

The Motherhood Study

Fresh Insights on Mothers' Attitudes and Concerns

Executive Summary

MOTHERS, MOTHERHOOD, AND MOTHERING long have been the subjects of academic and popular writing and discussion, but the voices of mothers from different walks of life have been noticeably missing from the national conversation. *The Motherhood Study* aimed to change that by going directly to mothers across the United States and hearing what they had to say about their attitudes, values, concerns, and needs.

A rigorous large-scale investigation led by a team of social science researchers, *The Motherhood Study* featured a survey of more than 2,000 mothers, a nationally representative sample reflecting the demographics of the total U.S. population of mothers 18 and older with at least one child under the age of 18. That quantitative analysis was complemented by in-depth interviews and focus groups to provide more detail about the experiences of mothers.

The study was designed to enrich the public dialogue by creating a vehicle for mothers of diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds — and varied life circumstances regarding family structure and employment — to express their beliefs and concerns about mothering and their thoughts about social change. What emerged was a complex and often surprising picture of mothers and mothering in the United States five years into the twenty-first century.

The findings of this study paint a picture in sharp contrast to the portrait of U.S. mothers in much of the public dialogue today — and point to elements of a mothers' agenda for social change.

Three issues identified in the key findings seem to be particularly salient for mothers — and ripe for immediate action:

1. The majority of mothers in the study place a high priority on reducing family violence and promoting healthy marriages;
2. They would like more attention paid to the matter of financial security for mothers; and
3. They want to be employed, but in positions that demand less of their time. They want more time to spend with their children and on personal and family relationships.

Mothers also assigned high priority to improving parenting skills, improving the quality and affordability of childcare, enabling fathers to spend more time with their children, making the media more appropriate for children and families, creating more connected neighborhoods for children, and enabling more mothers to breast-feed their children.

Key Findings

What Mothers Say about their Lives

- **Whatever their backgrounds, wherever they live, whatever their life circumstances, mothers today have much in common.** Regardless of age, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, geography, or employment status, mothers agree to a very large extent in their perceptions of the importance of mothering, the satisfactions they derive from their lives as mothers, their concerns about the negative forces that threaten their children, and their wishes for a culture that would make the work of mothering less challenging. There was no significant evidence in this study to support what media sometimes refer to as the “mommy wars,” supposed tensions between mothers who are employed in the workforce and those who are not.
- **In contrast to much of the popular discourse that typically emphasizes the stress and strain of motherhood, mothers reported strikingly high levels of satisfaction with their lives as mothers.** This was true when we asked about overall satisfaction with life as a mother, with nearly 81% of respondents agreeing that they are “very” satisfied and 16% saying they are “somewhat” satisfied. And it was true when we asked mothers about their satisfaction with specific aspects of their lives, including the degree of responsibility they have for children, the emotional support they receive from others, and their childcare arrangements (for those whose children are in childcare). Although levels of satisfaction appear to increase with income and education — and to be higher for married mothers and those with high levels of religious involvement — satisfaction was generally high for mothers across the entire sample. Certainly mothers also expressed many concerns for themselves and for their children. Their lives are not without stress, and they see serious problems with the culture in which their children are growing up. However, these concerns are not mothers’ primary focus when they are asked about their satisfaction with their lives as mothers. In qualitative interviews, women nearly always tied their satisfaction with life as a mother to the unique satisfactions of *being* a mother and to how their children are doing.
- **Mothers’ passion is strong for their children and for mothering — a job most mothers see as unique and extraordinarily important.** At the core of mothers’ powerful feelings appears to be a new and intense kind of love women experience when they become mothers. More than 93% of mothers responding to our survey said the love they feel for their children is unlike any other love they have experienced. Nearly 93% agreed that a mother’s contribution to the care of her children is so unique that no one else can replace it. And nearly 81% of mothers said mothering is the most important thing they do. Mothers’ sense of responsibility for the

well-being of children in general also seems strong. More than 92% of the mothers we surveyed agreed with the statement, “After becoming a mother, I found myself caring more about the well-being of all children, not just my own.” And 79% said that mothers are more responsible than other adults for children in general. Almost 88% of mothers surveyed said they believe society expects more from mothers than anyone else, and they see both good and bad in that expectation.

- **Most mothers surveyed have primary responsibility for the day-to-day upbringing of children.** Nearly 44% said they alone have primary responsibility for their children’s day-to-day upbringing, while about 49% share responsibility with their spouse or partner. Of those who share responsibility with someone (not necessarily their spouse or partner), about 66% reported that they provide more than 50% of the daily care.
- **Marriage is associated with a range of positive findings for the mothers surveyed, including economic status and satisfaction with life as a mother.** For example, about 16% of married mothers reported annual family incomes less than \$40,000, compared to 35% of mothers living with a partner and 73% of mothers who were unmarried and not living with a partner. Eighty-eight percent of married mothers said they were “very” satisfied with their lives as mothers, compared to 80% of cohabiting mothers and 62% of single mothers. The study also showed that 81% of married mothers said they are “very” satisfied with their relationships with their spouses, compared to 69% of mothers who were unmarried but living with a partner.
- **Mothers most often named their spouse or partner as their primary source of emotional support (48%).** Among married mothers that figure was 68%; among mothers living with a partner it was 52%; and among mothers who were unmarried and not living with a partner it was nine percent. Among the total sample, 20% named their own mother as their primary source of support, while 10% identified friends. For the sample as a whole, most mothers (83%) expressed satisfaction with the emotional support they receive, with 48% saying they are “very” satisfied.

What Mothers Would Change in their Personal Lives

- **Although nearly all mothers express satisfaction with their lives as mothers, fewer said they receive external validation as mothers.** Fewer than half of the mothers (48%) reported feeling appreciated most of the time and nearly one in five (19%) said they have felt less valued by society since becoming mothers. In qualitative interviews and focus groups, mothers called for greater appreciation

and recognition of the importance of caregiving — within families, communities, and the society as a whole.

- **Mothers want more time to spend on personal and family relationships, with almost 61% “strongly” agreeing and 22% “somewhat” agreeing with that statement.** Mothers who are neither married nor living with a partner are even more likely to express that wish (79% “strongly” agreeing, compared with 55% of married and 60% of mothers living with a partner). This is not surprising given that single mothers carry more responsibility for childrearing and financial support of the family and, in general, are more strapped for time.
- **Mothers are nearly evenly split as to whether they want the father of their children more actively involved in their upbringing.** Mothers with lower incomes and fewer years of education are more likely to say they want greater father involvement. They also are less likely to be married, and they bear much more responsibility for both the day-to-day care of the children and the financial support of the family, so it is not surprising they would call for more father involvement.
- **There is a striking gap between mothers’ current work status and their ideal work arrangement.** Currently more than 41% of the mothers we studied work full-time. However, only about 16% of mothers across the entire sample said they would prefer full-time work if they could choose their ideal work situation. One in three mothers said they would prefer to work part-time and about 30% said they would prefer to work for pay from home. Overall, a majority of mothers would prefer to be employed — but in positions that do not demand so much of their time.

What Mothers Would Change about Society

- **More than half of the mothers surveyed think that society as a whole is not doing a good job of meeting the needs of mothers, children, and families.**
- **Mothers seem to hold values that differ in significant ways from those of the larger culture.** Ninety-five percent agree that they wish American culture made it easier to instill positive values in children. Most mothers (87%) expressed concern about the influence of advertisements on children and, more generally, the influence of media (88%). Eighty-eight percent of mothers agree with the statement “money has too much control over our lives” and 86% agree that childhood should be a time when children are protected from large parts of the adult world.

- **Given an open-ended question that asked mothers to name their single biggest concern for their children, mothers most often cited education (general concerns about the quality of their child’s education or specific concerns, such as getting into college) or safety and security.** Each of these concerns was named by 22% of mothers surveyed. Education was more likely to be named as the number one concern for children among African-American and mothers of Hispanic origin, unmarried mothers, and those with lower incomes and fewer years of education. After education and safety and security, the next most often named concern for children was drugs and drinking, with 11% of mothers naming that as their biggest concern.
- **When asked about their single biggest concern for themselves, mothers most often named finances (25%), healthcare (11%), or safety (11%).** Mothers with lower incomes, unmarried mothers, and African-American mothers were more likely than other mothers in our sample to cite financial issues as their top concern for themselves.
- **Presented with a list of possible changes to make life better for mothers and children, mothers most often indicated as high priorities: 1) reducing all forms of family violence (94%); 2) enabling mothers to spend more time with their children (86%); and 3) promoting healthy marriages (86%).**
- **Seventy-two percent of mothers agreed that more mothers in positions of power in American society would make life better for mothers and children.**
- **Mothers strongly endorsed the idea of parents uniting to reduce the negative influences on children.** Nearly 99% of respondents agreed (more than 88% “strongly” and a little over 10% “somewhat”) they would like to see more mothers and fathers working together to reduce the negative influences on children in American society. Nearly one in three mothers (30%) indicated they already are involved in groups working to improve the lives of mothers, children, and families.

W **E INVITE MOTHERS** to add their voices and views to those of the representative group of mothers whose voices are heard in this report. We urge mothers to use the “Starting Points” discussion guide (on pages 45-49) to consider the questions posed in the survey and reflect together on their own experiences and concerns as mothers. And we urge everyone who cares about the health and well-being of mothers, children, families, and society, to reflect on the findings of the study and listen to what mothers are saying in this report and in the many conversations we hope will flow from it.

About this Report

This report is based on original research, including a nationally representative survey of mothers, designed and conducted by a 12-member team of scholars convened by the Motherhood Project and Mothers' Council of the Institute for American Values.

The Motherhood Study research team is led by Martha Farrell Erickson of the Children, Youth, and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota, who is the study's principal investigator. The project director for *The Motherhood Study* is Enola G. Aird, Director of the Motherhood Project, Institute for American Values. The national survey was directed by Christopher Barnes and conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis of the University of Connecticut.

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ISBN #978-1-931764-07-7

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Printed copies of this report are available from the Institute for American Values. Single copies cost \$7.00. Volume discounts are available. For more information, or to download an order form, visit:

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