

Life's Paradox

uncommon reflections of life matters

Simple Joys of Parenthood – Working Life's Paradox

By Dr Yvonne Sum, BDS Hons, NLPTT, APMC
International Speaker & Personal Coach

I was watching *SuperNanny* with the kids recently. What's *SuperNanny* about? It is a reality TV show about how Jo Frost, a modern day Mary Poppins comes into a family's life for a fleeting three weeks – observing the children with the parents in their family home, doing a needs analysis, prescribing a new order and routine, allowing them to road test it for 1 week on their own, returns to tweak a few things, and flies off onto a new challenging family. It is seemingly popular viewing too.

I asked the kids what they thought about the show. Their comment: “We don't need SuperNanny, Mummy!” Initial reactions – do they not like her and so would prefer her not to be around? Are we doing a good enough job being parents so we do not need a mentoring session with her (pat on our backs!)? Do we as a family just want to be left alone –warts and all (maybe we all prefer to do it our way!)?

The fact that *SuperNanny* has become a household name in at least three continents – North America, Europe and now Australasia – in about a year shows that there is a consciousness of parents desperately crying out for help:



Are we doing parenthood justice?
 Have we lost the natural instinct to parent?
 Is there a proper and right way to parent?
 Are there role models of ideal parenting?
 If so, are they available to mentor and coach us?
 Do we even want to be parents?

In her book called *Oh no, we forgot to have children!*, Deirdre Macken writes about birth rates in Australia dropping from 3.5 births in 1961 to 1.7 in 2000 (echoed throughout the rest of the world) that are now shrinking well below replacement level:

“The future of the world is being written now. What’s more it’s not being decided in the White House, or in corporate headquarters, in think tanks, religious doctrines or in a laboratory somewhere. This future is being decided in bedrooms across the world. In the privacy of their bedroom (let’s be conservative here), couples decide whether to have a baby this year or next, or when the mortgage has been reduced, or not at all. Couples with one child juggle with the decision about having another – soon, so there won’t be two disruptions to their earning capacity, or much later when they’re not so exhausted, or maybe not at all. Privately, single women wrestle with their options – is it too late, will they find a partner on time, should they conceive without a partner? And many more women are asking why they should risk their career, independence and the freedom to travel for a life constrained by children.”

The burden of decision is both economic and psychological. A new baby becomes a new mouth to feed and a body to clothe and shelter. Childcare costs if mother returns to work without giving up her role at work. If she doesn’t, the family goes from dual to single income.

The costs of raising kids – in time and money – are higher than ever. They have been privatized as never before. Having children today may be seen as a personal indulgence for parents but it is an economic imperative for society of tomorrow. Governments need children to support the growing army of elderly. Employers need more human capital of HR-intensive businesses. Society relies on a young population who are well-educated and socialized. Yet these costs are increasingly being shifted home to the parents. Parents are suckers who foot the bill for the economic and social prosperity of a nation whilst being accused of self-indulgence in doing so.

It can be argued that the joys of parenthood include psychological benefits of increasing the longevity of your gene pool, the possible immortality of self through offspring, experiencing the world through fresh and magical eyes of the innocent child.... Yet, according to Deirdre Macken in *Oh no, we forgot to have children!*:



“We know that the commitment to children doesn’t stop at the wallet. It encompasses time, energy, mental and emotional support and great dollops of waiting, watching and wondering. If domestic work is the double shift, then emotional work must be the third shift. At the back of every mother’s mind is an abacus that keeps track of the family’s emotional wellbeing.”

Parents are also not being portrayed in best light by the media. It is cool to be carefree singles like Carrie and her unattached friends from *Sex and the City* and those friends from *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. On the contrary, *The Simpsons*, *Everybody Loves Raymond* and the *Married with Children* paint a darker picture of what it is like to be tied down in a family way.

The increasingly vocal childless lobby which include groups like No Kidding and THINKERS (Two Healthy Incomes No Kids Early Retirement) resent paying for services they will never need, and for other people’s lack of forethought and planning (especially family planning). Some even believe they should be compensated for their lack of reliance on government funds.

Society’s unflattering picture of children today is formed by the media’s images, founded in the marketplace and fostered by fear. We may accept our toddler with all the charms and challenges of that age group but other shoppers in the supermarket will only see the tantrum-throwing purple rage of a spoilt tot (the kind we see on *SuperNanny* regularly) and the ineffectual discipline of a flustered parent caught between the lollie counter and a quick exit.

Childhood today is institutionalized and managerialized around our image of the workplace: Hours are precisely timetabled, outcomes (health, literacy, crime) are benchmarked and measured, costs are privatized and care (nappy services, childcare, tutoring, entertaining) has been outsourced.

Careen Leslie, director of the Wiradjuri Centre and early childhood course convenor at the University of Canberra, fears we are becoming remote from our caring roles.

“Nobody wants to deal with children....Women didn’t want to do it day and night, .. and men refused to take it up, so the duty has been transferred to childcare centres. But not even childcare workers want to do it, when graduates of early childhood studies decide where they’ll work, they invariably end up working in primary schools because this end of the business is too hard and undervalued. We’re not a child-friendly society and we’re becoming more unfriendly. We may say we like children but we have very little tolerance of them

and the less we have to do with them, the less capable and interested we are in them.”

Eventually, what we don't know, we either forget or fear. In *The Man Who loved Children*, Christine Stead reminds us, “One of the most obvious facts about grown-ups, to a child, is that they have forgotten what it is like to be a child.”

As Sheila Kitzinger says in *Ourselves as Mothers*:

“Children are treated as a private indulgence. One consequence of this social attitude is that increasingly women approach birth and the initial tasks of motherhood in a business-like spirit, determined to do it well, but concerned to get back to the situation, in both their working and their private and social lives that existed before the baby was born. Employers, colleagues, friends and even a partner often expect this. It is ‘returning to normal’.”

If mothers weren't making a mess of it all, then they weren't doing enough. Barbara Pocock in *The Work/Life Collision* explored how it wasn't just work that intensified during this period, it was actually mothering itself. “Mothers are more likely to see the fault in themselves attempting to meet their “deficiencies” through super-mothering than they are to look at their partners or to critically examine the rigidities imposed by their workplaces.”

Despite the negative return on investment from an economic perspective, and the social and psychological weight that parenthood entails, some of us continue to listen to our biological clocks. When babies are born, so too are mothers and fathers at that moment.

Deidre Macken continues in *Oh no, we forgot to have children!*:

“Expected to work like singles, cook like Nigella, dress like Madonna (in low heels), birth like Sheila Kitzinger, raise kids on Penelope Leach toys, live in houses renovated by Jamie Durie and educate their kids like Aristotle, no wonder mothers feel ambivalent about the demands of parenthood. And not terribly competent about it either.”

According to the 2004 Australian Childhood Foundation survey, parents were desperate for help with their parenting roles. 75% said they struggled to find time to enjoy activities with their children. More than 50% said they lacked confidence in their parenting skills. 60% struggled with effective discipline and 80% wanted more information and support on parenting issues.

It is no wonder that *SuperNanny* Jo Frost has hit a nerve in these trying times for families. So, if you do not have a modern day Mary Poppins to come rescue you with her brand of parenting – what are today’s parents to do?

Perhaps it is about getting back to the basics. Step back and notice what these mean to you:

- What are the simple joys in your life?
- How can you re-create these in your life?
- Who are you and what do you want?
- What and who do you treasure and wish to be around?
- How do you want to live?

What if we can have a renewed awareness of our child-like qualities through a learning partnership with our children (if you haven’t any – borrow some on a regular basis!) to remember the magic of our world? Too many executives (of both genders) in the coaching environment have confessed to losing connection with their teenagers whilst focusing on their careers.

How can we become leaders in our own lives? It may be time for us to clarify and celebrate our individual Life Purpose, core values and personal/family vision (if you haven’t decided to have kids, you still have extended family eg your parents ...!). It is about how we want to be as individuals – beyond the context of our identities in a career.

Behaviour is the highest form of communication. Be clear of “Branding You” in a manner that befits the identity and values you hold dear in your life. By being a role model actualizing our highest potential and holding that space for our families, our children (even those you borrow!) can have the best chance to transform to be the best they can be. Remember to communicate it clearly to those closest to you so they can help you achieve what you want. No man (or woman) is an island – so they say!

Challenge yourself. Be the best you can be. (regardless whether you are a parent or not.) As a peak performer in life, you deserve a coach. Go interview one (it may even be your children!) that will match your personality and needs to help you get what you want.

The whole working life’s paradox is this: plan and structure your life by all means, yet do remember to live for the moment and be flexible at all times!! Celebrate simple joys, again. Have a great life – the one you truly want to have.

About the Author: **Dr Yvonne Sum** is a pioneer in Parent Leadership coaching. She is on a quest to co-create joyful learning partnerships between parents and children to simultaneously bring out each other's authentic best. She inspires parents to learn from our children mirroring to us what we most need to learn about ourselves and vice-versa. Through her series of **Transformational Leadership Challenge™ (TLC)** programs, Dr Sum is committed to transform leaders of tomorrow today by highlighting family values and celebrating parents as role models and heroes in life who proactively unleash our children's potential through self actualization, intentional living and powerful leadership centred on love and high purpose. She expresses this passion to bring out our authentic best through her roles as an international speaker, writer, transformational corporate facilitator, executive and parent Meta-Coach, Neuro Linguistic Programming trainer, business woman, wife and mother. Please visit www.dryvonesum.com for more information.