

EXCERPT FROM:

FOREWORD BY SHAWN ACHOR

New York Times bestselling author of *The Happiness Advantage*

FLEX MOM

THE SECRETS OF HAPPY STAY-AT-HOME MOMS



SARA BLANCHARD

The Lost Lucky Ones

“I think it’s a tough road if you’re a stay-at-home mom, a working mom, if you have a partner, if you don’t. It’s the best job in the world, and the toughest job in the world all at the same time.”

– Angela Kinsey

Since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s challenged the notion of women as homemakers, we have come to loosely accept the idea that strong, powerful women should compete in the workforce with men. While there is still plenty of room for improvement in pay equality, opportunities, and ultimately, in breaking the glass ceiling, this and subsequent feminist movements have given rise to career women. When career women bore children, these movements allowed for them to become working moms. While earlier in history the stay-at-home mom (SAHM) was the norm, it is now much more common for children to have working moms. Given this background, when you have children now, there are two models of motherhood to choose between: working mom or stay-at-home mom.

This book is for mothers who have the financial bandwidth and have chosen to be the primary caregivers for their children. While much of the following reading will be helpful to working mothers, I cannot speak with expertise on the experience of being a traditional working mom with an office job—and more importantly, I cannot help you calculate the numbers to make it feasible for you to take a step back from the money. But, if you can work out your financials so that you are not totally dependent on your salary and you decide to become the primary caregiver for your children, then this book is absolutely for you.

I recently met Genevieve, who has a PhD in microbiology and enjoyed her career in cancer research. She and her husband moved around quite a bit as his career grew, but she was always able to find a position doing the work she loved. Enter children. A couple of years into parenthood, the 60 hour workweeks became significantly overwhelming, and the job she enjoyed became a burden as she struggled with being away from her little ones for so long. Barely able to juggle her work life and home life, Genevieve left her job—preserving great relationships with her bosses who said they’d welcome her back anytime—and greatly appreciated that she was able to stay at home. The first few months of being able to focus solely on her children were wonderful, and Genevieve filled the time with books and games and outings to the library. But less than a year into staying at home, she started feeling isolated and lonely, underappreciated and undervalued. The novelty of interacting with her small children wore off, and she found herself craving conversations with her colleagues, wanting to make contributions to the greater community like she did with her cancer research. Still, even though Genevieve’s bosses said that she could come back part time, she knew that she would be hard pressed to find a balance she was comfortable with in her old field. While going back to her previous career wasn’t the right fit, Genevieve knew she couldn’t continue staying at home the way she was feeling. She started looking for something that fit her interests—somewhere between staying at home and working. If this is you, *Flex Mom* is the book you need.

The reason *Flex Mom* is for you is because it presents a third model for motherhood, a model outside of the stay-at-home vs. working mom dichotomy. This book captures the unexpected pitfalls that are unique to the stay-at-home parenting experience, and transitions you into a new way of thinking and being. Because if you've been at home with your children, I bet that at one time or another, you've thought that being a stay-at-home mom is the most difficult thing you've ever done. I certainly have thought it. I also bet that your old career, the one you had prior to children, provided you with money, prestige, and/or a sense of purpose; I bet that while that job was challenging, being with the children 24/7 has left you more depleted than your job used to. Mostly, I bet that you wish there was a way to make this supposedly amazing experience more fulfilling.

Once you have children, life changes. No matter who it is, someone has to be responsible for the little ones—and there are tons of reasons to choose to be that person who is the primary caregiver for your children. Supporters say there's no substitute for the consistency and nurturing of parental care; you worked hard to have this child, and you want to be around to help raise him or her. There are so many additional reasons to be the stay-at-home parent: maybe you hated your career and this was a natural move to make. Maybe your spouse travels for work and you would have gone nuts if you'd continued working while holding down the fort. Maybe you'd always dreamed that you'd get to stay at home, just like your own mother did. For one reason or another, you and your partner made the decision for you to be a stay-at-home mom, and because everyone tells you what a privilege it is, you expected it to be awesome.

It sure has been awesome. And awesomely difficult.

Once you made it through the sleepless survival stage of the first year, you thought things would improve. Because really, what could be worse than your colicky child screaming for a few hours at a time, and then waking up every three hours for food, for months? You took on all the overnight shifts yourself because you were the stay-at-home parent, the one who didn't have an outside responsibility to wake up for the next day. So, even though you didn't get more than one complete sleep cycle per night for months, you pushed through the fatigue and eagerly waited for the next stage.

Then you realized the toddler years were tough in a different way, with your physical exhaustion shifting to one that took over more of your brain. You read the same books over and over again, shell shocked by the mind-numbing repetition that comes with young children. You fought the urge to put on Baby Einstein DVDs because, even though you wanted a break from the (cute) monotony, you felt guilty after the latest round of research showed that the DVDs didn't really improve cognitive skills. You had to interpret your child's grunts and squeals, figuring out which one meant hungry and which one meant they wanted to grab your fingers so they could waddle-walk with your hunched-over help. Surely, you thought, once your child started speaking in sentences and could navigate a playground without your help, child rearing would be more joyful and fulfilling.

By the time your children entered preschool, though, you found that you were so tired from giving and giving and giving that you didn't even know where to start to fill your own bucket again, where to find the energy to play and be joyful again.

The double edged sword for stay-at-home moms in middle- or upper-class families is that, for this particular crust of society, sociologist Annette Lareau observed that children are seen as projects to be cultivated. Unlike past generations, whose main goals were to feed the kids and keep them alive with the expectation that the kids would turn out okay, our generation gets a kick out of intentional parenting. As exhausting as it is to answer each question and nurture each talent, few parents want to neglect this work because they're afraid of not giving their child every advantage possible. Even though it's draining to focus so much on parenting your children, you do it anyway.

You're not alone in finding parenting difficult. A study by behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman showed—unwittingly—that when women were asked to rate activities that gave them the most pleasure, childcare was very low on the list. These parents would have preferred shopping, watching TV, and even preparing food and vacuuming to taking care of children. And I totally hate vacuuming. Still, while it's nice to know you're not alone—and you probably got a glimpse of this commonality as you met eyes across the playground with the other exhausted moms, then rolling those eyes in sympathy with each other—it doesn't help point you in the right direction to take a step towards actually enjoying your life as a stay-at-home parent.

The thing is, it's not cool to complain about the privilege of staying at home. We are considered the lucky ones, the ones who have enough money, who “only” have the responsibility of raising children; working moms have to do it all while juggling a real career.

And it's true—we really are lucky to be in a financial position that our partner can support our living expenses and those of our children. It's a luxury that not everybody in this country has, and there are many working moms who would love to be able to stay home to raise their children instead of having to work to support the family's financial needs. Statistics from 2015 show that among married-couple families with children, 60% of these families had both parents working; that means that it's the minority, or 40%, of families who have one unemployed parent, whether by choice or by circumstance. What frustrated stay-at-home parents want to share, though, is that it's not just a happy-go-lucky lifestyle that we live. The freedom not to work comes with its own set of burdens. What people don't see is that you probably left a major metropolitan area to live somewhere less expensive so your family could afford this lifestyle. They don't see the deliberation that goes into each pedicure or new item of clothing that you buy for yourself—the guilt that, annoyingly, you don't seem to have when spending money on your children's enrichment classes, or that your partner doesn't seem to have when buying some new gadgets for the home. Most of the time, the stay-at-home parenting lifestyle was created by design, after reflecting on family values, individual values, and financial capacity. It's not just luck. There is a lot of work that goes into this choice, and work that goes into making it through each day.

Outside observers don't see that kids make huge messes when they're home instead of at daycare, so you don't get to take naps when they are sleeping because you're busy returning your house to normal. They don't see that it's mind-numbing to listen to imaginary stories all day, to not have the mental stimulation that the give-and-take of adult conversation provides. They don't see that you don't get a lunch break, that you never get a sick day, that you don't have time for yourself until bedtime, and that you love your children dearly but can't wait to get away from them. They don't see that you can't say any of these things to outsiders, because then you'd sound like you're complaining. So the bulk of stay-at-home moms live in quiet guilt. And the guilt grows until you feel like a shell of yourself, and your sense of purpose is lost.

Fortunately, there is hope: being the primary caregiver for your children doesn't have to make you feel so invisible and lonely. This book draws upon my years of being a miserable stay-at-home mom with a passion for and former career in mind-body wellness—one who finally figured out through trial and error what it takes to make this time raising my children a more fulfilling experience.

The new name for a thriving, caregiving parent is the Flex Mom. The Flex Mom continues to prioritize her children, but understands how to create the space and structure to pursue her own passions. She sets goals outside of her family life—goals that fuel her passions and fit within the lifestyle she wants to live—while continuing to be present with her children in the same way that stay-at-home parents are. The Flex Mom flows between multiple roles, and the energy she gets from being lit up with excitement about pursuing her goals fuels back into her home life. This book outlines the steps you need to take to make the transformation.

While there are lots of stories and theories to learn from in *Flex Mom*, scattered through these pages are also some exercises to help you make changes in your life as you go. If you want to skip over those and simply read through, you should still be able to follow along. If you want to do the exercises, check the back of the book to learn how to get a free companion workbook that will help you process your thoughts as you work through these pages.

The steps to becoming a Flex Mom are:

- F: Free yourself from judgment, because you are probably your own worst critic
- L: Love yourself, and learn how to take care of yourself first
- E: Express your goals, goals that are in line with your skills and passions and mean something to you
- X: Examine your boundaries and community to carve out space so you can achieve your goals
- M: Master skills around mindfulness, because just as you think you've got things figured out, things will change—and mindfulness will let you see your options
- O: Open your mouth wisely and master crucial communication skills to get what you want
- M: Make it all come together

There are many, many benefits to being a stay-at-home parent, to being able to hold space for your children and your household. However, being miserable during the experience negates some of these benefits for your children, and leaves you feeling like you've spent several years of your life floundering around. This book is intended to help you nip that misery in the bud before you squander any more of these precious childhood years. By learning how to hold space not only for your family, but for your own personal goals and passions, you'll join the ranks of Flex Moms—moms who continue to be present for their children in the same way stay-at-home parents are, but who are energized by pursuing the things they want to be doing.