young and Willmott again:<sup>16</sup>

*"There are still plenty of men who will not do 'women's work' and women who think 'it's not a man's place to do it.' But for most people, it seems that the division is no longer rigid. Of the 45 husbands, 32 gave some regular help to their wives with the housework; 29 had, to take an index trivial enough in itself but perhaps significant, done the washing up one or more times during the previous week."*

To establish a comparison between the 1950s and the late Victorian era, Young and Willmott simply observe that "Booth did not mention men washing up."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Willmott, M. & Nelson, W. (2003)

<sup>15</sup> Young, M. & Willmott, P. (1957), 28

<sup>16</sup> Young, M. & Willmott, P. (1957), 27

<sup>17</sup> Charles Booth was an eminent philanthropist and social researcher who documented working class life in London towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – see Booth, C. (1902)



Evidence from our panel of mothers, however, would suggest that Young and Wilmott’s quoted father may have been a little optimistic with his declaration that ‘it has all changed now’. They may also have been somewhat disappointed to hear this contemporary mother, in her early 40s, describe her father’s reluctance to assist with the nursery run, or at least to be seen to be doing so.

*“My dad sometimes picked me up from nursery, but he would leave the pushchair because he didn't want to be seen pushing me home. He didn't want people to see him because he felt he wouldn't be a 'real' man. He jokes about that now though.”*

The following quotation also illustrates another father’s discomfort at the thought of being judged unfavourably by the neighbours for helping with household chores.

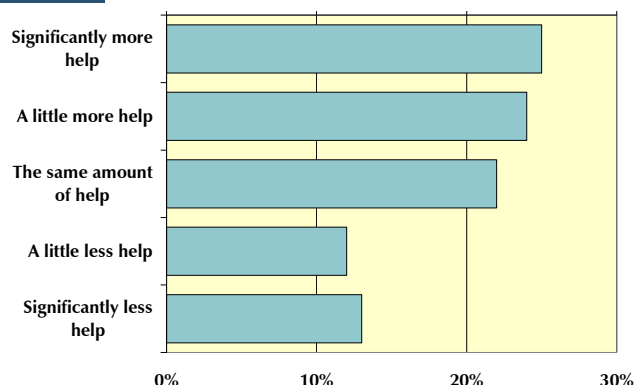
*“I remember my mother asking my father to shake the table cloth after dinner and he'd say: 'Well, the thing is those people in the flats can see me, what are they going to think about me?’”*

### 3.2 The increasing contributions of fathers – the contemporary mother’s view.

The fact that men in general, and fathers in particular, have with some exceptions been increasingly involved since the 1950s in what was once dismissed as ‘women’s work’, is evident from all of the historical trends that we have examined. It was also recognised by our national sample of mothers who responded to the poll questions.

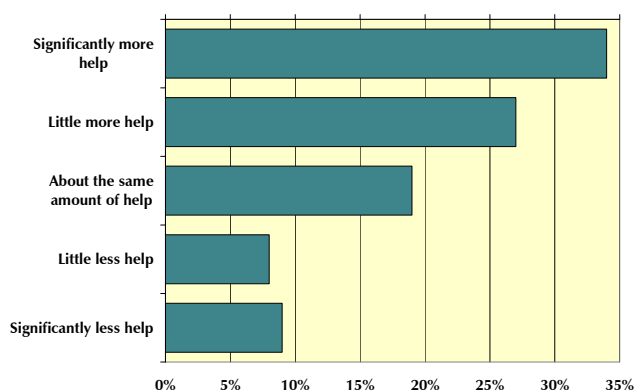
In response to a question “Do you think that you have more or less help with your childcare than your mother did when she was at the same life-stage”, the main consensus was that they were better off than their mothers in this regard. We can see from Figure 3 that almost half of mothers thought that they now had ‘significantly more’ or a ‘little more’ help with childcare than in the previous generation of mothers, compared with 25% who thought that they had less.

**Figure 3. Mothers receiving help from others compared with that received by their own mothers**



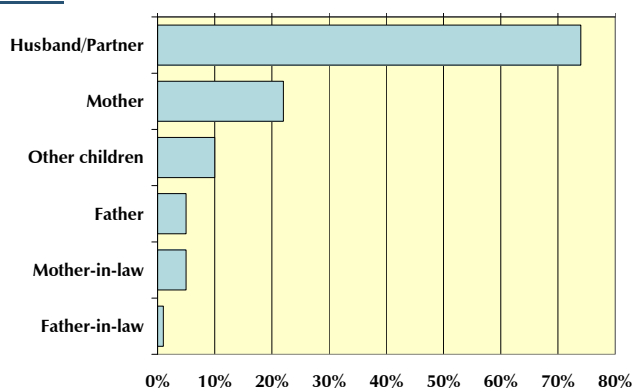
In response to a more specific question that asked respondents to compare the amount of help that partners provided in terms of child care compared with that experienced by their own mothers, the figures were even more dramatic – 60% felt that had more help compared with 17% who thought they had less help, as illustrated in Figure 4. The figures shown are for mothers in the 25-34 age category, but similar patterns are evident across the full age range of contemporary mothers.

**Figure 4. Mothers receiving help from their partners compared with that received by their own mothers.**



Given that partners/fathers are perceived as contributing significantly more help with child care than in the previous generation, it is not surprising that respondents listed partners at the top of the list of people providing support, as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Who helps most in the home with child care?**



The experiences recounted by majority of participants in the discussion groups provide further evidence of partners' increasing involvement in childcare. This was recognised by both mothers ...

*"I think that fathers do really want to spend time with their children now. I know in my case that [name] is loathed to do any housework at all, but in terms of the children he will be right there."*

... and by grandmothers:

*"Fathers these days are encouraged right from early pregnancy to take an active part in their child's life, with groups for them to attend, paternity leave, etc. When my own children were young, fathers were not so actively involved in the duties of looking after a baby and their role was to support their family by going out to work."*

*"Fathers today are much more involved. [Name's] husband was of course present at the birth, and was very involved with looking after the twins. He would take over the night duties on a Friday and Saturday night to ensure that [name] got some sleep. He is perfectly capable and was not daunted at the prospect of keeping 2 tiny babies alive and well. He continues to be actively involved with the boys now they are 5, taking them swimming and to football."*

*"I think fathers are a lot more involved in looking after and being involved with their children. [My son-in-law] will do loads of rough and tumble, play, games, care for and demonstrate a desire to want to be with them and make them feel loved."*

It was generally accepted that partners were prepared and wanted to spend time with their children to an extent which would 'have been unheard of' in previous generations. It was also their impression that a father playing a more active role in child rearing was now more of a social norm than an exception.

*"I think it is safe for them to say that they want to spend that time. I am not sure that there is any way that they could have done so in my dad's time."*

One group participant, however, did suggest that her partner's substantial contribution to childcare had required a little 'engineering'.

*"My husband was quite good because I worked shifts. I would work two day shifts and the afternoon/evening shift he would have them and pick them up for nursery at 6.30. He would have to have them for hours until I got home. So he would have to do the bedtime routine and feed them. I did it on purpose. I manipulated that so he had to do that. I think it has paid off. Now he works from home, he didn't then, but now he is always home when the children come in from school."*

A few mothers suggested that their partners' notions of childcare were a little different to their own; there was considerable level of agreement that dads wanted to do the 'fun stuff' and were less capable of multi-tasking around the house.

*"He goes out to work and when he comes home he sits down and plays with the children. He misses them and he wants to see them and he wants to do the fun, nice things."*

*"He wants to be the friend who does the rough and tumble. I am permanently doing lunch boxes and school uniforms and getting everything together."*

There were, however, a few notable exceptions and the partner of this particular participant did not appear to be living up to the example set by her father.

*"I think that my father was fairly hands-on. I do absolutely everything; the housework, entertaining the children, everything. My partner doesn't really take them out. He loves them, don't get me wrong. He will do things outside of*

*the house, in front of people, because he knows he should be."*

### 3.3 The impact of domestic technologies

Since the 1930s the range of products and technologies available to mothers to reduce the time they spend on domestic 'chores' has grown almost exponentially. Refrigerators, which started to appear in advertisements aimed at mothers in the 1930s, made the need for shopping less frequent. The first disposable and pin-less nappies appeared in the very early 1950s, but failed to make much headway until the 1960s/70s. Pre-prepared baby foods removed the need for carefully cooking and mashing vegetables, chicken, etc. Vacuum cleaners began to replace the rituals of carpet beating and sweeping in affluent households in the early 1900s but started to become commonplace in more modest domestic settings from the 1950s.

Effective detergents appeared in the 1940s and soon began to replace the less effective soap flakes that had preceded them. The washing machine, increasingly found in middle class households from the 1950s onwards, reduced not only the time needed to clean a family's clothes but also the effort required – even if many of these still featured a hand-operated mangle on top.

Our group of grandmothers recognised clearly the difference that such innovations had made to their lives as mothers or the generation that followed them:

*"I think we all had children in an era when we didn't have any of these fancy washing machines or things like that. I think times were harder in that way."*

*"I remember when the chest freezer arrived and it was such a novelty that my sister recorded everything that went into it on a Dictaphone."*

Today, we take for granted freezers, microwave ovens, tumble driers and the ever burgeoning array of gadgets that claim, with good reason, to make a mother's life easier. We also take for granted the array of 'convenience' foods on sale in each and every supermarket that allow a family meal to be prepared in a matter of minutes rather than several hours.

All of these innovations explain, in part at least, why the amount of time spent by mothers household

tasks appears to be steadily declining since the 1950s. even though the amount of time devoted specifically to child care has increased substantially.

A survey conducted by YouGov in 2005<sup>18</sup> concluded that mothers now manage to look after themselves, their partners and their children by spending 48.9 hours per week at home compared with the 78.6 hours of their 1950s predecessors. Washing and cleaning, for example, reduced from 15.1 hours to 6.6 over this periods while time spent cooking more than halved from 13 hours per week to under 6. The survey, however, did not separate out housework from child care.

Commenting on the issue of cooking, one participant in our mothers' group said:

*"My mother spent all of her time getting the children ready for school, cooking meals for lunch - because you came home for lunch then – meat and potatoes lunch and you had a 'high tea' in the evening. I think my mother spent most of the time when I was young preparing the meals and cleaning the house."*

Much of the time 'liberated' by domestic appliances, baby care items and convenience foods, of course, is spent not only in more 'quality time' child care but also in paid employment outside of the home, as we noted in Section 2.3. The availability of free nursery places in England, introduced by the previous government, positively encourages mothers, as Gordon Brown envisaged, to return to work. So do mothers today have more free time to themselves than their own mothers and grandmothers? Or do they simply fill the available time with engagement in other (unpaid) work in the home?

### 3.4 Mothers' time to themselves?

The 2005 YouGov survey noted above indicated that mothers then had 3.6 hours per week that they were able to devote to 'personal time'. This had risen from under three hours in the 1950s. In the group sessions and in the national poll we explored the same issues – the extent to which mothers felt that they had times to themselves ('me time') and

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<sup>18</sup> YouGov survey for Dolmio reported in the Guardian – <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/aug/16/gender.britishidentity>.



whether they thought that they had more or less than their own mothers.

Among the group of women in their late 60s and early 70s, looking back on their days as mothers, the notion of 'me time' was a bit difficult.

*"When you talk about the 'me time' ... We didn't have the money to go out and do the 'me time'."*

Another pointed to the 'relaxation' that she felt when working outside of the home:

*"When I was at school teaching, that was the only time. It was quieter there."*

One lady pointed to a particular time in the week that was reserved for her 'me time':

*"I had Saturday morning. My husband had the boys on Saturday mornings. He went into work first, he would come back and then I would be off. "*

Some of these women, now grandmothers, felt that they had never really wanted time alone to themselves – they wanted to be with their husbands and children even in their leisure time:

*"My husband was away abroad a lot so I didn't have any time. When he was at home I wanted to be with him as well so I didn't go off and do things then. The only time I think I would have any time was when my mother came to stay, but that was only a few hours here and there. Not regularly at all, there was no other way of doing it."*

For others, simply getting their babies and small children to take a nap was sufficient to provide them with 'me time':

*"The thing about it was that we also had children close together so you would get one down [to sleep] and were probably pregnant with the another, so you would use that time to put your feet up and have a rest."*

*"When they were very tiny, when they were babies, you might be able to get them to have a nap in the afternoon so you might get one hour to yourself. Sometimes you would just use that hour to rest, other times you would get to that pressing job."*

Among our group of current mothers, the notion of 'me time' and the amount they experienced was almost as difficult.

*"I don't feel like I have any 'me time' at all really."*

This same participant went on ...

*"... I went round to a friend's house and her partner was putting out the washing. It would not have occurred to my husband in a million years to do that. We have been together a long time now and I kind off accept that is the way we are."*

It was clear that she envied those in the group whose opportunities for time to themselves were provided by fathers who released them from at least some of the daily chores.

Other participants were clearly more fortunate:

*"I have had a couple of weekends away. I have had a spa weekend. Other women have said: 'Don't you feel guilty?' and actually I don't. I sort of feel that I deserve it."*

Another mother commented on the changes that occurred as her children grew up a little:

*"I do get quite a bit of time now, because I have come out the other side. When they were small I used be on the go the whole time with them. They are also quite close together; there is only 16 months difference. It was quite hard going to start with, but we did have a lot of support from parents all around which was really good."*

This issue of support was mentioned by many participants in the group sessions. It was seen as being necessary in order to have any real free time at all, especially when children were very young. In most cases, the required level of support came not only from partners but from mothers and mothers-in-law. In these and other senses most mothers in the group felt that their situation was easier than that of their own mothers. Some echoed the sentiments expressed earlier in our group of grandmothers

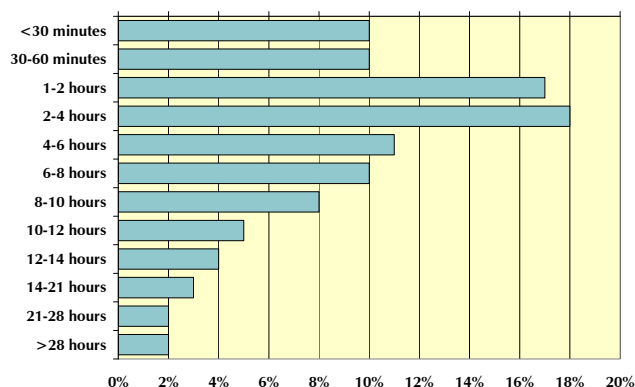
*"There is this concept of 'me time' now and I don't think there was that in my mother's day. She just did what everybody else did and there was no ego about it. She worked part-time and chose an occupation, teacher, which fitted in. She chose that because it fitted in with term*

time. That was what everybody did. There was no discussion about it. There was no 'I am missing out.'"

The picture emerging from our national poll was of great variation in the amount of free time that mothers experienced during an average week, as shown in Figure 6. The largest sets of responses were in the 1-2 hours up to 4-6 hours per week categories. The average was 5.5 hours per week – equivalent to 47 minutes per day. This is considerable more than the 3.6 hours per week reported by the 2005 YouGov survey noted in Section 3.3.

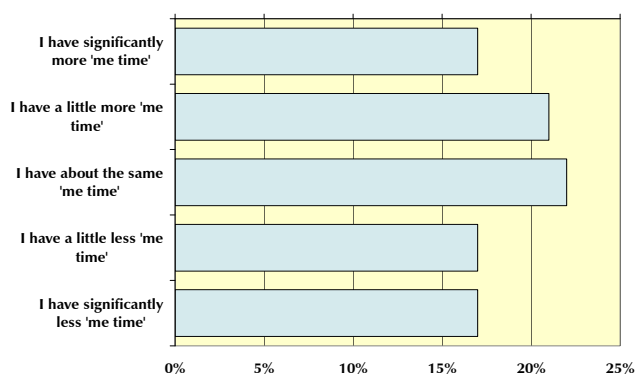
Opportunities for 'me time' were least among mothers in the 25-34 age group (33 minutes per day) and highest in the 45-64 age group (58 minutes per day) presumably reflecting the ages of their children.

**Figure 6. Amount of mother's 'me time' per week**



While there was substantial variation in perceptions of available 'me time', mothers in the national poll sample were equally divided on whether the available time that they enjoyed was more or less than that experienced by their own mothers, as shown in Figure 7.

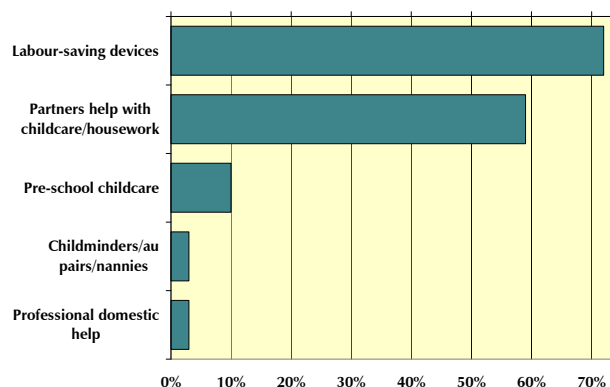
**Figure 7. Mothers' 'me time' compared with that of their own mothers**



From Figure 7 we can see that while 38% of mothers thought that they had 'significantly more' or a 'little more' 'me time' than their own mothers, 34% felt that they had less.

Of those who felt that had more time to themselves than their mothers, their reasons for thinking so are illustrated in Figure 8.

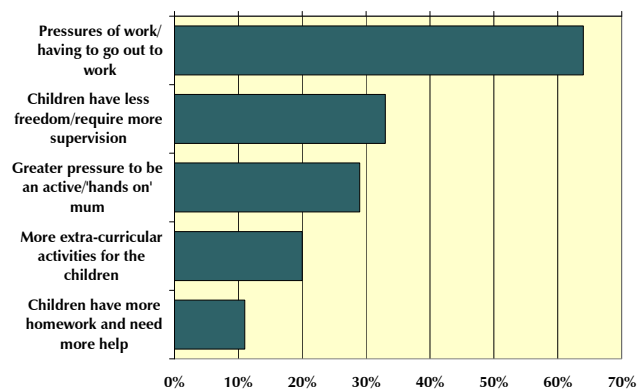
**Figure 8. Reasons for more 'me time'**



From Figure 8 we can see that the biggest reasons by far for mothers being able to enjoy more 'me time' than their own mothers are the increased availability and affordability of labour-saving appliances such as washing machines, tumble driers, etc. and the help they receive from their partners. Pre-school child care facilities may help some mothers, but only 10%, and childminders and cleaners are not seen as contributing significantly to many mothers' welfare in this regard. All of this reflects the trends noted in Section 3.3

For those mothers who felt that they had less 'me time' than their own mothers, it was the pressure of paid employment that was the biggest factor, as shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9. Reasons for less 'me time'**



We can also see from Figure 9 that while combining being a mother with work outside of the home

substantially diminished a mother’s sense of having free time to herself, the perceived need for greater supervision of children than in the past was the second largest contributor. This greater reluctance by mothers to allow their children to play outside (perhaps while they put their feet up) is understandable. We now live in an age of greater anxiety than in previous generations where the dangers to children from traffic and ‘strangers’ are more uppermost in our minds. As one mother in our groups sessions commented:

*“I am the last one of four so we were very much left to our own devices in terms of play. There was a very big community network so I remember playing hide and seek in each other’s gardens, jumping over fences, hiding in the gardens in the dark. You wouldn’t dream of that now.”*

The trends in women’s employment that have led some mothers to feel that they are worse off than their own mothers in terms of available free time are discussed in Section 2.3 of this report. It is clear from our own group discussions that many mothers today feel that they are working a ‘double shift’ – one outside of the home and one when they return home. The trends in fathers being more involved in regular child-care and domestic duties (see Section 3.2) seem not quite to have caught up in some households with those in the numbers of mothers working. As Martina Klett-Davies and Eleni Skaloutis<sup>19</sup> conclude:

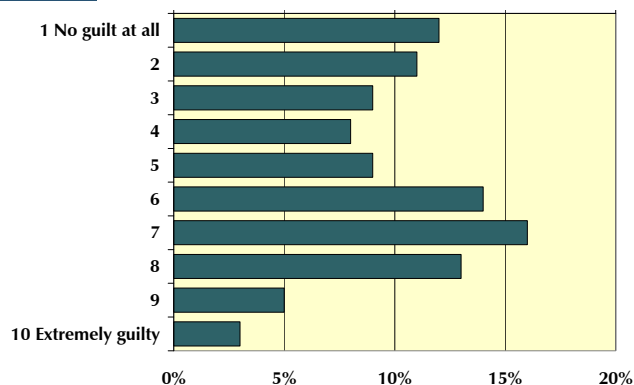
*“It cannot be assumed that because mothers are more likely to be in paid employment, they spend less time with their children. In fact, parents are spending longer on child-rearing activities than ever before ... Indeed, working mothers spend more time with their children now than non-working mothers did in 1981.”*

### 3.5 The work-life balance and guilt

As we have seen above, the issue of guilt often arises in the context of discussions about how mothers balance pressures of work and child care with ‘having a life of one’s own’. Some mothers are more able, perhaps following Shirley Conran’s notion of ‘Superwoman’, to ensure that they have time to themselves to do that the things that they, as individuals, want. Other mothers, perhaps less so.

We explored in our national poll feelings of guilt associated with the work-life balance and the amount of time that mothers were able to spend with their children. The results are summarised in Figure 10.

**Figure 10. Feelings of guilt about the work-life balance**



Here we can see that while some mothers (12%) feel no guilt at all about balancing work commitments with the amount of time they spend with their children, the largest groups of respondent are towards the ‘extremely guilty’ end of the scale. The average score is 5.3, suggesting moderate feelings of guilt across the population of mothers as a whole.

The sense of guilt is experienced most by older mothers in the age range 35-44 with the youngest groups of mums (18-24) feeling the least guilt.

In our discussions with mothers aged 30-44, guilt was a recurrent theme and an emotion which all of them reported experiencing on a fairly regular basis. In the context of work/life balance participants said that they felt guilty for going back to work, guilty for spending so much time there, and even guilty for enjoying it or finding it fulfilling.

*“I remember going back to work with very mixed emotions. You are fighting your biological instinct which is that ‘I am the best person to look after my child’. The other half of you is saying: ‘No, you need to get back’, and thinking: ‘Oh, this is nice’.”!*

*“I fight with my own conscience and my own guilt, which we all have looking after children. Is [name] going to get to the age of 10 saying: ‘Mummy was always on her computer doing work’? My rule is that if I am at home doing work – and I do work at home a lot – if he asks*

<sup>19</sup> Klett-Davies, M. & Skaloutis, E. (2009)

*me or wants me to do something then I will just stop."*

Invariably mothers compared their own and their children's current situation with that of their mothers' and their own childhood. These comparisons were not always favourable and served only to compound these mothers' sense of guilt.

*"Every night I just sit there and feel so guilty. I sit there and think I should have done more. I should have sat and played with them more, but actually I look back and think that my mum didn't really play with me, but she would be in the kitchen. But she was there and I am not there. I am at work and they are there with my mum. I didn't miss out. I loved being a child and I knew she was there. I was happy playing with my toys. I wish I could be there for mine more. I don't feel guilty if I haven't sat and played all day with them. I'd feel guilty if I haven't taken them out and we have been in all day. I feel more guilty being at work."*

For the grandmothers, feelings of guilt, while less marked, were still evident. Although none of them even considered going back to work until their children reached school age, when that time came the decision was not always easy.

*"I think that I had a bit of a guilty conscience when I first went back to work. mainly because my son's health was very poor when he was a child."*

Once back at work the guilt, for some, continued although for quite different reasons:

*"I remember feeling particularly guilty when I was working at a school and I enjoyed it so much. The Head had a thing about drama and asked me to do it and I did. It was so exciting, I really enjoyed it immensely. I was always a little bit sad when I used to leave my daughter and felt that I shouldn't enjoy being away from her as much as I did."*

These are trends that are set to continue and perhaps feelings of guilt are something that almost all mothers have experienced and will continue to experience in the future – especially those that are torn between a the desire to be a 'stay-at-home' mum and the need or wish to have a life in paid employment.

## 4 Representations of mothers in magazines

A review of two magazines, "Good Housekeeping" and "Woman's Weekly" from the 1920's to the present day was undertaken. An unchanging feature these representations is that the woman continues to internalise the main responsibility for bringing up the child(ren) and experiences guilt for not being 'good enough'. David Winnicott has coined the phrase 'good enough' to refer to a basic, universally accepted level of parenting, as an attempt to remove the pressure from mothers to be flawless parents. Magazine advertisements, however, have always subtly play into the guilt and pressure women feel about their failings in their mothering role in some way, whether it is with regard to the child's physiological needs, as appears to be largely the case in the 1920's and 1930's, or additionally to their psychological, emotional and educational needs as expressed in magazines from the 1940's to the present day.

An advert in *Women's Weekly* in 1929 for California syrup of figs to treat constipation demonstrates this with a picture of a little boy with a pale face and a forlorn expression and the caption next to it stating "Does his mother realise? Considerate mothers will act at once...."

Similarly an advert for a vitamin building drink, Complian, in May 1977 (*women's weekly*) nearly fifty years later states " keeping a family fit and well is what being a mum is all about".

The primary mothering role in the 1920's and the 1930's appeared to be attending to a child's physiological needs, strict hygiene and nutrition. This is reflected in the wealth of advertisements for laxatives, medical and cleansing products (Nestol, Wright's coal tar soap, Germolene) ( and vitamin building drinks and medicines such as Roboleine which included "egg yolk to make nerves steady and stubborn..." and Jecomalt cod liver oil, Ovaltine).

These advertisements reflect key commentary at that time from medical and child care experts concerned with high infant mortality rates due to diets low in nutrition and to infectious diseases. Dr Truby King in 1927 advocated a clinically detached attitude to child rearing, with strict feeding and sleeping regimes and limited physical contact



between mother and child to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. In the 1950's and 1960's, however, the pendulum had swung the other way with rediscovery of the writings of Dr Benjamin Spock and his key book *Baby and Childcare*, that advocated a kinder, more instinctual child rearing approach without rigid timetables and encouraged physical contact and displays of affection to the child.

An advice section in *Woman's Weekly* in 1929 advocated the primacy of breast milk with high concerns for the hygiene levels at that time of formula foods stating that "Breast milk is germ free and ... no substitute is equal to it for safeguarding a child against rickets and building a sure foundation for future health."

Interestingly, in the 21st Century, despite the greater proportion of mothers in the work place, and the huge advances in formula foods, breast milk is still advocated in women's magazines as the best option. Today, however, the key selling point is that breast fed babies may have higher IQ than formula fed babies, rather than being less likely to suffer from rickets.

The 1940's saw the continuation of advice and advertisements focusing on a mother's primary need to maintain the physiological well being of her child. This advice was given against the backdrop of the Second World War and recipes focused on making nourishing, fortifying meals using limited rationed food such as powder egg and making clothes on a budget. (*Good Housekeeping* 1943). This was the decade which encapsulated the "make, do and mend" slogan. There has been a re-emergence of this slogan and the notion of doing more with less, in terms of recipes for the family and recycling of clothes and toys in women's magazines from 2010 onwards and it may be a continuing trend as the government's austerity measures impact further on families.

Towards the end of the war and in the late 1940's and into the 1950's and 1960's, the status of motherhood becomes further elevated. In addition to catering to the child's physical needs, the mother also become responsible for the child's psychological development. The writings of psychologist John Bowlby<sup>20</sup> became the new

accepted wisdom on mothering practices. He suggested that mothers were endowed with intrinsic skills and knowledge due to a 'natural' maternal bond between mother and child. In an address to the World Health Organisation in 1951, Bowlby is quoted as saying:

*"What is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment ... A state of affairs in which the mother does not have this is termed 'maternal deprivation.' "*

Bowlby's theories coincided with the end of the war and men returning home to find many of their previous jobs occupied by women. But although women's transition into the labour force was now a fact of life advice pages in *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Weekly* were more concerned with issues such as "The importance of communicating with your baby."

The 1970's through to the present day saw the continuation of expert opinion and theory on attending to the emotional and psychological needs of the child. An article entitled "understanding your baby" emphasised that "responding to a baby's crying is important, and when a mother responds quickly to crying the baby, he cries less.

The post-war era of the 1950's and 1960's represented a marked shift in the spending capacity of the average family and with that, the acquisition of the latest material and household implements. Advertisements aimed at mothers and home makers reflected this trend. Whereas in the 1920's to the 1940s adverts focused on food and medicines for the child and basic cleaning products for the home, adverts in G.H. and W.W in the 1950's focused largely on the latest labour saving devices aimed at women, including automatic washing machines vacuum cleaners, fridges, and gas cookers.

The convenience of these new labour saving devices, was illustrated by a reader responding to an article written at that time entitled, "Do we work harder than our mothers did?"

*"We have so many labour saving devices and gadgets in the home, such a variety of cooked, frozen and tinned foods, crease-resisting*

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<sup>20</sup> Bowlby, J. (1968)

*materials, nylon, stainless steel, chromium plating and detergents that we don't have to get down to things in the way our mothers did."* (G.H. Jan 1955 p.131).

Responses to this article, however, suggested that labour saving devices might have resulted in more work for women:

*"Perhaps our mothers were more content to do one thing at a time, while we spend our time fitting things in, timing our activities with kitchen 'pingers', never wasting a precious minute ..."* G.H. Jan 1955, p.132.

The issue of 'free time' being squeezed was as prevalent, it seems, in the 1950s, as it is today. Especially in the context of working mothers:

*"A high proportion of mothers are combining their home making with work outside the home, from choice as well as necessity. They want the opportunity for a broader field of work and they are prepared to sacrifice choice as well as necessity. They want the opportunity for a broader field of work and are prepared to sacrifice leisure and to undertake a double job in order to have it."* G.H. Jan 1955, p.132)

A decade later we find the same sentiment expressed in *Good Housekeeping* – "The double life of working wives". Letter in response to the article sound very familiar – e.g.

*"We are not emancipated, we are only half way there. We have merely established the right to do two jobs instead of one. Men have yielded nothing ... Far too much is expected of women. We are relied upon to contribute to the economy of the business and of the home....Having children, bringing them up, involving yourself with them, all this means unending adjustment. But fathers refuse to get involved. They are untouched by their children."*

Adverts from the 1950's reflecting a more relatively affluent era, also reflected a greater emphasis on the acquisition of material things for children, including toys, prams, nursery chairs, bathing corners, etc.

Kathryn Keller coined the term "economic nurturing ideology" to describe the expression of maternal love by providing one's child with the latest goods

and clothing – as applicable in the 1950s, perhaps, as it is today.

Support groups for expectant mothers gain increasing prominence following the end of the second world war and encouragement if given to attend 'mothercraft' classes to gain practical experience about raising a child prior to the birth. This trend developed rapidly into the 1960s and advice from organisations such as The National Child Birth Trust began to feature prominently.

The 1970's saw the introduction of the image conscious mother and greater magazine space was progressively devoted to slimming articles and diet recipes. In addition to nurturing qualities, mothers were now expected to conform to seemingly unrealistic images embodied by celebrities to be glamorous and slim. The notion of the "Yummy Mummy", though, appears to be a 20th century term, although the underlying concept is much older, and is now embodied by female celebrities such as Angelina Jolie who features on the cover of *Vanity fair* (July 2008) and refers to pregnancy as "very sexy".

The views of celebrities on the mothering role and experience seem also to be sought increasingly. (Tracy Brabin – *Coronation Street*, talks about being a modern mum. *Women's Weekly* May 1995). Celebrity mothers with their greater material wealth and support systems, such as a live in nanny that are often not acknowledged in celebrity interviews, do not portray a realistic experience of motherhood and place additional pressures on mothers to look good as well as concerning themselves with their children's emotional, educational and physical needs. This consequently results in women having even less time for themselves. This is not a new phenomenon, as family psychologist Nora Aris, for example, writing in *Good Housekeeping*, April 1955:

*"There are fewer pairs of hands as parents go out to work. Modern life has brought many problems to the young mother and housewife, who is working practically single handed ... We need more community services and greater flexibility in hours of work ..."*

This article could also have been written in the 21st century as the same concerns for many mothers persist with regards to time pressures and

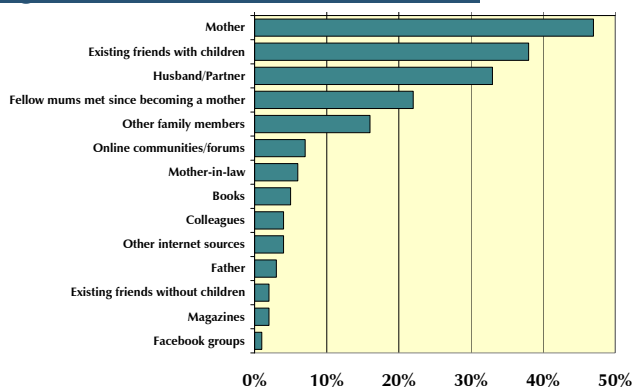
competing demands in relation to work and child care.

## 5 Mothers' sources of advice and support

We have noted at the beginning that motherhood is never, or should never be, a solitary undertaking. It is a special characteristic of the human race that we employ alloparenting, involving other members of the family and the wider community in at least some aspects of child care. We have noted the significant contributions of partners and maternal grandmothers in this process.

In the national poll we were keen to discover not only who helped out with the daily child care chores (or pleasures) but also to whom mothers turned for advice on bring up their children. Responses to the question 'Who do you most turn to for advice about being a mother?' are summarised in Figure 11.

**Figure 11. Mothers' sources of advice**



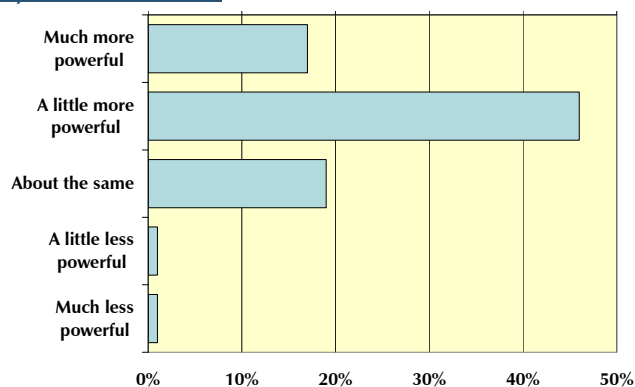
From Figure 11 we can see that the mother's own mother is first on the list of those providing advice, consistent with other findings regarding the role of the maternal grandmother – the most important oracle for nearly half of all mothers. The mother's friends with children, however, come immediately second in importance and above husband / partners. Mothers clearly seem to rely more on advice from established female friends who have become mothers than they do from a man, even though he is often quite centrally involved in the child's care. If we add together all the female 'friend' categories, including colleagues and online communities, these come to 74% and indicate the continuing importance of 'alloparents' who are not family members.

Other mums met since becoming a mother occupy fourth place, ahead of other family members. Mothers-in-law are sought out for advice by only 5% of mothers while magazines are seen by an even smaller proportion (2%) as a place where reliable advice might be obtained.

Perhaps surprising here is the low emphasis placed on online communities and forums – only 7% of mothers see these as having much value in these terms. This is despite the rapid rise of social networks such as mumsnet.com that features forums on topics as diverse as 'Am I being unreasonable?' to those focusing on primary education. But although mothers did not see such sites as providing the kind of advice they were after, they recognised that such networks provided them with a degree of empowerment.

We provided our poll respondents with the following statement and question: 'There is a lot of talk in the media about the collective power of mums, particularly through organisations such as Mumsnet and other communities. Do you feel that mothers are more powerful now through these communities?' Their answers are illustrated in Figure 12.

**Figure 12. Perceptions of empowerment provide by Mumsnet, etc.**



From Figure 12 we can see that a substantial majority (63%) of mothers felt that sites such as Mumsnet had made mothers 'much more' or 'a little more' powerful. This is reflected in responses to another question that explored how mothers kept in touch with what they perceived to be their main support networks.

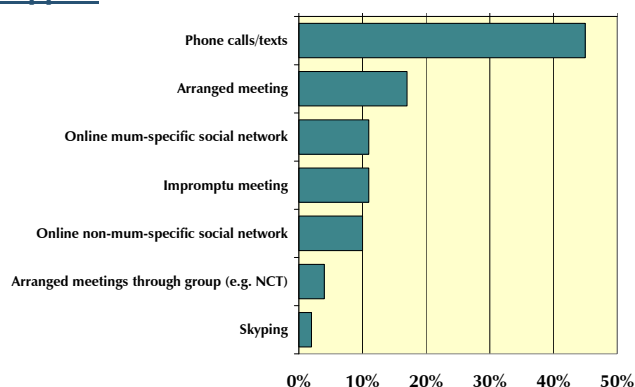


### 5.1 Keeping in touch with the support network

As we have seen from the above, it is the mum’s mum who is seen as the primary sources of advice and support and is the person a mother is most likely to turn to at frequent intervals. But what are the channels that a mother uses to keep in touch not only with her own mum but also those other members of her support network.

We can see from Figure 13 that in this era of communication technologies it is phone calls and texts that dominate. Face-to-face meetings now take second place. It would be unwise to infer from this, however, that mothers are less in contact with their support networks than in previous times. SMS texts, in particular, often serve to create opportunities for additional ad hoc face-to-face meetings – occasions that may have been difficult to arrange at short notice in the past.

**Figure 13. Communicating with sources of support**



Online, mum-specific networks are also seen as being important in this context. While, as we have seen earlier, they may not be the first place a mother turns for advice, they allow mothers to be ‘connected’ and provide a chance for them to receive opinions from a very broad spectrum of other mothers.

*“One good thing about Mumsnet is that I met my best friend through Mumsnet. We were on an Oxford forum, she was new to Oxford, I was new to Oxford so we arranged to meet up and that was seven years ago.”*

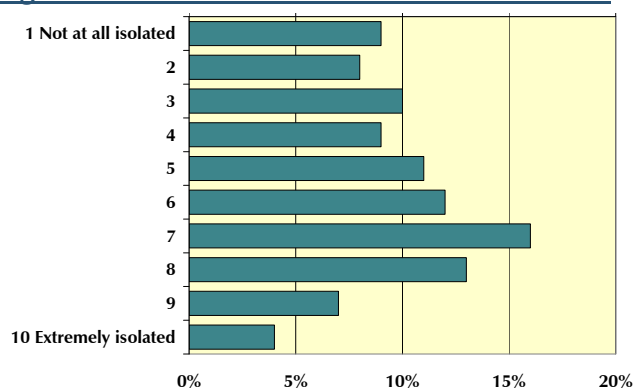
*“I think that sort of thing is good if you have got a problem or there is something that you are worried about and you don't know who to talk to about it anonymously. You get good and bad*

*advice, but a least you know that you are not on your own. I used a twins club one which was my life line.”*

### 5.2 Isolation?

In the national poll we included a question that dealt explicitly with the extent to which mothers felt isolated. There was considerable variation in responses, as can be seen from Figure 14. Here we can see that the largest group (16%) felt very isolated (7 on the 10-point scale towards ‘extremely isolated’). The average, however, was around the midpoint at 5.37. Mothers in the age group 35-44 felt slightly more isolated (5.62) than those in the 25-34 age group (5.34).

**Figure 14. Extent to which mothers feel isolated**



Mothers in the discussion groups recognised that, without support, feeling alone and isolated was a significant risk.

*“I think if you didn't go out and do the groups you be very isolated.”*

Some suggested that their mothers had not enjoyed the networks on which they relied, or the same ease of access to these sources of support.

*“My mum said that she was just left to get on with it. I think she was very young when she had my sister and I think that cut her off. There weren't mobile phones to text each other with: ‘Oh my god, he has just done this ...’, no groups where you could go and meet people. She really only had my nan or my dad.”*

*“My mum, when they got married they moved away, she didn't have any support. She didn't have a car so she couldn't get anywhere. She didn't have her mum nearby either.”*

For those mothers who had been in work prior to having children the profound change in lifestyle that

came with the birth of their children took some adjustment. This participant also recognised the value of networks in combating feelings of isolation.

*“Also it is such a different lifestyle if you have had a career. I was in my mid-thirties and suddenly I had a child. Even people who lived in the same street, and I probably never even realised that they were there because I was probably always out. Suddenly you have a baby and you see this different life. It is such a role reversal and I think it is really nice to be able to go to a group. NCT, things like that, some of whom plug you in when you are pregnant, so before you even have the baby you have this kind of patch already set up. You might decide after a year that you don't really like a particular group or that you are not going to do this or you are not going to do that, but you have established by then a network of people that you like and friends for the children. It is really important otherwise you would be so isolated I think.”*

## 6 Are mothers valued?

In the group sessions with mothers and in the less formal one with grandmothers, we explored the extent to which mothers are, or were, valued by other members of the families for the contributions that they made.

In some families, mothers clearly felt that they received at least some tokens of appreciation.

*“Actually my husband is quite good. He knows that I work really hard at home. He doesn't necessarily say thank you, but will say things like: ‘God that was a great dinner you made today. That smells fantastic’. He cooks a lot actually, he is domesticated.”*

*“My husband is really good at encouraging the boys to say thank you. He will say things like: ‘Great dinner mama’ and the boys will join in. So he is quite good. There are the little pats.”*

For others, however, recognition of their value and contribution was less evident.

*“I feel a bit like that [undervalued] at the moment. I am at home and it is hard. My husband comes home and I will say: ‘We went to the park. Then we went to the Co-op. Oh, and I put that washing out and did the cleaning’. I am*

*telling him a list of things and I don't blame him if his eyes start glazing over. What else can you say? You get up and do the same. I do have some really nice days, she says feeling a bit guilty for moaning, but it is constantly cleaning up.”*

Other mothers, and the majority, felt that their value was at least tacitly recognised. It was when partners were away that an element of justified self-pity was more apparent.

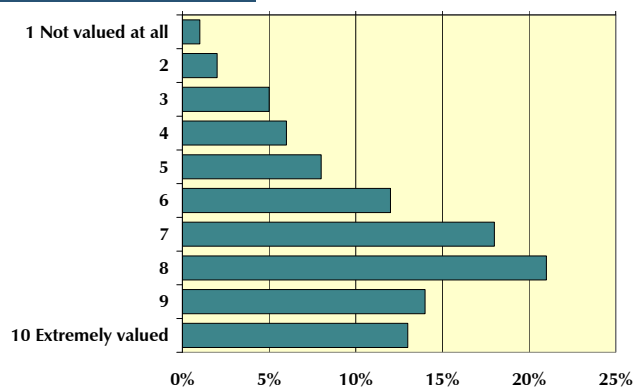
*“I don't think that it is necessarily that you may be undervalued as a mum, but it can be such a grind ... My husband is in Italy at the moment, and prior to that he was away for ten days. So for ten days to be doing everything; getting the children up, pack lunches, home work all the time putting them to bed. The cycle just goes on and it is really hard.”*

For other mothers it was not so much the sense of value within the family that was important but rather more their reputation outside of it:

*“My children have always been pretty good. And they said to us that their friends always commented on how lucky they were having parents like us. My husband and I have always done everything together and always brought them up together. It is always nice when they come out with things like that or their friends will come and give you a hug.”*

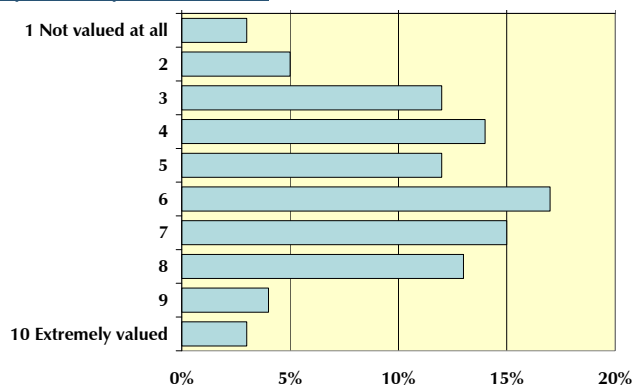
In the national poll we asked respondents to rate on a 10-point scale the extent that they felt valued as a mother within their families. The results are summarised in Figure 15. Here we can see that the ratings are quite high, peaking at a value of 8. The overall average was 7.06.

**Figure 15. Degree to which mothers feel valued within their families**



The extent to which mothers feel valued by society as a whole was rather different from that shown in Figure 15. In this context, the perceived value was only 5.42 and the distribution of responses from mothers in the national sample is shown in

**Figure 16. Degree to which mothers feel valued by society as a whole**



Opinion from the discussions with mothers and grandmothers on whether mothers were valued in contemporary society, was also divided. From the perspective of the grandmothers, there was some acceptance that the provision of support and the systems in place to ease mothers' transitions back to work demonstrated not only society's commitment to mothers, but also its appreciation of their intrinsic value. There was a realisation, however, that even within a society committed to equality, mothers would still be reliant on the 'understanding' of an employer.

*"I think maybe mothers who go back to work find it easier today, with maternity leave and their jobs being kept open for them to return to, flexible working hours. Maybe not all bosses are understanding when children are ill and mothers need time off to look after them. When I had my children you left work and stayed at home to look after them."*

Other grandmothers pointed to the provision of healthcare and networks of support to illustrate their belief that contemporary society values its mothers.

*"I think that mothers are valued more in some societies than others, but when you have good maternity benefits, healthcare, NCT groups, healthcare workers that do home visits, baby and toddler groups etc ... that shows that mothers are being valued because mothers need that support."*

Comments from other grandmothers, however, were not all positive in this regard; many of them felt that there is a pressure on contemporary mothers to 'have it all'.

*"No I don't think society values mothers. I think society expects mothers to be able to do it all - have children, go back to work, manage the house. I also think that women put a lot of pressure on each other to have it all. For example my daughter who has not gone back to work after having children feels inferior in some way."*

While the grandmothers interviewed recognised that society was certainly 'moving in the right direction' with regards to its support for mothers and the opportunities which were now available to them, the majority of mothers themselves were of the opinion that there was still considerable room for improvement. Discussions with mothers indicated some continued dissatisfaction with the way society treated mothers, both in terms of employers' inflexibility and the lack of support offered by society to mothers struggling to adjust to life with children. What was apparent was that while motherhood was without doubt immensely rewarding it was also immensely challenging. One group participant who is a lawyer commented:

*"I get really disappointed dealing with cases where employers are prepared to lose years of talent and experience just because they are not prepared to consider women's requests to work from home one day a week. The woman is already stressed trying to organise every thing to come back. There are ways of doing it. It disappoints me that the political will now is to diminish and take away these rights at a time when we have only just begun this cultural change to assist women in the workplace."*

Another mother commented:

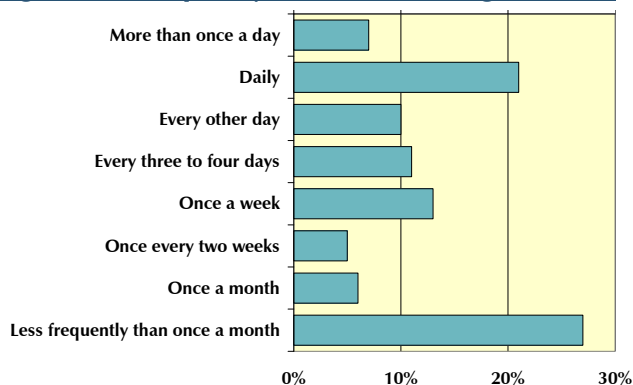
*"My husband had just started a new job and he would come back and say how everyone at his new practice was all so clever and high achieving. I would be sitting thinking that I got up with Balamory<sup>21</sup> ... I felt like nothing. Socially I felt like I couldn't carry my weight. I didn't know what was going on in the news. I was at*

<sup>21</sup> A popular children's television programme

home and I could have been doing it all, reading the papers, but I just felt that I didn't have anything to contribute. It was very, very hard."

We also asked in the national poll: "How often are you thanked for what you do as a mother?" The responses are illustrated in Figure 17.

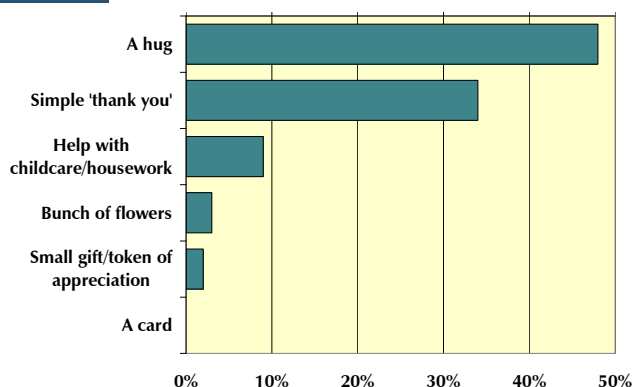
**Figure 17. Frequency of mothers being thanked.**



From Figure 17 we can see that while some mothers receive thanks on a daily basis, the largest group (27%) get thanked less frequently than once per month. The average is about once every 20 days. Those receiving daily thanks tend to be in the older category of 35-44.

We also explored in the poll how mothers would like to be thanked and their value recognised. Their responses are summarised in Figure 18.

**Figure 18. How mothers would best like to be thanked.**



From Figure 18 we can see that a hug was all that was required for the largest group (48%), followed by a simple 'thank you' 34%. Bunches of flowers were seen as a genuine token of thanks by only 3% of mothers while only 4 out of the total sample of 1,003 felt that a card would be adequate. Perhaps Mother's Day should become 'Give mum a hug' day.

## 7 Mothers and their mothers

The social anthropologist Kelly Shiell-Davis emphasise that the way mothers bring up their own children is strongly influenced by their own childhood experiences and, in particular, by the role played by their mothers. In the group sessions we explored the relationships that today's mothers have with their own mothers and the ways in which they have been influenced by them. We also posed questions to the group of grandmothers about their relationships with their daughters. Of particular value here were also the reports from mothers who had interviewed their own mothers as part of the group exercise

There was consensus among both grandmothers and mothers that mother-daughter relationships had changed significantly over the last two generations. For the most part, the group of 25-45 year old mothers reported having far better relationships with their own mothers than the group of 55-78 year old grandparents said that they had with theirs. Grandmothers were of the opinion that their relationships with their daughters were far more relaxed and more akin to friendships. One said:

*"I think we've had much more of a chance to resolve the differences that arise in the usual mother daughter relationship and are true friends. I don't feel that I had that opportunity with my own mother. I think the great humour that I shared with my mother when she was still alive and share with you[her daughter] characterises a lot of our relationship."*

Another emphasised the more relaxed nature of the relationships between mothers and their grown-up daughters ...

*"My daughter and I get on well, but she is much cheekier to me than I ever was with my mother. My mother was very strict."*

... while another added:

*"But that is nice, isn't it? This is the relationship I have with my daughters. I wouldn't have dared say that to my mum."*

While these relationships were viewed as far more amicable and informal, the grandmothers were mindful that some topics of discussion were still off-limits or required very careful handling. Indeed, from the grandmothers' perspective, one of the



requisites of a strong mother-daughter bond was the ability to exercise tact and more than a little diplomacy.

*“It is more free and easy, but you have to be careful about it. She might say to you: ‘Oh no, we don’t need to do that’. But if you said that to your daughter. Oh my word.”*

*“And if you ever mention money then there is an explosion, whereas if my husband talks to her, if there are any problems, he can get away with it.”*

Interestingly, other grandmothers were of the opinion that their daughters took far less offence and perhaps felt less threatened when advice (particularly financial) or offers of support came from their fathers. They also pointed to a far greater involvement in the lives of their daughters and their daughters families – a situation that was seen as infinitely more desirable than the disconnect which had characterised the relationship they had had with their own mothers.

*“My relationship is very different with my daughter than I had with my own mother, we work together and her family and myself are very much more involved in each others lives.”*

Many of the sentiments expressed by the grandmothers were echoed by the younger generation of mothers we spoke with. They too acknowledged their mothers’ substantial contributions and the fact that they were centrally involved in all aspects of family life.

*“We are more involved in each others lives in a way that she wasn’t with her mum or mother-in-law.”*

Some of the daughters also viewed their mothers as friends and appreciated that the relationships that they enjoyed with them were less hierarchical and more relaxed than they may have been in the past.

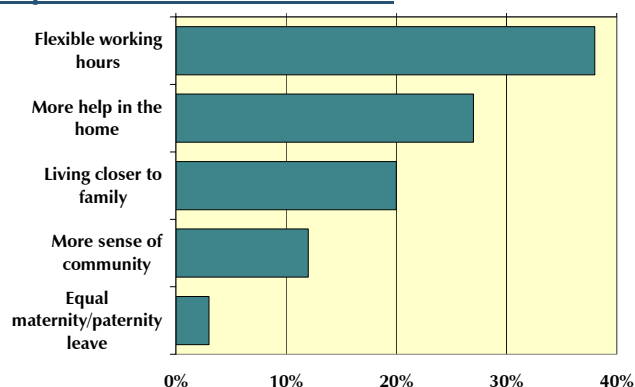
*“It is much more relaxed I find with me and my parents than it was with her and her mum. Her mum, I suppose they were quite middle class, and they were quite wealthy and my grandma wasn’t nice ... For the majority of her childhood my mother didn’t really live with them. So there was no real relationship. The relationship I have with my mum is lovely and it is very relaxed.”*

## 8 What would improve mothers’ lives?

Responses from the national poll indicated that more flexible working hours would be the best contributor to mothers’ lives – reflecting very much the desire or need felt by mothers to work outside of the home.

More help in the home and living closer to the mother’s own family were other significant contributors, as shown in Figure 19.

**Figure 19. What would contribute an improvement in mothers’ lives**



While the issue of equal maternity and paternity leave came lowest on the list of potential improvements, it was an issue of concern to a number of mothers in our group sessions. One commented on Nick Clegg’s proposals:

*“This is a bit of a soapbox for me. We are the last in Europe to embrace this. Scandinavian countries don’t have issues about looking after children because there is no animosity in the workplace because men have the same amount of time [off for paternity leave] as women. They know that when they employ men or women of child bearing age there is an equal chance that they will need to take leave. I think it is about time. Some women are now earning more than their partners so financially it may now make more sense for the man to spend a bit more time with their children. There is no reason why that shouldn’t happen.”*

Others, however, were less convinced:

*“I don’t know that my husband would take up that opportunity. Underneath it all he is quite traditional and he gets a lot of his sense of self from being the one out there. In a way it is not*

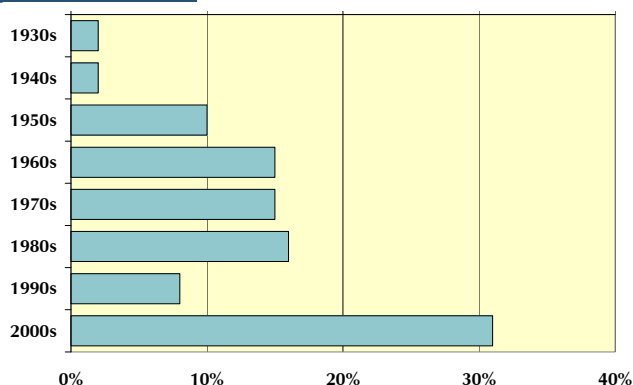
*playing to his strengths. I don't particularly like having to do everything, but ..."*

It is interesting to note that only a very small minority of mothers (12%) in this section of the survey cited 'more sense of community' as the factor that would improve the quality of their lives as mothers. Perhaps this is evidence for mothers already having strong networks that provide them with a strong sense of community already.

## 9 The Golden Age of motherhood?

Given our exploration of the past 80 years of motherhood we were keen to see which decade today's mothers felt was the best for them. Interestingly, the largest group 31% said that that if they had a time machine they would go no further back than the 2000s, as shown in Figure 20.

**Figure 20. The decades to which mothers would prefer to return**



The 1990s were, for today's mothers, a decade to avoid – the 1980s, 1970s and 1960s were preferable. Not surprisingly, the 1930s and the 1940s were the least preferred decades to which to return.

What this seems to suggest is that today's mothers, despite all of the pressures on them and the difficulties of maintaining a work-life balance, recognise that they are probably better off than their own mothers were at their stage of life and that being a mother today is certainly preferable to being one in the 1950s or before.

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