

The
Atlantic

Not Wanting Kids Is Entirely Normal

Why the ingrained expectation that women should desire to become parents is unhealthy



James Hamblin

JESSICA VALENTI | SEP 19, 2012 | HEALTH

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

In 2008, Nebraska decriminalized child abandonment. The move was part of a “safe haven” law designed to address increased rates of infanticide in the state. Like other safe-haven laws, parents in Nebraska who felt unprepared to

care for their babies could drop them off in a designated location without fear of arrest and prosecution. But legislators made a major logistical error: They failed to implement an age limitation for dropped-off children.

Within just weeks of the law passing, parents started dropping off their kids. But here's the rub: None of them were infants. A couple of months in, 36 children had been left in state hospitals and police stations. Twenty-two of the children were over 13 years old. A 51-year-old grandmother dropped off a 12-year-old boy. One father dropped off his entire family—nine children from ages one to 17. Others drove from neighboring states to drop off their children once they heard that they could abandon them without repercussion.

The Nebraska state government, realizing the tremendous mistake it had made, held a special session of the legislature to rewrite the law in order to add an age limitation. Governor Dave Heineman said the change would “put the focus back on the original intent of these laws, which is saving newborn babies and exempting a parent from prosecution for child abandonment. It should also prevent those outside the state from bringing their children to Nebraska in an attempt to secure services.”

One father dropped off his entire family.

On November 21, 2008, the last day that the safe haven law was in effect for children of all ages, a mother from Yolo County, California, drove over 1,200 miles to the Kimball County Hospital in Nebraska where she left her 14-year-old son.

What happened in Nebraska raises the question: If there were no consequences, how many of us would give up our kids? After all, child abandonment is nothing new and it's certainly not rare in the United States. Over 400,000 children are in the foster care system waiting to be placed in homes, thousands of parents relinquish their children every year. One woman even sent her adopted child back to his home country with an apology letter pinned like a grocery list to his chest. Whether it's because of hardship or not, many Americans are giving up on parenthood.

In February 2009, someone calling herself Ann logged onto the website Secret Confessions and wrote three sentences: “I am depressed. I hate being a mom. I also hate being a stay at home mom too!” Over three years later, the thread of comments is still going strong with thousands of responses—the site usually garners only 10 or so comments for every “confession.” Our anonymous Ann had hit a nerve.

One woman who got pregnant at 42 wrote, “I hate being a mother too. Every day is the same. And to think I won't be free of it until I am like 60 and then my life will be over.” Another, identifying herself only as K's mom, said, “I feel so trapped, anxious, and overwhelmed. I love my daughter and she's well taken care of but this is not the path I would have taken given a second chance.”

Gianna wrote, “I love my son, but I hate being a mother. It has been a thankless, monotonous, exhausting, irritating and oppressive job. Motherhood feels like a prison sentence. I can't wait until I am paroled when my son turns 18 and hopefully goes far away to college.” One D.C.-based mom even said that although she was against abortion before having her son, now she would “run to the abortion clinic” if she got pregnant again.

The responses—largely from women who identify themselves as financially stable—spell out something less explicit than well-worn reasons for parental

unhappiness such as poverty and a lack of support. These women simply don't feel that motherhood is all it's cracked up to be, and if given a second chance, they wouldn't do it again.

Some cited the boredom of stay-at-home momism. Many complained of partners who didn't shoulder their share of child care responsibilities. “Like most men, my husband doesn't do much—if anything—for baby care. I have to do and plan for everything,” one mother wrote. A few got pregnant accidentally and were pressured by their husbands and boyfriends to carry through with the pregnancy, or knew they never wanted children but felt it was something they “should” do.

The overwhelming sentiment, however was the feeling of a loss of self, the terrifying reality that their lives had been subsumed into the needs of their child. DS wrote, “I feel like I have completely lost any thing that was me. I never imagined having children and putting myself aside would make me feel this bad.” The expectation of total motherhood is bad enough, having to live it out every day is soul crushing. Everything that made us an individual, that made us unique, no longer matters. It's our role as a mother that defines us. Not much has changed.

“The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity,” wrote Betty Friedan. “The mystique says they can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘Tom's wife ... Mary's mother.’ The truth is—and how long it's been true, I'm not sure, but it was true in my generation and it's true of girls growing up today—an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be.”

At the time she published *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argued that the public image of women was largely one of domesticity—“washing machines, cake mixes ... detergents,” all sold through commercials and magazines. Today, American women have more public images of themselves than that of

a housewife. We see ourselves depicted in television, ads, movies, and magazines (not to mention relief!) as politicians, business owners, intellectuals, soldiers, and more. But that's what makes the public images of total motherhood so insidious. We see these diverse images of ourselves and believe that the oppressive standard Friedan wrote about is dead, when in fact it has simply shifted. Because no matter how many different kinds of public images women see of themselves, they're still limited. They're still largely white, straight upper-middle-class depictions, and they all still identify women as mothers or non-mothers.

American culture can't accept the reality of a woman who does not want to be a mother. It goes against everything we've been taught to think about women and how desperately they want babies. If we're to believe the media and pop culture, women—even teen girls—are forever desperate for a baby. It's our greatest desire.

The truth is, most women spend the majority of their lives trying *not* to get pregnant. According to the Guttmacher Institute, by the time a woman with two children is in her mid-40s she will have spent only five years trying to become pregnant, being pregnant, and not being at risk for getting pregnant following a birth. But to avoid getting pregnant before or after those two births, she would have had to refrain from sex or use contraception for an average of 25 years. Almost all American women (99 percent), ages 15-44, who have had sexual intercourse use some form of birth control. The second most popular form of birth control after the Pill? Sterilization. And now, more than ever, women are increasingly choosing forms of contraception that are for long-term use. Since 2005, for example, IUD use has increased by a whopping 161 percent. That's a long part of life and a lot of effort to avoid

parenthood!

Now, it may be that these statistics simply indicate that modern women are just exerting more control over when and under what circumstances they become mothers. To a large degree that's true. But it doesn't jibe with an even more shocking reality: that half of pregnancies in the United States are unintended. Once you factor in the abortion rate and pregnancies that end in miscarriage, we're left with the rather surprising fact that one-third of babies born in the United States were unplanned. Not so surprising, however, is that the intention to have children definitively impacts how parents feel about their children, and how those children are treated—sometimes to terrifying results.

American culture can't accept the reality of a woman who does not want to be a mother.

Jennifer Barber, a population researcher at the University of Michigan, studied more than 3,000 mothers and their close to 6,000 children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Barber and her colleagues asked women who had recently given birth, “Just before you became pregnant, did you want to become pregnant when you did?” Those who answered yes were categorized as “intended”; those who answered no were then asked, “Did you want a baby but not at that time, or did you want none at all?” Depending on their answer, they were classified as “mistimed” or “unwanted.” Over 60 percent of the children studied were reported as planned, almost 30 percent were unplanned (“mistimed”), and 10 percent were unequivocally “unwanted.”

The results of Barber's research showed that the children who were unintended—both those who were mistimed and those who were unwanted—got fewer parental resources than those children who were intended. Basically, children who were unplanned didn't get as much emotional and cognitive support as children who were planned—as reported both by the researchers and the mothers themselves. Barber's research looked at things like the number of children's books in the home, and how often a parent read to a child or taught them skills like counting or the alphabet for the “cognitive” aspect. For the “emotional” support rating, they developed a scale measuring the “warmth” and “responsiveness” of the mother, how much time the family spent together, and how much time the father spent with the child. Across the board, children who were wanted got more from their parents than children who weren't. Children who were unplanned were also subject to harsher parenting and more punitive measures than a sibling who was intended.

Barber pointed out that this kind of pattern could be due to parental stress and a lack of patience that's “directed explicitly toward an unwanted child,” and that a mistimed or unwanted birth could raise stress levels in the parents' interactions with their other children as well. She also says that in addition to benign emotional neglect, parenting unintended children is also associated with infant health problems and mortality, maternal depression, and sometimes child abuse.

* * *

When Torry Hansen of Shelbyville, Tennessee, sent her seven-year-old adopted son by himself on a plane back to his home country of Russia with nothing more than a note explaining she didn't want to parent him, she became one of the most reviled women in America. Russian officials were so incensed that they temporarily halted all adoption to the United States. We sometimes expect fathers to shirk their responsibility; but when mothers do it,

it shakes the core of what we've been taught to believe about women and maternal instinct.

Anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy argued in a 2001 Utah lecture, for example, that being female is seen as synonymous with having and nurturing as many children as possible. So when mothers abandon their children, it's seen as unnatural. This simplistic, emotional response to parents—mothers, in particular—who give up their kids is part of the reason Americans have such a difficult time dealing with the issue. As Hrdy says, “No amount of legislation can ensure that mothers will love their babies.”

That's why programs like safe haven laws—age limitations or not—will never truly get to the heart of the matter. As Mary Lee Allen, director of the Children's Defense Fund's child welfare and mental health division, has has, “These laws help women to drop their babies off but do nothing to provide supports to women and children before this happens.”

Unfortunately, discussing the structural issues has never been an American strong suit. Hrdy notes that legislators are too afraid to focus on sensible solutions. “Talking about the source of the problem would require policymakers to discuss sex education and contraception, not to mention abortion, and they view even nonsensical social policies as preferable to the prospect of political suicide.”

If policymakers and people who care about children want to reduce the number of abandoned kids, they need to address the systemic issues: poverty, maternity leave, access to resources, and health care. We need to encourage women to demand more help from their partners, if they have them. In a way, that's the easier fix, because we know what we have to do there; the issues have been the same for years. The less-obvious hurdle is that of preparing parents emotionally and putting forward realistic images of parenthood and motherhood. There also needs to be some sort of acknowledgement that not

everyone should parent—when parenting is a given, it’s not fully considered or thought out, and it gives way too easily to parental ambivalence and unhappiness.

Take Trinity, one of the mothers who commented on the Secret Confessions board about hating parenthood. She wrote, “My pregnancy was totally planned and I thought it was a good idea at the time. Nobody tells you the negatives before you get pregnant—they convince you it's a wonderful idea and you will love it. I think it’s a secret shared among parents ... they’re miserable so they want you to be too.”

By having more honest conversations about parenting, we can avoid the kind of secret depressions so many mothers seem to be harboring. If what we want is deliberate, thought-out, planned, and expected parenthood—and parenting that is healthy and happy for children—then we have to speak out.

This post is excerpted from [Why Have Kids?](#)

LATEST VIDEO

Trump's Most Drastic Statement Yet

The U.S. abandons the Paris Accord—and the global community it helped build.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JESSICA VALENTI is a columnist for *The Guardian US*, the founder of [Feministing.com](#), and the author of *Full Frontal Feminism*; *He's a Stud, She's a Slut*; *The Purity Myth*; and *Why Have Kids?* She has written for *Salon*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Nation*.

 [Twitter](#)
