

Susan Chira '80

A Mother's Place: Taking the Debate About Working Mothers Beyond Guilt and Blame

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The origins of Susan Chira's book, *A Mother's Place: Taking the Debate About Working Mothers Beyond Guilt and Blame*, stem from her own turmoil about returning to work after the births of her two young children. Bombarded by messages that she was a "bad mother," that her children would suffer from her absence, and that she shouldn't even try to "have it all," yet convinced in her heart that she could raise her children to her own high standards *and* pursue the successful journalism career upon which she thrived, she set out to present the case that it's not whether a mother works in the home or in the workforce, but the kind of mother she is. Hers is an impassioned appeal — through comprehensive research, interviews with a range of families, and her own experience — to rethink messages from the media, politicians, the law, psychology and popular culture about what is truly best for our children.

Chira, who is deputy foreign editor of *The New York Times*, challenges a range of established sources, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek*, child development experts Penelope Leach and T. Berry Brazelton, and numerous polls, studies and reports, reinterpreting the data and re-evaluating the conclusions. Ultimately, she leads us to rephrase the questions and rethink the answers to what makes a "good mother," and demonstrates that, in fact, working in and of itself usually makes no difference in how children fare. Rather, it is the state of mind of the mother as she raises her children that most profoundly affects them.

Chira cites numerous factors that can influence a mother's state of mind, from financial concerns to the kind of work she does to the degree of involvement of the children's father. She points out the benefits of the workplace — the stimulation, adult company, financial independence, and sense of accomplishment — that many women feel they need to balance their work as mothers. While remaining non-judgmental of at-home mothers, Chira notes that the frustration and isolation a full-time mother can feel may create a less than ideal family environment. Even part-time work has its costs, Chira explains, not only financially, but professionally and psychologically as well.

Rather than blame working mothers for the growing problems among today's youth, Chira purports that society is trapped in the wrong debate. The main issue,

she writes, “is not whether or not a mother works; it is whether or not she is sensitive to her child.” She discusses ways society and the government can enhance support systems for families, including subsidized child care, welfare reform, and more flexible employment arrangements.

Chira concludes with a new vision of motherhood, one which focuses on true hallmarks of motherly love: an unwavering commitment to her children, a sense of responsibility (that often includes breadwinning), and emotional sensitivity. Her final hope is that “no mother should curb her dreams — whether to be at home or at work — out of baseless fear or guilt.”

— *Susan Rubin Hodara '75 is editor of Big Apple Parent in New York City, and writes a monthly column about parenting in the nineties.*