

**The New York Times**<http://nyti.ms/1uLdyRr>WATCH THE  
TRAILER

SUNDAYREVIEW | OPINION | NYT NOW

# Our 'Mommy' Problem

By HEATHER HAVRILESKY NOV. 8, 2014

WHEN I hear someone telling an expectant mother that having a baby will turn her into a new person, I can't help but imagine a pathologically optimistic weather forecaster brightly warning that an oncoming tornado is about to give a town "an extreme makeover." Becoming a mother doesn't change you so much as violently refurbish you, even though you're still the same underneath it all.

That can be hard to remember when teachers, coaches, pediatricians and strangers alike suddenly stop addressing you by your name, or even "ma'am" or "lady," and start calling you "Mom." You'll feel like a new person, all right — a new person you don't necessarily know or recognize.

Motherhood is no longer viewed as simply a relationship with your children, a role you play at home and at school, or even a hallowed institution. Motherhood has been elevated — or perhaps demoted — to the realm of lifestyle, an all-encompassing identity with demands and expectations that eclipse everything else in a woman's life.

"Bunch of mommies cutting loose, huh?"

Some female friends and I were having a drink at a bar recently

when a male stranger hailed us with this line. A bunch of mommies. That alien race unnaturally invested in high-end strollers, one-pot-chicken meals and carcinogen-free sunscreens. His expression suggested that it was odd that women charged with ushering kids from Kumon lessons to soccer games might be out on the town, sipping beers just like regular humans sometimes do. (How did he know we were mothers in the first place? Was it the extra-large sippy cups with MOMMY! bubble-lettered on the sides that we poured our beers into?)

We smugly shake our heads at the backward attitudes of “Mad Men,” but at this particular moment in our history, some combination of overzealous parenting, savvy marketing and glorification of hearth and home have coaxed the public into viewing female parents as a strange breed apart from regular people. You might feel like the same person deep inside, but what the world apparently sees is a woman lugging around a giant umbilical cord.

It's tough to blame bystanders, though, when our culture is so besotted with all things “mom” and “mommy”: “Mommy & Me” yoga classes and “Mommy & Me” mani-pedis and “mommy” makeovers abound. Navigate the world with a child in tow and pretty soon you can't escape the word. If you post something to your blog about having kids, you're a “mommy blogger.” If you get your hair cut short, you got a “mom haircut.” If you have something to say about the challenges of balancing home life and work, you're part of the “mommy wars.” If you need a drink after all of this mommy talk, you're having a “mommy's night out,” which means you might become a “mom gone wild.”

“HEY, moms? Moms? Listen up, moms!” I'm sitting on some



risers at the side of a soccer field, contemplating the drift of gray clouds in the distance, when these words send a shiver down my spine. My daughter's soccer coach is striding toward me with some instructions for the weekend's game, but I can't process the words coming out of his mouth. Moms? I look to my right and I see two mothers and a father. I look to my left and see a grandmother, another father and an older sister.

Why does this word irritate me when the wrong person says it? When my kids call me "Mommy," I feel a surge of pride and happiness. "Mommy" is also my mother's name, thanks to the fact that my older sister shamed me when I tried to switch to "Mom" in my teens. But the "Mommy" I say to my mother or hear from my children is a private word, a word that defines the relationship between me and my mother, or me and my kids. It's like the word "sweetheart" or "lover," but arguably even more intimate. It's a word that feels awkward when it comes out of the mouth of a teacher or a stranger or a cable news pundit.

You can love being a mother — and I don't personally know a woman who doesn't love it — and still hate being addressed as "Mom" or "Mommy" by someone who isn't your child. You can love being around other women, or other parents, and sharing your ideas and emotions and experiences, and still not want the whole thing to be wrapped up in a big "Mommy" bow.

The Mommy bow chafes because it's at once cloying and rife with contradictions. On TV and in movies and in modern fiction, mothers are frequently portrayed as protective yet focused on the trivial, wise yet neurotic, sexy yet sexless, monumentally important but deeply silly. Even for those of us who remain blissfully unconcerned by such

cultural undercurrents, new opportunities to feel as if we're not measuring up lie around every corner. We are besieged by Facebook images of sun-kissed children canning homegrown peaches and building tiny replicas of the Eiffel Tower out of toothpicks and being home-schooled on organic dairy farms in Wisconsin. We know far too much about other people's lives these days, and the more we know, the clearer it becomes that we are doomed to lag behind the pack in this increasingly high-stakes game.

Sure, it's possible to be inspired by the great dinner ideas on Goop or the excellent examples set by other parents online. Personally, though, I don't want to read about amazing kid-friendly boutique hotels with treehouse cabins in Sweden. I don't want to know about the most delicious cherry pie some super-relaxed stay-at-home dad made with his towheaded toddler. I am not interested in hearing theories on what gave your 5-year-old such a premature grasp of quadratic equations, or about the countless benefits of living in Berlin for your now-German-speaking, bicycle-riding, train-hopping spawn. There's too much pressure, on parents in general and mothers in particular, to keep our kids away from corn syrup and bullies and industrially farmed beef while introducing them to chapter books and charcoal drawings and parasailing.

Maybe it's not ideal for a kid to unlock her front door and watch "Gilligan's Island" every afternoon, as I once did, but lately we've swung so far in the opposite direction that it's hard to understand how two mortal parents (let alone one!) are supposed to keep up. I like violins and knitted tea cozies and themed birthday parties as much as the next Earthling. But before I get to that stuff, I need to clear a path through this dirty laundry so I can get to the dishwasher. I'm hesitant



to throw myself into any high-maintenance child-related activity too enthusiastically lest I doom myself to becoming a specialist in an unpaid field that might cut into the time I spend on things like, I don't know, making a living? Staying in shape? Seeing my friends occasionally?

The current culture demands that every mother be *all in*, all the time. My sister-in-law told me about a mom at her kid's elementary school who took the basic school T-shirt that everyone got and painstakingly created a beaded fringe at the bottom, replete with cinched waist and perfectly cuffed sleeves. All of the other little girls gathered around, screeching variations of "I want the same thing!" Incredibly enough, instead of laughing in their unrealistic faces the way our parents might have, all the adults started mumbling, "Yes, O.K., we can do that, sure, I'll learn a challenging new craft, no problem. Tonight, of course. We'll do it tonight." This made my sister-in-law, who was already late for work, want to teach a few people the artisanal craft of rearranging someone's face using only your bare hands. We are outclassed at every turn. We are outspent and out-helicoptered and outnumbered. It used to be good enough just to keep your house from being coated in a thin layer of dog hair and human feces. No longer.

FORTY years ago, my mother and her two friends drank coffee, ate homemade cherry pie and chain-smoked their way through lively debates over whether a popular author was daringly frank or a chauvinist, while their children were expected to play nicely outside and rarely interrupt. Today, all three mothers might instead be engaged in some elaborate craft project, with each woman stopping the conversation every few seconds to open a little jar of paint or to

help glue on some tiny eyes.

Somehow, as we've learned to treat children as people with desires and rights of their own, we've stopped treating ourselves and one another as such. But that's not hard to understand when the reigning cultural narrative tells us that we are no longer lively, inspired women with our own ideas and emotions so much as facilitators, meant to employ at all times the calm, helpful tones of diplomats.

No wonder so many of us have stopped listening to all those people trying to tell us to surrender, embrace our inner housewife, have it all, accept less than "it all," be more French, be less attached, be more attached, lean in, lean out. Today's absurdly conflicting notions of motherhood play far better as comedy. No matter what the script says, we don't have to perform such a farcical, unrealistic role. We can rip the S off our chests. We're still the same underneath it all.

Heather Havrilesky is a contributor to The New York Times Magazine and New York magazine, and the author of the memoir "Disaster Preparedness."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on November 9, 2014, on page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Our 'Mommy' Problem.

---

© 2014 The New York Times Company