



What Mothers Do: especially when it looks like nothing

Naomi Stadlen

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'I wish I'd had this book years ago - to show to bosses who didn't understand, to friends who couldn't grasp why I was permanently tired, and even to myself - to know that I wasn't the only one who wished for an extra eight hours in the day.' Anne Diamond, television presenter, mother. 'Naomi Stadlen writes with understanding, deep insight and humour. This is truly woman-to woman.' Sheila Kitzinger, childbirth educator, mother. ended up feeling that you have 'done nothing all day'? Do you sometimes find it hard to feel pleased with what you are doing, and tell yourself you should achieve more with your time? Maybe it's because you can't see how much you are doing already. In this unique and perceptive look at mothering, Naomi Stadlen draws on many years' work with hundreds of other mothers of a wide variety of ages and backgrounds. She explores mothers' experiences to reveal what they - and you - are doing when it may look, to everyone else, like nothing. If you are a mother, and have ever felt: that nobody understands what you do all day; overwhelmed by your feelings for your baby; tired all the time; that nothing prepared you for motherhood; uncertain what your baby seems to want; short-tempered with your partner; - you will find this the most reassuring book you have ever picked up.

What Mothers Do: especially when it looks like nothing Details

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Jamie says

This was a good book to read piecemeal when I was rocking Max. It helped me reflect on my experience of motherhood and I liked looking at my current mindset from a larger cultural perspective. What is it that mothers do? It's hard to explain, but there's a lot to it and mothers are not given enough credit. I appreciated the way Stadlen explored the shifting of relationships and personal identity of new moms; she helped me to see that all of the "little" things I do with Max are way more important than any outwardly noticeable things I am getting done (or at least *trying* to get done).

Karen says

So far, one of the best books I've read about mothering - all the stuff the other "parenting" books don't have. It's not a how-to book at all, but an observation of what we're already doing, much of which doesn't have language associated with it yet.

Nickie says

Far be it from me to act like I'm possessed of near-goddess like magnificence for spawning, but sometimes in the face of endless no-sleep and hormonal chasms of depression, you need something to make you feel special. And to know that there are hordes of women who feel just as good/bad as you do about the whole thing.

For anyone who's spent a magical afternoon gazing in awe at their beautiful sleeping progeny, then ten minutes later found themselves raging about how said vision of loveliness has deprived them of all that makes them feel human, this is the book for you.

Elizabeth says

this is the best "parenting" book i have ever read. it is unique in that the author doesn't tell you what you should do. instead the book is all about the things mothers do that frequently do not even have an adequate vocabulary to describe them. it is more: you are probably already doing this to some degree and i am just writing it down.

this book not only hit upon many thoughts i had been having, it hit on upon thoughts i hadn't even begun to think. it was like she looked inside me and wrote a book about everything i have felt and thought since my son was born. i have even been keeping a list of some of the passages that "speak" to me. it has chapter titles like "nothing prepares you" and "So tired i could die".

the basic premise of the book is that mothers do all these things that we don't even really have words to

express. she makes a point in the first chapter that we have a litany of words to describe the things mothers do wrong, but very few for what moms do right. the example she gives is we have the words, "negligent" and "over-protective" but no word for "protecting her child in the right amount".

she goes on to have chapters about "being instantly interruptible" and motherly love and the power of comfort and the feeling that you didn't do anything all day... but you did. the book wraps up with chapters on a new mom's relationship with her husband and another about her relationship with her own mother.

the woman who wrote it is english so the vocabulary is a little different, but you get used to it.
(nappies=diapers, mum=mom, cot=crib, chemist=pharmacist, etc...)

not only do i highly recommend this book for all moms, this is the kind of book i think young men and women should be reading in highschool and college. it was so good, as soon as i finished it i a) cried and b) wanted to re read it again, right then.

Karin says

This should be a book that all mothers read.

It gives so much validation that when we "sit around" with our babies and young children we are actually doing very exhausting work. I can't say enough good about it. It shows gentleness and respect for all mothers, regardless of how they choose to parent. It also addresses how we communicate with each other and which ways are helpful and which ways are counter-productive. I think I'll try to get several copies and then give to mothers when a baby is born.

Sarah says

As a new mother, this book saved my mental health in the early days of my baby's life.

It is not a parenting guide or how-to book. The author doesn't ascribe to or recommend any philosophy of parenting. This book very elegantly describes the shock and frustrating experiences of mothers, and delineates through snippets of interviews with mothers, all the various types of work that mothers do 24 hours a day.

Her definitions of a mother's work include learning about, listening to her baby; the ability to be constantly interruptable; the socializing of her baby; her worry.

I highly recommend this book to any new mother who is struggling with her transition into motherhood. It will give even more meaning to what you are doing as a mother, even if it feels like you are not ever getting anything done.

Ieva says

A must-read for any new parent. It took me 18 months to read this book with a very active baby and now toddler, but I could relate to every single bit, and if anything, this book made me feel 'normal' in this ever

demanding and sometimes lonely mum life.

Leah says

I liked this a lot. There is the "mothering is the most important work" platitude, and then there is the "you should really be using your degree/you are just a SAHM/you must not be a feminist" that you get from people. And sometimes you get them from the same person. It could give one whiplash. This book is a great way to center yourself and realize what you are doing, that it is transient and necessary, and that it has value beyond the platitudes.

This book is slanted toward the Attachment Parenting spectrum but is very careful to not insult mothers with other parenting techniques. I can see it possibly upsetting a mother who has to work outside the home but who doesn't want to, particularly as it is written from a UK perspective and assumes a full year of maternity leave. I think it is well done but I wouldn't want it to sideswipe someone who is already upset about that.

Molly Westerman says

This book sets out with two admirable goals: 1) to articulate and make visible the really complex activities and processes of what's generally called "mothering" and 2) to honor those activities and processes as far more than 'doing nothing' (as in, 'I've been home with my baby, I'm exhausted, and yet I've feel like I've done nothing all day'). I absolutely agree that we need to pay far more nuanced attention to parents' (and specifically mothers') experiences, which are extremely interesting and valuable. I just don't like how Stadlen goes about pursuing those aims.

I feel totally alienated by Stadlen's descriptions of what parenting as a woman is like. Over and over, she makes a universal-sounding claim and lists a bunch of quotations that back it up, while I'm thinking, no; that just leaves me out. More importantly, I'm troubled by the book's treatment of socioeconomic class (often I'm thinking, er, excuse me but your privilege is showing ...), its ongoing not-so-subtle implication that really the goal is for mothers to stay home full-time with their babies and young children (and apparently we all secretly want to anyway, once we meet our babies); relatedly, its insistence that the mother is REALLY always ultimately/primarily responsible for the baby, and that the father (female partners seem to be nowhere in sight, alas) can only ever 'look after' his child; and a strain of mother-blaming that's totally contrary to the good intentions of the project.

It feels as though this book is actually speaking to a very specific audience (financially-secure women who are the primary/responsible parents in their families ... and, it seems to me, are heterosexually partnered, well-educated and used to high-powered office-based jobs, etc.) without admitting it. I also wish it would acknowledge structural and culturally-constructed constraints rather than solely emphasizing self-help strategies and acting as though a mother is ultimately, solely responsible for how her child experiences the world and turns out as an adult.

I found chapters 6 ("I Get Nothing Done All Day," on some of the subtle processes of growth and communication that happen as we interact with babies) and 10 ("I Was Surprised that I Still Had the Same Name," on some of the intellectual and ethical challenges [in a good sense] of taking care of babies) more interesting and nuanced than the others, so I developed a bit more fondness for the book in this second half.

But the universalizing thing and the judgmental-while-claiming-never-to-judge thing would keep me from recommending this book to a friend.

Stephanie says

I found the goal of this book--to articulate what mothers do when it may appear to outsiders that they do little to nothing--very admirable and largely well-done. I think that this is an important book for vocalizing what mothers, particularly mothers of infants and young children (for this book does not deal with mothering over a lifetime), do, for it offers reassurance to mothers who feel as though they "get nothing done all day" that they are doing a great deal of mothering without taking it into account and should therefore berate themselves less. Unfortunately, I found a number of flaws with this book. First, the author made generalizations about how a mother should or is expected to feel toward her child without giving much allowance to mothers who may feel differently. Second, the author explicitly says that her book is not a "prescription" of what mothers should do but rather a "description" of what mothers do, yet she repeatedly offers her precise ideas of what "good" mothering entails (take sleep training, for example). Third, the author seems to completely disregard outside influences or other social and structural influences or restraints when it comes to childrearing; she even states that it is the mother's fault when a child acts out because the mother didn't attend to his needs quickly enough when he was younger. I certainly appreciate Stadlen's attempt to "materialize the overlooked and invisible value of [the relationship between mother and child]" (126) and challenge the "consistent denigration of genuine mothering" (294; yet I ask, what is "genuine mothering"?), but this book leaves much to be desired.

Erika says

This book does a beautiful job of allowing us to examine what it is mothers--especially stay-at-home mothers--do all day, and, more than that, to name and honor those things. It can be very easy to feel like you're "not getting anything done," when, in fact, you are working hard all day at arguably the most important job there is! Stadlen shows how the typical ways we measure success and efficiency and accomplishment cannot be applied to the work of the stay-at-home parent and offers other ways to understand what SAHMs do. She has a lovely folkloric, personal-narrative approach that is appropriate to her thesis. The book, for the most part, would apply to fathers, too--especially those who stay home with their babies (as my husband did for a year). My only criticism so far is that the book can get a little touchy-feely, I'm-ok-you're-ok, but I suppose it's better to err on the side of gentleness when your audience is sleep-deprived and hormone-wired.

Jenni Pertuset says

I read this when my daughter was a newborn. I have a strong drive toward feeling productive, and at a time when just leaving the house sometimes took hours this reassured me that I was still accomplishing a great deal. I felt encouraged by that and by its normalizing (is that a word?) some of the things I'd imagined, but thought no sane mother ever had.

Nux says

Fascinating to see my thoughts that's so difficult to put into words being outlined in here. Also some that I thought would make me be categorized as weird... turns out to be pretty normal. Not all applicable or happening to me, but these non-applicable things are still good to know.

Would definitely recommend it to all new mums, or perhaps even mum to be's or those wanting to become mums themselves.

Kristen says

I expected to like this book more than I actually did. The first few chapters were pretty good, but then it became repetitive and kind of slow. So it was just okay.

Books Ring Mah Bell says

I didn't learn a lot from this book... I'm in the trenches, so I "get it". Props to the author for spelling it out for those who think parenting means watching soaps and eating bon-bons while Jr plays quietly in the background.

Here's a summary of a day in the life, read this, and save yourself from reading the book.

It begins with the sacrifice of your body. The little miracle grows inside of you, swelling your boobs, butt and belly to epic proportions. Some jerk will ask if you are expecting twins (you aren't) and you smile and say "Triplets, actually" or "I'm not pregnant, I just like beer". Then the birthing comes. Beautiful my ass! You push out turds, you yell, you sweat. The pain is gone the minute you place eyes onto this child, slimy, wrinkled creature, alien and beautiful. (Adoptive parents, you suffer thru your own labor, worrying about paperwork and biological parents...) The first six months are hell. Granted, there is magic in those little feet and hands, and watching that baby develop... but it's tough. You are exhausted due to baby sleeping patterns. If you breast feed, you are like a cow at the county fair - Step Right UP! See the amazing milk machine! Your boobs out all the time for the little lamprey... (said with affection in case one misses my sarcasm) oh diapers! As soon as you change it, your senses are attacked: hmm. I smell poop. AGAIN! I hear a rumble! AHHHH! He grows and gets mobile, you worry about him jamming forks into electric outlets, putting god-awful things into his mouth, and knocking over furniture onto himself. It takes you an hour to walk around the block as you are explaining drains, sewers and fire hydrants... then you play in the sandbox, making castles and roads... you make snacks CONSTANTLY! You learn that cheerios and milk make an amazingly tough paste. Then you try to keep him occupied while you clean and make dinner, only to find he's figured out how to open the shampoo bottle (how did he get to that??) and poured the contents onto the floor, rubbing his hands and feet in the slippery mess in a bizarre form of toddler art. As you clean that you see an old sippy cup under the couch... so old whatever liquid was in it has become solid. At this point, there has been a diaper blow out (a.k.a. shit explosion) potty training has not been too successful yet, although your little angel has figured out how to flush the toilet, regrettably he used your watch as a substitute for his turds... so you get that cleaned up and smell something burning. Damn! Dinner! You race to the kitchen to find your toddler has figured out how to pull a chair to the desk and open a pen... more artistic genius scribbled on papers for work, bills, himself and if you are not so lucky, the floor/walls. You give the sweetie a bath, and it dawns on you you've missed your shower this morning because he peed thru his pj's and you were changing and washing bedding... you dress the child for the 12th time that day when the Jehovah's

witnesses come to the door. They see the child and ask "do you work or stay at home"?
You dismember the bodies in the basement, and quietly bury them beneath the swing set that night.

I won't go into the after school running around for last minute science projects and sporting events, musical instruments accidentally run over by the car, teaching them how to ride a bike and throw a ball (and repair a window), calming a child after a fight with a friend or first heartbreak, teaching them to drive, and busting them sneaking out in the middle of the night.

It is a rich, wonderful thing, being a parent.

Who knew the heart could hold so much love!?

If you are lucky, someday your child will understand everything you have done and sincerely say, "thank you".

Go call your moms.
