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Treating Motherhood As A Job, Like Any Other

Pamela Ryckman

Forging real friendships with other mothers

I'm about to have dinner with a friend who wants children. We used to work together and, until I got pregnant four years ago, Valerie and I were a pair well-versed in slinking past velvet ropes and landing reservations at downtown hot spots. But on this night, she's dragged herself uptown to my local bistro on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where the crowd is an easy blend of preppy bankers and bejeweled geriatrics. As Valerie teeters in on three-inch stilettos, I wave to her before adjusting my breast pad. Nine months into nursing my second child, I can still spontaneously spring a leak.

"How do you do it?" Valerie asks, and instantly I understand her question. She is not wondering why I left my fourteen-hour-a-day career or relinquished my ability to fly to Morocco on a whim. She's not asking how I snuggle and coo, or how I wipe spit-up and change diapers.

What she's really asking is how I endure the torrent of Bugaboo-pushing women who have, she believes, nothing going on. Valerie wants to have children, and she knows these mothers have more responsibilities and less time than single career girls. But, she laments, "All they talk about is their husbands and babies. Even the moms who work!" As a result, Valerie has come looking for reassurance that she won't be bored to tears by her new parental peer group, that she'll remain three-dimensional amidst the cardboard cut-outs.

And this is when I reveal my admittedly cynical survival strategy: I treat motherhood as a job, like any other.

If tomorrow I were hired to begin work at a new office, I would do my best to develop a functional, friendly rapport with colleagues. I would concentrate on my assignments, prove myself to be a diligent employee, and try to be open to advice and constructive criticism. And while I would welcome any friendships that developed organically over time, I would never expect to meet my closest confidantes, at this stage of life, on the job.

So why do we assume that becoming a mother requires a do-over in terms of friendship?

When I say that motherhood is a job, I do not mean my relationship with my boys, which is more intense than any I have ever known. It is not work to love and be loved by my babies. Rather, I am referring to the managerial and administrative tasks required to ensure that my

children are socialized. To find the most nurturing teacher or soccer coach, I seek counsel from moms. Just as only an experienced mentor can help navigate the politics of an unfamiliar company, only another mother can offer this type of guidance.

After I gave birth, I went hunting for "mommy friends." Three months post-partum and stir crazy, I dabbed concealer under my eyes and dashed to a music class my newborn would never appreciate, with the solitary goal of connecting with women in my situation. I wanted someone to tell me that baby acne was normal, that I would recover from mastitis, that my marriage would survive. In this new vocation of motherhood, my childless friends couldn't help me. I needed insight from insiders, consolation from contemporaries, and training from professionals who had honed their skills on-the-job. I needed other mothers.

But somehow I confused this desire for a community with a requirement for true friendship - the kind based on inherent interests and shared humor - and I was disappointed when I failed to find it. As we mothers became less sleep-deprived and more confident, it was clear that we didn't have much in common apart from same-age children. Though we'd shared so many intimacies in the early days (How long did it take to heal? Did sex feel the same?), when we began again to assert ourselves as women separate from our babies, we didn't necessarily click. Was the sorority a sham?

Frequently I am told by older matriarchs that their best friends are the gals they met as new mothers. Yet these women were having children in their twenties and defining their identities in the process. For my generation the process has changed; many women now test their mettle in the workplace, and children often come long after we've figured out who we are as individuals. Our alliances are firmly established, and we're not looking for replacements just because we've given birth. By the time baby arrives, it can feel like our dance card is full.

Still, it seems like a good idea - for our children's sake, at least - to meet new couples, to socialize within our same demographic. "How do we become close to people now?" my husband Bill asks after a particularly onerous cocktail party. We are encountering people at a time when too much is at stake. We want other families to like our family. We are a reflection on our spouses and children, and we are on our best behavior. In the past we would have stayed for one more drink, and someone would have said something silly or off-color or controversial, but honest. Now we graciously excuse ourselves; we told the babysitter we'd be home by eleven, or ten. We are guarded. We are so damn boring.

Or perhaps we're just tired. "Another polite meal?" Bill winces. It's too much work. Yet isn't that how we should be viewing these events? Like mandatory client dinners, they grease the wheels.

So when Valerie presses me about mothers' tunnel vision, I turn the question back on her: "Your co-workers spend hours discussing fiction and philosophy?" Culture might sneak its way into the conversation, but it's more likely they talk about work. This was definitely true when Valerie and I worked on Wall Street. That didn't mean we weren't well-rounded people; we simply had alternate outlets for our pastimes. Likewise, in my new "profession" of motherhood, I've decided it's okay to talk primarily about children with my mommy-colleagues. Such chatter may appear inane to an outsider, but it gets the job done. By staying informed and on point, I learn how to raise happy children who, I hope, will develop their own deep friendships. I don't need friends; I already have friends.

Paradoxically, my most important, all-consuming job, the one to which I

willingly dedicate my life, is the one that least unites me with my peers. In my previous positions, I was hired for my skills and personality. Rigorous interviews helped ensure I fit with firm culture, and like-minded associates filled adjacent cubicles. No such screening process exists for mothers.

I am not accusing my fellow moms of being vapid, but I am saying that much of our interaction is. Nearly four years into parenting, I still don't really know the women with whom I spend so much time. When we're together, our kids are pulling at us or running off, and we're distracted. Just as we begin a substantive conversation, a toddler has a temper tantrum and we need to leave.

Often the women I like best are the hardest to catch. The interests and pursuits that make them attractive as friends also, ironically, make them inaccessible. They're busy. Had we met at work or prior to motherhood, they may have become my support system; as kindred spirits, we would have sought each other out, as Valerie and I did. But now emotional resources are limited, and we simply cannot prioritize the sisterhood.

In the end, my struggle to forge bonds has inadvertently provided what I really need - an assembly of compatible, low-maintenance acquaintances. We mothers use each other; we call not to share our inner demons and secret dreams, but to schedule play dates and inquire about pediatricians. Our connections are tenuous and expendable, the bi-product of a same-time-same-place-same-nap-schedule lifestyle. We are "human resources," and right now, that's all we can give. I'll feel lucky if I emerge from the infant/toddler trenches with even a few solid comrades.

My friend Anna - one of the keepers - just called to say she's moving to the suburbs. "I've spent the past four years helping at school and church, going to dinners, building this community. And it just struck me that I could be gone tomorrow and forgotten in two weeks," she said. "It's like a corporation - you think it's everything, and then you leave or get laid off and the people you spent all this time with just fall away."

She's right. On one hand it's depressing to think of the countless hours passed with throw-away companions. But it's also liberating to stop expecting so much of other moms.

Motherhood has taught me to keep my old friends - even the childless ones - close. The ladies I've known for years may not believe the myth of my perfect present, but they know my checkered past. And when the time is right, they'll tell my children how I climbed a glacier, or ate termites in the jungle, or shot jelly beans from my nostrils, or ran naked in the snow. They may mention that sometimes I drank too much, or fell hard for an unsuitable man.

They will never extol my virtues as a church volunteer or PTA president. They may not know the remedy for diaper rash, but they will always know the woman inside this mother.

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