



## INTRODUCTION

# The New Momism

It's 5:22 P.M. You're in the grocery checkout line. Your three-year-old is writhing on the floor, screaming, because you have refused to buy her a Teletubby pinwheel. Your six-year-old is whining, repeatedly, in a voice that could saw through cement, "But mommy, puleeze, puleeze" because you have not bought him the latest "Lunchables," which features, as the four food groups, Cheetos, a Snickers, Cheez Whiz, and Twizzlers. Your teenager, who has not spoken a single word in the past four days except, "You've ruined my life," followed by "Everyone else has one," is out in the car, sulking, with the new rap-metal band Piss on the Parentals blasting through the headphones of a Discman.

To distract yourself, and to avoid the glares of other shoppers who have already deemed you the worst mother in America, you leaf through *People* magazine. Inside, Uma Thurman gushes "Motherhood Is Sexy."<sup>1</sup> Moving on to *Good Housekeeping*, Vanna White says of her child, "When I hear his cry at six-thirty in the morning, I have a smile on my face, and I'm not an early riser."<sup>2</sup> Another unexpected source of earth-mother wisdom, the newly maternal Pamela Lee, also confides to *People*, "I just love getting up with him in the middle of the night to feed him or soothe him."<sup>3</sup> Brought back to reality by stereophonic whining, you indeed feel as sexy as Rush Limbaugh in a thong.

You drag your sorry ass home. Now, if you were a "good" mom, you'd joyfully empty the shopping bags and transform the process of putting the groceries away into a fun game your kids love to play (upbeat

Raffi songs would provide a lilting soundtrack). Then, while you steamed the broccoli and poached the chicken breasts in Vouvray and Evian water, you and the kids would also be doing jigsaw puzzles in the shape of the United Arab Emirates so they learned some geography. Your cheerful teenager would say, "Gee, Mom, you gave me the best advice on that last homework assignment." When your husband arrives, he is so overcome with admiration for how well you do it all that he looks lovingly into your eyes, kisses you, and presents you with a diamond anniversary bracelet. He then announces that he has gone on flex time for the next two years so that he can split childcare duties with you fifty-fifty. The children, chattering away happily, help set the table, and then eat their broccoli. After dinner, you all go out and stencil the driveway with autumn leaves.

But maybe this sounds slightly more familiar. "I won't unpack the groceries! You can't make me," bellows your child as he runs to his room, knocking down a lamp on the way. "Eewee—gross out!" he yells and you discover that the cat has barfed on his bed. You have fifteen minutes to make dinner because there's a school play in half an hour. While the children fight over whether to watch *Hot Couples* or people eating larvae on *Fear Factor*, you zap some Prego spaghetti sauce in the microwave and boil some pasta. You set the table. "Mommy, Mommy, Sam losted my hamster," your daughter wails. Your ex-husband calls to say he won't be taking the kids this weekend after all because his new wife, Buffy, twenty-three, has to go on a modeling shoot in Virgin Gorda for the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, and "she really needs me with her." You go to the TV room to discover the kids watching transvestites punching each other out on *Jerry Springer*. The pasta boils over and scalds the hamster, now lying prostrate on the floor with its legs twitching in the air. "Get your butts in here this instant or I'll murder you immediately," you shriek, by way of inviting your children to dinner. "I hate this pasta—I only like the kind shaped like wagon wheels!" "Mommy, you killed my hamster!"

If you're like us—mothers with an attitude problem—you may be getting increasingly irritable about this chasm between the ridiculous, honey-hued ideals of perfect motherhood in the mass media and the reality of mothers' everyday lives. And you may also be worn down by media images that suggest that however much you do for and love your kids, it is never enough. The love we feel for our kids, the joyful times we have with them, are repackaged into unattainable images of infinite patience and constant adoration so that we fear, as Kristin van Ogtrop put it movingly

in *The Bitch in the House*, “I will love my children, but my love for them will always be imperfect.”<sup>4</sup>

From the moment we get up until the moment we collapse in bed at night, the media are out there, calling to us, yelling, “Hey you! Yeah, you! Are you *really* raising your kids right?” Whether it’s the cover of *Redbook* or *Parents* demanding “Are You a Sensitive Mother?” “Is Your Child Eating Enough?” “Is Your Baby Normal?” (and exhorting us to enter its pages and have great sex at 25, 35, or 85), the nightly news warning us about missing children, a movie trailer hyping a film about a cross-dressing dad who’s way more fun than his stinky, careerist wife (*Mrs. Doubtfire*), or Dr. Laura telling some poor mother who works four hours a week that she’s neglectful, the siren song blending seduction and accusation is there all the time. Mothers are subjected to an onslaught of beatific imagery, romantic fantasies, self-righteous sermons, psychological warnings, terrifying movies about losing their children, even more terrifying news stories about abducted and abused children, and totally unrealistic advice about how to be the most perfect and revered mom in the neighborhood, maybe even in the whole country. (Even *Working Mother*—which should have known better—had a “Working Mother of the Year Contest.” When Jill Kirschenbaum became the editor in 2001, one of the first things she did was dump this feature, noting that motherhood should not be a “competitive sport.”) We are urged to be fun-loving, spontaneous, and relaxed, yet, at the same time, scared out of our minds that our kids could be killed at any moment. No wonder 81 percent of women in a recent poll said it’s harder to be a mother now than it was twenty or thirty years ago, and 56 percent felt mothers were doing a worse job today than mothers back then.<sup>5</sup> Even mothers who deliberately avoid TV and magazines, or who pride themselves on seeing through them, have trouble escaping the standards of perfection, and the sense of threat, that the media ceaselessly atomize into the air we breathe.

We are both mothers, and we adore our kids—for example, neither one of us has ever locked them up in dog crates in the basement (although we have, of course, been tempted). The smell of a new baby’s head, tucking a child in at night, receiving homemade, hand-scrawled birthday cards, heart-to-hearts with a teenager after a date, seeing *them* become parents—these are joys parents treasure. But like increasing numbers of women, we are fed up with the myth—shamelessly hawked by the media—that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, that it is *al-*

*ways* the best and most important thing you do, that there is only a narrowly prescribed way to do it right, and that if you don't love each and every second of it there's something really wrong with you. At the same time, the two of us still have been complete suckers, buying those black-and-white mobiles that allegedly turn your baby into Einstein Jr., feeling guilty for sending in store-bought cookies to the class bake sale instead of homemade like the "good" moms, staying up until 2:30 A.M. making our kids' Halloween costumes, driving to the Multiplex 18 at midnight to pick up teenagers so they won't miss the latest outing with their friends. We know that building a scale model of Versailles out of mashed potatoes may not be quite as crucial to good mothering as *Martha Stewart Living* suggests. Yet here we are, cowed by that most tyrannical of our cultural icons, Perfect Mom. So, like millions of women, we buy into these absurd ideals at the same time that we resent them and think they are utterly ridiculous and oppressive. After all, our parents—the group Tom Brokaw has labeled “the greatest generation”—had parents who whooped them on the behind, screamed stuff at them like “I’ll tear you limb from limb,” told them babies came from cabbage patches, never drove them four hours to a soccer match, and yet they seemed to have nonetheless saved the western world.

This book is about the rise in the media of what we are calling the “new momism”: the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. The term “momism” was initially coined by the journalist Philip Wylie in his highly influential 1942 bestseller *Generation of Vipers*, and it was a very derogatory term. Drawing from Freud (who else?), Wylie attacked the mothers of America as being so smothering, overprotective, and invested in their kids, especially their sons, that they turned them into dysfunctional, sniveling weaklings, maternal slaves chained to the apron strings, unable to fight for their country or even stand on their own two feet.<sup>6</sup> We seek to reclaim this term, rip it from its misogynistic origins, and apply it to an ideology that has snowballed since the 1980s and seeks to return women to the Stone Age.

The “new momism” is a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most fre-

quently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach. The new momism is the direct descendant and latest version of what Betty Friedan famously labeled the “feminine mystique” back in the 1960s. The new momism *seems* to be much more hip and progressive than the feminine mystique, because now, of course, mothers can and do work outside the home, have their own ambitions and money, raise kids on their own, or freely choose to stay at home with their kids rather than being forced to. And unlike the feminine mystique, the notion that women should be subservient to men is not an accepted tenet of the new momism. Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here’s where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a “real” woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a “mom” and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism that would involve the cross cloning of Mother Teresa with Donna Shalala. Thus the new momism is deeply contradictory: It both draws from and repudiates feminism.

The fulcrum of the new momism is the rise of a really pernicious ideal in the late twentieth century that the sociologist Sharon Hays has perfectly labeled “intensive mothering.”<sup>7</sup> It is no longer okay, as it was even during the heyday of June Cleaver, to let (or make) your kids walk to school, tell them to stop bugging you and go outside and play, or, God forbid, serve them something like Tang, once the preferred beverage of the astronauts, for breakfast. Of course many of our mothers baked us cookies, served as Brownie troop leaders, and chaperoned class trips to Elf Land. But today, the standards of good motherhood are really over the top. And they’ve gone through the roof at the same time that there has been a real decline in leisure time for most Americans.<sup>8</sup> The yuppie work ethic of the 1980s, which insisted that even when you were off the job you should be working—on your abs, your connections, your portfolio, whatever—absolutely conquered motherhood. As the actress Patricia Heaton jokes in *Motherhood & Hollywood*, now mothers are supposed to “sneak echinacea” into the “freshly squeezed, organically grown orange juice” we’ve made for our kids and teach them to “download research for their kindergarten report on ‘My Family Tree—The Early Roman Years.’”<sup>9</sup>

Intensive mothering insists that mothers acquire professional-level skills such as those of a therapist, pediatrician (“Dr. Mom”), consumer products safety inspector, and teacher, and that they lavish every ounce of physical vitality they have, the monetary equivalent of the gross domestic product of Australia, and, most of all, every single bit of their emotional, mental, and psychic energy on their kids. We must learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother and wear it at all times. With intensive mothering, everyone watches us, we watch ourselves and other mothers, and we watch ourselves watching ourselves. How many of you know someone who swatted her child on the behind in a supermarket because he was, say, opening a pack of razor blades in the toiletries aisle, only to be accosted by someone she never met who threatened to put her up on child-abuse charges? In 1997, one mother was arrested for child neglect because she left a ten-year-old and a four-year-old home for an hour and a half while she went to the supermarket.<sup>10</sup> Motherhood has become a psychological police state.

Intensive mothering is the ultimate female Olympics: We are all in powerful competition with each other, in constant danger of being trumped by the mom down the street, or in the magazine we’re reading. The competition isn’t just over who’s a good mother—it’s over who’s the best. We compete with each other; we compete with ourselves. The best mothers always put their kids’ needs before their own, period. The best mothers are the main caregivers. For the best mothers, their kids are the center of the universe. The best mothers always smile. They always understand. They are never tired. They never lose their temper. They never say, “Go to the neighbor’s house and play while Mommy has a beer.” Their love for their children is boundless, unflagging, flawless, total. Mothers today cannot just respond to their kids’ needs, they must predict them—and with the telepathic accuracy of Houdini. They must memorize verbatim the books of all the child-care experts and know which approaches are developmentally appropriate at different ages. They are supposed to treat their two-year-olds with “respect.” If mothers screw up and fail to do this on any given day, they should apologize to their kids, because any misstep leads to permanent psychological and/or physical damage. Anyone who questions whether this is *the* best and *the* necessary way to raise kids is an insensitive, ignorant brute. This is just common sense, right?<sup>11</sup>

The new momism has become unavoidable, unless you raise your kids in a yurt on the tundra, for one basic reason: Motherhood became one of

the biggest media obsessions of the last three decades, exploding especially in the mid-1980s and continuing unabated to the present. Women have been deluged by an ever-thickening mudslide of maternal media advice, programming, and marketing that powerfully shapes how we mothers feel about our relationships with our own kids and, indeed, how we feel about ourselves. These media representations have changed over time, cutting mothers some real slack in the 1970s, and then increasingly closing the vise in the late 1980s and after, despite important rebellions by Roseanne and others. People don't usually notice that motherhood has been such a major media fixation, revolted or hooked as they've been over the years by other media excesses like the O. J. Simpson trials, the Lewinsky-Clinton imbroglio, the Elian Gonzalez carnival, *Survivor*, or the 2002 Washington-area sniper killings in which "profilers" who knew as much as SpongeBob SquarePants nonetheless got on TV to tell us what the killer was thinking.

But make no mistake about it—mothers and motherhood came under unprecedented media surveillance in the 1980s and beyond. And since the media traffic in extremes, in anomalies—the rich, the deviant, the exemplary, the criminal, the gorgeous—they emphasize fear and dread on the one hand and promote impossible ideals on the other. In the process, *Good Housekeeping*, *People*, E!, Lifetime, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *NBC Nightly News* built an interlocking, cumulative image of the dedicated, doting "mom" versus the delinquent, bad "mother." There have been, since the early 1980s, several overlapping media frameworks that have fueled the new momism. First, the media warned mothers about the external threats to their kids from abductors and the like. Then the "family values" crowd made it clear that supporting the family was not part of the government's responsibility. By the late 1980s, stories about welfare and crack mothers emphasized the internal threats to children from mothers themselves. And finally, the media brouhaha over the "Mommy Track" reaffirmed that businesses could not or would not budge much to accommodate the care of children. Together, and over time, these frameworks produced a prevailing common sense that only you, the individual mother, are responsible for your child's welfare: The buck stops with you, period, and you'd better be a superstar.

Of course there has been a revolution in fatherhood over the past thirty years, and millions of men today tend to the details of child rearing in ways their own fathers rarely did. Feminism prompted women to insist



that men change diapers and pack school lunches, but it also gave men permission to become more involved with their kids in ways they have found to be deeply satisfying. And between images of cuddly, New Age dads with babies asleep on their chests (think old Folger's ads), movies about hunky men and a baby (or clueless ones who shrink the kids), and sensational news stories about "deadbeat dads" and men who beat up their sons' hockey coaches, fathers too have been subject to a media "dad patrol." But it pales in comparison to the new momism. After all, a dad who knows the name of his kids' pediatrician and reads them stories at night is still regarded as a saint; a mother who doesn't is a sinner.

Once you identify it, you see the new momism everywhere. The recent spate of magazines for "parents" (i.e., mothers) bombard the anxiety-induced mothers of America with reassurances that they can (after a \$100,000 raise and a personality transplant) produce bright, motivated, focused, fun-loving, sensitive, cooperative, confident, contented kids just like the clean, obedient ones on the cover. The frenzied hypernatism of the women's magazines alone (and that includes *People*, *Us*, and *InStyle*), with their endless parade of perfect, "sexy" celebrity moms who've had babies, adopted babies, been to sperm banks, frozen their eggs for future use, hatched the frozen eggs, had more babies, or adopted a small Tibetan village, all to satisfy their "baby lust," is enough to make you want to get your tubes tied. (These profiles always insist that celebs all love being "moms" much, much more than they do their work, let alone being rich and famous, and that they'd spend every second with their kids if they didn't have that pesky blockbuster movie to finish.) Women without children, wherever they look, are besieged by ridiculously romantic images that insist that having children is the most joyous, fulfilling experience in the galaxy, and if they don't have a small drooling creature who likes to stick forks in electrical outlets, they are leading bankrupt, empty lives. Images of ideal moms and their miracle babies are everywhere, like leeches in the Amazon, impossible to dislodge and sucking us dry.

There is also the ceaseless outpouring of books on toilet training, separating one sibling's fist from another sibling's eye socket, expressing breast milk while reading a legal brief, helping preschoolers to "own" their feelings, getting Joshua to do his homework, and raising teenage boys so they become Sensitive New Age Guys instead of rooftop snipers or Chippendale dancers. Over eight hundred books on motherhood were published between 1970 and 2000; only twenty-seven of these came out



between 1970 and 1980, so the real avalanche happened in the past twenty years.<sup>12</sup> We've learned about the perils of "the hurried child" and "hyperparenting," in which we schedule our kids with so many enriching activities that they make the secretary of state look like a couch spud. But the unhurried child probably plays too much Nintendo and is out in the garage building pipe bombs, so you can't underschedule them either.

Then there's the Martha Stewartization of America, in which we are meant to sculpt the carrots we put in our kids' lunches into the shape of peonies and build funhouses for them in the backyard; this has raised the bar to even more ridiculous levels than during the June Cleaver era. Most women know that there was a massive public relations campaign during World War II to get women into the workforce, and then one right after the war to get them to go back to the kitchen. But we haven't fully focused on the fact that another, more subtle, sometimes unintentional, more long-term propaganda campaign began in the 1980s to redomesticate the women of America through motherhood.<sup>13</sup> Why aren't all the mothers of America leaning out their windows yelling "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore"?

So the real question is how did the new momism—especially in the wake of the women's movement—become part of our national common sense? Why have mothers—who have entered the workforce in droves at exactly the same time that intensive mothering conquered notions of parenting—bought into it? Are there millions of us who conform to the ideals of the new momism on the outside, while also harboring powerful desires for rebellion that simply can't be satisfied by a ten-minute aromatherapy soak in the bathtub?

There are several reasons why the new momism—talk about the wrong idea for the wrong time—triumphed when it did. Baby boom women who, in the 1970s, sought to enter schools and jobs previously reserved for men knew they couldn't be just as good as the guys—they had to be better, in part to dispel the myths that women were too stupid, irrational, hysterical, weak, flighty, or unpredictable during "that time of the month" to manage a business, report the news, wear a stethoscope, or sell real estate. Being an overachiever simply went with the terrain of breaking down barriers, so it wouldn't be surprising to find these women bringing that same determination to motherhood. And some of us did get smacked around as kids, or had parents who crushed our confidence, and we did want to do a better job than that. One brick in the wall of the new momism.

Many women, who had started working in the 1970s and postponed having children, decided in the 1980s to have kids. Thus, this was a totally excellent time for the federal government to insist that it was way too expensive to support any programs for families and children (like maternity leave or subsidized, high-quality day care or even decent public schools) because then the U.S. couldn't afford that \$320 billion appropriation to the Pentagon, which included money for those \$1600 coffee makers and \$600 toilet seats the military needed so badly in 1984.<sup>14</sup> (Imagine where we'd be today if the government had launched the equivalent of the G.I. bill for mothers in the 1980s!) Parents of baby boomers had seen money flow into America's schools because of the Sputnik scare that the Russkies were way ahead of the U.S. in science and technology; thus the sudden need to reacquaint American kids with a slide rule. Parents in the 1980s saw public schools hemorrhaging money. So the very institutions our mothers had been able to count on now needed massive CPR, while the prospect of any new ones was, we were told, out of the question. Guess who had to take up the slack? Another brick in the wall of the new momism.

The right wing of the Republican party—which controlled the White House from 1980 to 1992, crucial years in the evolution of motherhood—hated the women's movement and believed all women, with the possible exception of Phyllis Schlafly, should remain in the kitchen on their knees polishing their husband's shoes and golf clubs while teaching their kids that Darwin was a very bad man. (Unless the mothers were poor and black—those moms had to get back to work ASAP, because by staying home they were wrecking the country. But more on that later.) We saw, in the 1980s and beyond, the rise of what the historian Ruth Feldstein has called "mother-blaming," attacks on mothers for failing to raise physically and psychologically fit future citizens.<sup>15</sup> See, no one, not even Ronald Reagan, said explicitly to us, "The future and the destiny of the nation are in your hands, oh mothers of America. And you are screwing up." But that's what he meant. Because not only are mothers supposed to reproduce the nation biologically, we're also supposed to regenerate it culturally and morally. Even after the women's movement, mothers were still expected to be the primary socializers of children.<sup>16</sup> Not only were our individual kids' well-being our responsibility, but also the entire fate of the nation supposedly rested on our padded and milk-splotched shoulders. So women's own desires to be good parents, their realization that they now

had to make up for collapsing institutions, and all that guilt-tripping about “family values” added many more bricks to the wall.

But we are especially interested in the role that the mass media played, often inadvertently, and often, mind you, in the name of *helping* mothers—in making the new momism a taken-for-granted, natural standard of how women should imagine their lives, conceive of fulfillment, arrange their priorities, and raise their kids. After all, the media have been and are the major dispenser of the ideals and norms surrounding motherhood: Millions of us have gone to the media for nuts-and-bolts child-rearing advice. Many of us, in fact, preferred media advice to the advice our mothers gave us. We didn’t want to be like our mothers and many of us didn’t want to raise our kids the way they raised us (although it turns out they did a pretty good job in the end).

Thus, beginning in the mid-1970s, working mothers became the most important thing you can become in the United States: a market. And they became a market just as niche marketing was exploding—the rise of cable channels, magazines like *Working Mother*, *Family Life*, *Child*, and *Twins*, all supported by advertisements geared specifically to the new, modern mother. Increased emphasis on child safety, from car seats to bicycle helmets, increased concerns about Johnny not being able to read, the recognition that mothers bought cars, watched the news, and maybe didn’t want to tune into one TV show after the next about male detectives with a cockatoo or some other dumbass mascot saving hapless women—all contributed to new shows, ad campaigns, magazines, and TV news stories geared to mothers, especially affluent, upscale ones. Because of this sheer increase in output and target marketing, mothers were bombarded as never before by media constructions of the good mother. The good mother bought all this stuff to stimulate, protect, educate, and indulge her kids. She had to assemble it, install it, use it with her child, and protect her child from some of its features. As all this media fare sought to advise mothers, flatter them, warn them and, above all, sell to them, they collaborated in constructing, magnifying, and reinforcing the new momism.

Here’s the rub about the new momism. It began to conquer our psyches just as mothers entered the workforce in record numbers, so those of us who work (and those of us who don’t) are pulled between two rather powerful and contradictory cultural riptides: Be more doting and self-sacrificing at home than Bambi’s mother, yet more achievement-oriented at work than Madeleine Albright.<sup>17</sup> The other set of values that took hold

beginning in the 1980s was “free-market ideology”: the notion that competition in “the marketplace” (which supposedly had the foresight and wisdom of Buddha) provided the best solutions to all social, political, and economic problems. So on the job we were—and are—supposed to be highly efficient, calculating, tough, judgmental and skeptical, competitive, and willing to do what it takes to promote ourselves, our organization, and beat out the other guys. Many work environments in the 1980s and ’90s emphasized increased productivity and piled on more work, kids or no kids, because that’s what “the market” demanded. Television shows offered us role models of the kind of tough broads who succeeded in this environment, from the unsmiling, take-no-prisoners DA Joyce Davenport on *Hill Street Blues* to Judge Judy and the no-nonsense police lieutenant Anita Van Buren on *Law & Order*. So the competitive go-getter at work had to walk through the door at the end of the day and, poof, turn into Carol Brady: selfless doormat at home. No wonder some of us feel like Sybil when we get home: We have to move between these riptides on a daily basis. And, in fact, many of us want to be both women: successful at work, successful as mothers.

Now, here’s the real beauty of this contorting contradiction. Both working mothers *and* stay-at-home mothers get to be failures. The ethos of intensive mothering has lower status in our culture (“stay-at-home mothers are boring”), but occupies a higher moral ground (“working mothers are neglectful”).<sup>18</sup> So, welcome to the latest media catfight: the supposed war between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. Why analyze all the ways in which our country has failed to support families while inflating the work ethic to the size of the *Hindenburg* when you can, instead, project this paradox onto what the media have come to call, incessantly, “the mommy wars”?<sup>19</sup> The “mommy wars” puts mothers into two, mutually exclusive categories—working mother versus stay-at-home mother, and never the twain shall meet. It goes without saying that they allegedly hate each other’s guts. In real life, millions of mothers move between these two categories, have been one and then the other at various different times, creating a mosaic of work and child-rearing practices that bears no resemblance to the supposed ironclad roles suggested by the “mommy wars.”<sup>19</sup> Not only does this media catfight pit mother against mother, but it suggests that all women be reduced to their one role—mother—or get cut out of the picture entirely.

At the same time that the new momism conquered the media outlets of

America, we also saw mothers who talked back. *Maude*, Ann Romano on *One Day at a Time*, Erma Bombeck, Peg Bundy, *Roseanne*, Brett Butler, Marge Simpson, and the mothers in *Malcolm in the Middle* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* have all given the new momism a big Bronx cheer. They have represented rebellious mothering: the notion that you can still love your kids and be a good mother without teaching them Origami, explaining factor analysis to them during bath time, playing softball with them at six A.M., or making sure they have a funny, loving note in their lunch box each and every day. Since 1970, because of money and politics, the new momism has conquered much of the media, and thus our own self-esteem. But it has not done so uncontested. The same media that sell and profit from the new momism have also given us permission—even encouraged us—to resist it. However, it is important to note that much of this rebellion has occurred in TV sitcoms which, with a few exceptions, offer primarily short-term catharsis, a brief respite from the norms in dramatic programming, the news, and advice columns that bully us so effectively.

Okay, so men and kids—well, some kids, anyway—benefit from the new momism. But what do mothers get out of it besides eyebags, exhaustion, and guilt? Well, because of how women have been socialized, a lot of us think the competitive, everything-has-a-price mindset of the workaday world is crass, impersonal, and callous. Many of us, then, want our homes to embody a rejection of a world that celebrates money and screwing over other people, in part because we know all too well how that world has screwed over women and children. So, it's not surprising that many women are seduced by ads, catalogs, and TV shows that urge us to turn our homes into softly lit, plug-in scented, flower-filled havens in a heartless world. The new momism keeps us down by demanding so much of us, but keeps us morally superior because through it we defy a society so driven by greed and self-interest.<sup>20</sup> Plus, many of us, having left a child home in the care of a man to return to find the kid eating Slim Jims and marshmallows for dinner, and the floor covered with spilled Coke, dirty socks, and guinea pig excrement, have concluded that men can't do it, so we shut them out and do it ourselves. We resent men for not helping us more, but also bask in the smugness that at least here, in this one role, we can claim superiority. So through the new momism women acquiesce to *and* resist good, old-fashioned sexist notions of how the world should work.

There are already bleacher loads of very good, even excellent books attacking the unattainable ideals surrounding motherhood, and we will rely on many of them here.<sup>21</sup> But while many of these books expose and rail against the cultural myths mothers have had to combat—putting your child in day care proves you are a selfish, careerist bitch, if you don't bond with your baby immediately after birth you'll have Ted Kaczynski on your hands, and so forth—they have not examined in detail, and over time, the enormous role the mass media have played in promulgating and exaggerating these myths.

We want to fill this gap, to examine how the images of motherhood in TV shows, movies, advertising, women's magazines, and the news have evolved since 1970, raising the bar, year by year, of the standards of good motherhood while singling out and condemning those we were supposed to see as dreadful mothers. We want to explore the struggle in the media between intensive mothering and rebellious mothering, and consider how it has helped make mothers today who we are. This imagery may have been fleeting, and it may have been banal, but it told common, interlocking stories that, over the years, evolved into a new "common sense" we were all supposed to share about motherhood, good and bad. This imagery has also provided us with a shared cultural history of becoming mothers in the United States, yet we may not appreciate the extent to which this common history has shaped our identities, our sense of success and failure as mothers, and the extent to which it ties us together through mutual collective memories. So instead of dismissing these media images as short-lived (and sometimes even stupid), let's review how they have laid down a thick, sedimented layer of guilt, fear, and anxiety as well as an increasingly powerful urge to talk back.

We've chosen to start roughly around 1970, for several reasons. This was when the women's movement burst onto the political scene as one of the biggest news stories of the year, and one of the central tenets of the movement was to critique how existing models of marriage and motherhood trapped millions of women in lives they found frustrating and in economic arrangements that were deeply unfair. At the same time, the soaring divorce rate was producing an unprecedented number of single-parent households, 90 percent of them headed by women. The "stagflation" of the 1970s—roaring inflation combined with rising unemployment (which Gerald Ford cleverly sought to combat by distributing "Whip Inflation Now" buttons to the citizenry)—also propelled millions

of mothers into the workforce. In 1970, only 28.5 percent of children under age six had a mother working outside the home. By 1988, the figure had jumped to 51.5 percent. Nor was the idea of having children then as surrounded by the occluding, spun-sugar romance that encases it today. In a widely reported survey done by Ann Landers of fifty thousand parents in the mid-1970s, a rather mammoth 70 percent said that if given the choice to do it again, they would not have children; it wasn't worth it.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1970s and later, it was clear that the media would have to respond to this crisis in the 1950s common sense about motherhood. After all, some women (and men) welcomed these changes while others hated them. In fact, in the 1970s various TV shows, women's magazines, and movies incorporated the feminist challenge to motherhood in their wise-cracking mothers and tales of self-discovery. Yet by the 1980s, the media began to backtrack. The result? An ever-expanding, thundering media avalanche of anxiety about the state of motherhood in America.

To give you an idea, let's look briefly at the news, which has played a much more central role in policing the boundaries of motherhood than you might think. Few books have reviewed the enormously influential role the nightly news played in shaping national norms about motherhood—revisiting *Good Housekeeping* or *The Cosby Show* makes sense, but the news? Yet it is in the news that we can track especially well the trajectory of the new momism. Most people don't get (or want) to look at old news footage, but we looked at thirty years of stories relating to motherhood. In the 1970s, with the exception of various welfare reform proposals, there was almost nothing in the network news about motherhood, working mothers, or childcare. And when you go back and watch news footage from 1972, for example, all you see is John Chancellor at NBC in black and white reading the news with no illustrating graphics, or Walter Cronkite sitting in front of a map of the world that one of the Rugrats could have drawn—that's it.

But by the 1980s, the explosion in the number of working mothers, the desperate need for day care, sci-fi level reproductive technologies, the discovery of how widespread child abuse was—all this was newsworthy. At the same time, the network news shows were becoming more flashy and sensationalistic in their efforts to compete with tabloid TV offerings like *A Current Affair* and *America's Most Wanted*.<sup>23</sup> NBC, for example, introduced a story about day care centers in 1984 with a beat-up Raggedy Ann doll lying limp next to a chair with the huge words *Child Abuse*



scrawled next to her in what appeared to be Charles Manson's handwriting. So stories that were titillating, that could be really tarted up, that were about children and sex, or children and violence—well, they just got more coverage than why Senator Rope-a-Dope refused to vote for decent day care. From the McMartin day-care scandal and missing children to Susan Smith and murdering nannies, the barrage of kids-in-jeopardy, “innocence corrupted” stories made mothers feel they had to guard their kids with the same intensity as the secret service guys watching POTUS.

Having discovered in the summer of 2001 that one missing Congressional intern and some shark attacks could fill the twenty-four-hour news hole, the cable channels the following year gave us the summer of abducted girls (rather than, say, in-depth probes of widespread corporate wrongdoing that robbed millions of people of millions of dollars). Even though FBI figures showed a *decline* in missing persons and child abductions, such stories were, as *Newsweek*'s Jonathan Alter put it, “inexpensive” and got “boffo ratings.”<sup>24</sup> It goes without saying that such crimes are horrific and, understandably, bereft parents wanted to use the media to help locate their kidnapped children. But the incessant coverage of the abductions of Samantha Runnion (whose mother, the media repeatedly reminded us, was at work), Elizabeth Smart, Tamara Brooks, Jacqueline Marris, and Danielle van Dam terrified parents across the country all out of proportion to the risks their children faced. (To put things in perspective, in a country of nearly three hundred million people, estimates were that only 115 children were taken by strangers in ways that were dangerous to the child.)<sup>25</sup> Unlike mothers in the 1950s, then, we were never to let our children out of our sight at carnivals, shopping malls, or playgrounds, and it was up to us to protect them from failing schools, environmental pollution, molesters, drugs, priests, Alar, the Internet, amusement parks, air bags, jungle gyms, *South Park*, trampolines, rottweilers, gangs, and HBO specials about lap dancers and masturbation clubs. It's a wonder any women had children and, once they did, ever let them out of their sight.

Then there were the magazines. Beginning in the 1980s, and exploding with a vengeance in the '90s, celebrity journalism brought us a feature that spread like head lice through the women's magazines, as well as the more recent celebrity and “lifestyle” glossies: the celebrity mom profile. If any media form has played a central role in convincing young women without children that having a baby is akin to ascending to heaven and

seeing God, it is the celebrity mom profile. "Happiness is having a baby," gushed Marie Osmond on a 1983 cover of *Good Housekeeping*, and Linda Evans, at the peak of her success in *Dynasty*, added in *Ladies Home Journal*, "All I want is a husband and baby." Barbara Mandrell proclaimed, "Now my children come first," Valerie Harper confessed, "I finally have a child to love," and Cybill Shepard announced, "I'll have a fourth baby or adopt!"<sup>26</sup> Assaulting us from every supermarket checkout line and doctor's and dentist's offices, celebrity moms like Kathie Lee Gifford, Joan Lunden, Jaclyn Smith, Kirstie Alley, and Christie Brinkley (to name just a few) beamed from the comfy serenity and perfection of their lives as they gave multiple interviews about their "miracle babies," how much they loved their kids, what an unadulterated joy motherhood was, and about all the things they did with their kids to ensure they would be perfectly normal Nobel laureates by the age of twelve. By the summer of 1999, one of *People's* biggest summer stories, featuring the huge cover headlines "BOY, OH BOY," was the birth of Cindy Crawford's baby. The following summer, under the headline "PREGNANT AT LAST!" we had the pleasure of reading about the sperm motility rate of Celine Dion's husband, information that some of us, at least, could have lived without. In 2003 Angelina Jolie claimed that her adopted baby "saved my life." The media message was that celebrity moms work on the set for twelve hours a day, yet somehow manage to do somersaults with their kids in the park, read to them every day, take them out for ice cream whenever they wanted, get up with them at 3:00 A.M., and, of course, buy them toys, animals, and furniture previously reserved for the offspring of the Shah of Iran. These were supposed to be our new role models.

In the women's magazines in the early 1970s, advertising focused on the mother and her alleged needs—whether for hand cream, hair dye, toilet cleaners, or tampons.<sup>27</sup> Anacin, for example, announced "Mother of 5 Active Children Tells How She Relieves Her Nervous Tension Headaches." (Ditch the kids with a sitter and head for Cozumel with Denzel Washington?) Rarely were mothers and children pictured together as some beatific unit. Ads showed mom spraying the kitchen with Lysol, or smiling in a field of daisies because she'd just used a fabulous Clairol product. When babies were pictured, they appeared alone.

But by 1990, images of children were everywhere, and there was a direct address from the ad to you, the mom, exhorting you to foresee your child's each and every need and desire. No doubt copywriters had read Dr.

Spock's latest pronouncement that mothers had to "anticipate wishes which [the baby] can barely recognize let alone formulate."<sup>28</sup> "Giving your kids a well-balanced meal when you're busy is no fun and games. Until now," proclaimed Banquet, a maker of frozen meals for kids. The gleeful face of a cherubic child beamed out from the ad, which informed us that this new "kid cuisine" featured a special "FunPak" with "puzzles and games that help kids learn about history, space exploration, and all kinds of interesting things."<sup>29</sup> Or you could "Help your children get free 'Learning Tools for Schools' with Scott Paper purchases." By saving the special apple seal from Scott paper products, you, Mom, could help your child's school get microscopes, audio/visual equipment, "and more" to "help your children prepare for the environmental and educational challenges of the future."<sup>30</sup> "Put a song in their hearts!" urged Disney as it hawked its sing-along videos, telling moms to "give your kids the magic of music."<sup>31</sup> Mothers learned that "your child will travel in style" with the new carrying case loaded with Legos, which "makes every trip a journey into imagination."<sup>32</sup>

The new momism, then, was also promoted through the toys and myriad other products sold to us and our kids. Coonskin caps and silly putty were just not going to cut it anymore. The good mother got her kids toys that were educational, that advanced gross and fine motor skills, that gave them the spatial sensibilities and design aptitude of Frank Lloyd Wright, and that taught Johnny how to read James Joyce at age three. God forbid that one second should pass where your child was idle and that you were not doing everything you could to promote his or her emotional, cognitive, imaginative, quantitative, or muscular development. And now mothers and children in ads were pictured in poses that made the Virgin Mary in the *pietà* seem neglectful. Dazzling, toothy smiles about to burst into full throaty laughter defined the new, characteristic pose of the truly engaged, empathetic mom as she hugged, held, nursed, and played with her kids, always with joyful spontaneity. The classic image was of a new, beaming mother, holding her baby straight up in the air and over her face, and smiling into its little elevated eyes, cheerfully unaware of the rather common infant behavior such an angle might produce: projectile vomiting.

All these media suggest, by their endless celebrating of certain kinds of mothers and maternal behavior and their ceaseless advice, that there are agreed upon norms "out there." So even if you think they're preposterous, you assume you'll be judged harshly by not abiding by them. In this way

media portrayals can substitute for and override community norms.<sup>33</sup> You know, when our kids say “all the other kids get to do it” we laugh in their faces. But when the magazines suggest, “All the other moms are doing this, are you?” we see ourselves being judged by the toughest critics out there: other mothers. Mothers who had thrown their TV sets out the window could still absorb all this through talks with friends, relatives, other mothers, and, most aggravating of all, their own kids.

At the heart of the new momism is the insistence that mothers inhabit what we in the academy would call the “subject positions” of our children as often as possible. (In the parlance of childcare experts, this means always climbing inside your child and seeing the world only and entirely through his or her eyes.) We like to think of ourselves as coherent and enduring selves, but we are just as much a composite of many, often contradictory identities or subject positions. The media, which bombard us with TV shows, movies, catalogs, ads, and magazines, serve as a kind of Home Depot of personas to draw from and put on, providing a rapid transit system among many identities.<sup>34</sup> “It’s Sunday afternoon—shall I be Cindy Crawford or Joan Crawford?” (The kids pray for the former, and usually get the latter.) Surrounded by media morality tales in which we are meant to identify first with one type of woman and then another, women have gotten used to compartmentalizing ourselves into a host of subject positions, and this is especially true for mothers.

But to crawl inside our kids’ own skin and heads, to anticipate and assume *their* subject positions, too, so we will know exactly how they will feel two hours from now and what they will need to make them feel loved, cherished, bolstered, stimulated—how did we get sucked into *this* one? And to do this we have to appreciate each and every more finely grained stage of child development so that we know exactly where in the kid’s evolution to place ourselves. Yikes.

And have you noticed how we’ve all become “moms”? When we were kids, our mothers would say, “I have to call Christine’s *mother*,” not “I have to call Christine’s mom.” Our mothers would identify themselves to teachers as so-and-so’s *mother*. Today, thanks in part to Dr. Laura (“I am my kid’s mom”) and Republican pollsters (who coined the term “soccer mom” in 1996), we hear about “the moms” getting together and we have become so-and-so’s mom. “Mom”—a term previously used only by children—doesn’t have the authority of “mother,” because it addresses us from a child’s-eye view. It assumes a familiarity, an approachability, to

mothers that is, frankly, patronizing; reminiscent, in fact, of the difference between woman and girl. At the same time, “mom” means you’re good and nurturing while “mother” means you’re not (note the media uses of “celebrity mom” versus “welfare mother” and “stay-at-home mom” versus “working mother”). “Mom” sounds very user-friendly, but the rise of it, too, keeps us in our place, reminding us that we are defined by our relationships to kids, not to adults.

Because the media always serve up heroes and villains, there had to be the terrible mothers, the anti-Madonnas, the hideous counterexamples good mothers were meant to revile. We regret to report that nearly all of these women were African American and were disproportionately featured as failed mothers in news stories about “crack babies,” single, teen mothers, and welfare mothers. One of the worst things about the new momism is that it is like a club, where women without kids, or women deemed “bad” mothers, like poor women and welfare mothers, don’t belong. It is—with a few exceptions, like Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*—a segregated club.

At the very same time that we witnessed the explosion of white celebrity moms, and the outpouring of advice to and surveillance of middle-class mothers, the welfare mother, trapped in a “cycle of dependency,” became ubiquitous in our media landscape, and she came to represent everything wrong with America. She appeared not in the glossy pages of the women’s magazines but rather as the subject of news stories about the “crisis” in the American family and the newly declared “war” on welfare mothers. Whatever ailed America—drugs, crime, loss of productivity—was supposedly her fault. She was portrayed as thumbing her nose at intensive mothering. Even worse, she was depicted as bringing her kids into the realm of market values, as putting a price on their heads, by allegedly calculating how much each additional child was worth and then getting pregnant to cash in on them. For middle-class white women in the media, by contrast, their kids were priceless.<sup>35</sup> These media depictions reinforced the divisions between “us” (minivan moms) and “them” (welfare mothers, working-class mothers, teenage mothers), and did so especially along the lines of race.

For example, one of the most common sentences used to characterize the welfare mother was, “Tanya, who has \_\_\_\_\_ children by \_\_\_\_\_ different men” (you fill in the blanks). Like zoo animals, their lives were re-

duced to the numbers of successful impregnations by multiple partners. So it's interesting to note that someone like Christie Brinkley, who has exactly the same reproductive MO, was never described this way. Just imagine reading a comparable sentence in *Redbook*. "Christie B., who has three children by three different men." But she does, you know.

At the same time that middle- and upper-middle-class mothers were urged to pipe Mozart into their wombs when they're pregnant so their kids would come out perfectly tuned, the government told poor mothers to get the hell out of the house and get to work—no more children's aid for them. Mothers like us—with health care, laptops, and Cuisinarts—are supposed to replicate the immaculate bedrooms we see in Pottery Barn Kids catalogs, with their designer sheets and quilts, one toy and one stuffed animal atop a gleaming white dresser, and a white rug on the floor that has never been exposed to the shavings from hamster cages, Magic Markers accidentally dropped with their caps off, or Welch's grape juice. At the same time, we've been encouraged to turn our backs on other mothers who pick their kids' clothes out of other people's trash and sometimes can't buy a can of beans to feed them. How has it come to seem perfectly reasonable—even justified—that one class of mother is supposed to sew her baby's diapers out of Egyptian cotton from that portion of the Nile blessed by the god Osiris while another class of mother can't afford a single baby aspirin?

So who the hell are we, the authors, and what biases might we bring to this tour down motherhood's recent memory lane? Well, we are of a certain vintage—let's just say that if we were bottled in the 1960s, we'd be about to go off right about now. So we have lived through the women's movement and its aftermath, and, between the two of us, have been raising kids from the 1970s to the present. That does not mean we are authorities on child rearing (just ask our kids), but rather that we've seen very different takes on motherhood put forward and fought over, different fads and standards come and go. While neither of our lives comes close to those of Cindy Crawford or Kathie Lee Gifford (no nannies, no personal assistants, no cooks, no trainers, no clothing line named after either one of us, no factories in Paraguay), we are nonetheless privileged women. We live near excellent daycare centers and schools, we have health insurance, and we benefit from the advantages that come automatically with being white and heterosexual. So we have not stood in the shoes of mothers who

don't have live-in partners, health insurance, or decent day care, who live in dangerous neighborhoods and substandard housing, who have to work two crappy jobs so they can feed their kids, or who have faced custody battles simply because they're lesbians. We can hardly speak for all, or even most mothers.

We can, however, replay the dominant media imagery that has surrounded most of us, despite our differences, imagery that serves to divide us by age and race and "lifestyle choices," and seeks to tame us all by reinforcing one narrow, homogenized, upper-middle-class, corporately defined image of motherhood. We speak as mothers who succumb to and defy the new momism. And our main point is this: Media imagery that seems so natural, that seems to embody some common sense, while blaming some mothers, or all mothers, for children and a nation gone wrong, needs to have its veneer of supposed truth ripped away by us, mothers. For example, while there have been "zany" sitcoms about families with "two dads" or a working mom living with her mother and a male housekeeper, the white, upper-middle-class, married-with-children nuclear family remains as dominant as a Humvee, barreling through the media and forcing images of other, different, and just as legitimate family arrangements off to the side. We want to ridicule this ideal—or any other household formation—as *the* norm that should bully those who don't conform. After all, as any mother will point out, the correct ratio of adult-to-kid in any household should be at least three-to-one, a standard the nuclear family fails to meet.

The new momism involves more than just impossible ideals about child rearing. It redefines all women, first and foremost, through their relationships to children. Thus, being a citizen, a worker, a governor, an actress, a First Lady, all are supposed to take a backseat to motherhood. (Remember how people questioned whether Hillary Clinton was truly maternal because she had only one child?) By insisting that being a mother—and a perfect one at that—is the most important thing a woman can do, a prerequisite for being thought of as admirable and noble, the new momism insists that if you want to do anything else, you'd better prove first that you're a doting, totally involved mother before proceeding. This is not a requirement for men. The only recourse for women who want careers, or to do anything else besides stay home with the kids all day, is to prove that they can "do it all." As the feminist writer (and pioneer) Letty Cottin Pogrebin put it, "You can go be a CEO, and a good



one, but if you're not making a themed birthday party, you're not a good mother," and, thus, you are a failure.<sup>36</sup>

The new momism has evolved over the past few decades, becoming more hostile to mothers who work, and more insistent that all mothers become ever more closely tethered to their kids. The mythology of the new momism now insinuates that, when all is said and done, the enlightened mother chooses to stay home with the kids. Back in the 1950s, mothers stayed home because they had no choice, so the thinking goes (even though by 1955 more mothers were working than ever before). Today, having been to the office, having tried a career, women supposedly have seen the inside of the male working world and found it to be the inferior choice to staying home, especially when their kids' future is at stake. It's not that mothers can't hack it (1950s thinking). It's that progressive mothers refuse to hack it. Inexperienced women thought they knew what they wanted, but they got experience and learned they were wrong. Now mothers have seen the error of their ways, and supposedly seen that the June Cleaver model, if taken as a *choice*, as opposed to a requirement, is the truly modern, fulfilling, forward-thinking version of motherhood.

In the 1960s, women, and especially young women, were surrounded by mixed messages, one set telling them that there was a new day dawning, they were now equal to men and could change the world, the other telling them they were destined to be housewives, were subservient to men, and could never achieve equality. Electrified by the civil rights and antiwar movements and their demands for freedom and participatory democracy, women could no longer stand being pulled in opposite directions, and opted for equality. Of course, the contradictions in our lives did not vanish—in the wake of the women's movement we were supposed to be autonomous, independent, accomplished, yet poreless, slim, nurturing, and deferential to men.<sup>37</sup> In the early twenty-first century, we see a mirror image of the 1960s, but without the proud ending: The same contradictions are there, but now the proposed resolution, like a mist in the culture, is for women to give up their autonomy and find peace and fulfillment in raising children.

In other words, ladies, the new momism seeks to contain and, where possible, eradicate, all of the social changes brought on by feminism. It is backlash in its most refined, pernicious form because it insinuates itself into women's psyches just where we have been rendered most vulnerable: in our love for our kids. The new momism, then, is deeply and powerfully

political. The new momism is the result of the combustible intermixing of right-wing attacks on feminism and women, the media's increasingly finely tuned and incessant target marketing of mothers and children, the collapse of governmental institutions—public schools, child welfare programs—that served families in the past (imperfectly, to be sure), and mothers' own, very real desires to do the best job possible raising their kids in a culture that praises mothers in rhetoric and reviles them in public policy.

Plenty of mothers aren't buying this retro version of motherhood, although it works to make them feel very guilty and stressed. They want and need their own paychecks, they want and need adult interaction during the day, they want and need their own independence, and they believe—and rightly so—that women who work outside the home can be and are very good mothers to their kids. Other mothers don't want or need these things for the time being, or ever, and really would rather stay home. The question here is not which path women choose, or which one is "right." The question is why one reactionary, normative ideology, so out of sync with millions of women's lives, seems to be getting the upper hand.

The new momism has become the central, justifying ideology of what has come to be called "postfeminism." Ever since October 1982, when *The New York Times Magazine* featured an article titled "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation," a term was coined, and the women of America have heard, ceaselessly, that we are, and will be forever more, in a postfeminist age.

What the hell is postfeminism, anyway?<sup>37</sup> You would think it would refer to a time when complete gender equality has been achieved (you know, like we'd already achieved a *feminist* state and now we're "post" that). That hasn't happened, of course, but we (and especially young women) are supposed to think it has. Postfeminism, as a term, suggests that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism, but that feminism is now irrelevant and even undesirable because it supposedly made millions of women unhappy, unfeminine, childless, hairy, lonely, bitter, and prompted them to fill their closets with combat boots and really bad India print skirts. Supposedly women have gotten all they could out of feminism, are now "equal," and so can, by choice, embrace things we used to see as sexist, like a TV show in which some self-satisfied lunk samples the wares of twenty-five women before rejecting twenty-four and

keeping the one he likes best, or like the notion that mothers should have primary responsibility for raising the kids. Postfeminism means that you can now work outside the home even in jobs previously restricted to men, go to graduate school, pump iron, and pump your own gas, as long as you remain fashion conscious, slim, nurturing, deferential to men, and become a doting, selfless mother.

According to postfeminism, women now have a choice between feminism and antifeminism and they just naturally and happily choose the latter. And the most powerful way that postfeminism worked to try to redomesticate women was through the new momism. Here's the progression. Feminism won; you can have it all; of course you want children; mothers are better at raising children than fathers; of course your children come first; of course you come last; today's children need constant attention, cultivation, and adoration, or they'll become failures and hate you forever; you don't want to fail at that; it's easier for mothers to abandon their work and their dreams than for fathers; you don't want it all anymore (which is good because you can't have it all); who cares about equality, you're too tired; and whoops—here we are in 1954.

Each of us, of course, has her own individual history as a mother, her own demons and satisfactions, her own failures and goals. But motherhood is, in our culture, emphasized as such an individual achievement, something you and you alone excel at or screw up. So it's easy to forget that motherhood *is* a collective experience. We want to erase the amnesia about motherhood—we *do* have a common history, it does tie us together, and it has made us simultaneously guilt-ridden and ready for an uprising. Let's turn the surveillance cameras away from ourselves and instead turn them on the media that shaped us and that manufactured more of our beliefs and practices than we may appreciate, or want to admit.

Especially troubling about all this media fare is the rise of even more impossible standards of motherhood today than those that tyrannized us in the past. For women in their twenties and thirties, the hypernatality of the media promotes impossibly idealized expectations about motherhood (and fatherhood!) that may prove depressingly disappointing once junior arrives and starts throwing mashed beets on the wall. Peggy Orenstein reported in her 2000 book *Flux* that by the 1990s, "motherhood supplanted marriage as the source of romantic daydreams" for childless, unmarried women in their twenties and early to mid-thirties. To put it another way, "Motherhood has become increasingly central to women's conception of

femininity, far more so than marriage.” The women she talked to “believed children would answer basic existential questions of meaning” and would “provide a kind of unconditional love that relationships with men did not.” They over-idealized motherhood and bought into the norm of “the Perfect Mother—the woman for whom childbearing supersedes all other identities and satisfactions.”<sup>38</sup> A new generation of young women, for whom the feminine mystique is ancient history, and who haven’t experienced what it took for women to fight their way out of the kitchen, may be especially seduced by media profiles suggesting that if Reese Witherspoon can marry young and become an A-list actress while raising a three-year-old and expecting another child, then you can “do it all” too. Just as Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, and Camryn Manheim sought to get women to say “excuuuse me” to the size-zero ideal, we would like women to just say no to the new momism.

Finally, this book is a call to arms. With so many smart, hard-working, dedicated, tenacious, fed-up women out there, can’t we all do a better job of talking back to the media that hector us all the time? As we get assaulted by “15 Ways to Stress Proof Your Child,” “Boost Your Kid’s Brainpower in Just 25 Minutes,” “Discipline Makeover: Better Behavior in 21 Days,” and “What It Really Takes to Make Your Baby Smarter,” not to mention “The Sex Life You Always Wanted—How to Have it *Now*” (answer: put the kids up for adoption), let’s develop, together, some really good comebacks. And let’s also take a second look at these “wars” we’re supposed to be involved with: the “war” against welfare mothers, the “war” between working versus stay-at-home mothers. While these wars do often benefit one set of mothers over another, what they do best is stage *all* mothers’ struggles, in the face of the most pathetic public policies for women and children in the western world, as a catfight. Then the politicians who’ve failed to give us decent day care or maternity leave can go off and sip their sherry while mothers point fingers at each other. Our collective dilemmas as mothers are always translated into individual issues that each of us has to confront by herself, alone, with zero help. These media frameworks that celebrate the rugged individualism of mothers, then, justify and reinforce public policies (or lack thereof) that make it harder to be a mother in the United States than in any other industrialized society.

As mothers, we appreciate all too well how much time and attention children need and deserve, and how deeply committed we become to our kids. We can be made to cry at the drop of a hat by a Hallmark commer-

cial or a homemade Mother's Day card. We get roped into the new momism because we do feel that our society is not providing our kids with what they need. But the problem with the new momism is that it insists that there is one and only one way the children of America will get what they need: if mom provides it. If dad "pitches in," well, that's just an extra bonus. The government? Forget it.

We fear that, today, we have a new common sense about motherhood that may be as bad, or worse, as the one that chained mothers to their Maytags in 1957. It wasn't always like this. There was a time in the now distant past when there was something called the Women's Liberation Movement. They are the folks who brought you "the personal is political." Enough lies have been told by Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh, and others about what feminists said about motherhood and children to fill a Brazilian landfill center. But when we exhume what feminists really hoped to change about motherhood, hopes buried under a slag heap of cultural amnesia and backlash, the rise of the new momism seems like the very last set of norms you would predict would conquer motherhood in America in the early twenty-first century. Let's go back to a time when many women felt free to tell the truth about motherhood—e.g., that at times they felt ambivalent about it because it was so hard and yet so undervalued—and when women sought to redefine how children were raised so that it wasn't only women who pushed strollers, played Uncle Wiggly, or quit their jobs once kids arrived. Of course these women loved their kids. But were they supposed to give up everything for them? Are we?

Anyhow, the next time you read about Sarah Jessica Parker's perfect marriage and motherhood, don't sigh and say, "Oh, I wish that was my life." Instead, say, "Give me a break." (Or, alternatively, "Give me a %\$#\$% break." Of course, most of you probably already say that.) Because, you know, if we all refuse to be whipsawed between these age-old madonna-whore poles of perfect and failed motherhood, designed to police us all, then we—all of us—get a break. And that, as you shall shortly see, was what feminists were asking for in the first place.