



# **Why Have Kids?: A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness**

*Jessica Valenti*

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If parenting is making Americans unhappy, if it's impossible to "have it all," if people don't have the economic, social, or political structures needed to support child rearing, then why do it? And why are anxious new parents flocking to every Tiger Mother and Bébé-raiser for advice on how to raise kids?

In *Why Have Kids?*, Valenti explores these controversial questions through on-the-ground reporting, startling new research, and her own unique experiences as a mom. She moves beyond the black and white "mommy wars" over natural parenting, discipline, and work-life balance to explore a more nuanced reality: one filled with ambivalence, joy, guilt, and exhaustion.

Would-be parents must navigate the decision to have children amidst a daunting combination of cultural expectations and hard facts. And new parents find themselves struggling to reconcile their elation with the often exhausting, confusing, and expensive business of child care. When researchers for a 2010 Pew study asked parents why they decided to have their first child, nearly 90 percent answered, for "the joy of having children." Yet nearly every study in the last ten years shows a marked decline in the life satisfaction of those with kids. Valenti explores this disconnect between parents' hopes and the day-to-day reality of raising children—revealing all the ways mothers and fathers are quietly struggling. A must-read for parents as well as those considering starting a family, *Why Have Kids?* is an explosive addition to the conversation about modern parenthood.

## **Why Have Kids?: A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness** **Details**

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# From Reader Review Why Have Kids?: A New Mom Explores the Truth About Parenting and Happiness for online ebook

## Isabel says

I got this book as an audiobook and realized that I'd picked up something controversial when my daughter looked at me inquiringly and asked with hurt in her voice, "Why'd you get that book, Mom?" Hmm.

Valenti's title is intriguing. I was interested to hear the answer to her question. Why do American women have kids? I thought that would be the topic. It's not. However, her title suited the author's purpose, which, she states herself, is to make the reader angry. If not angry, just the title had definitely unsettled the kid that I decided to have ten years ago.

So, here's my opinion: Valenti works too hard at being a rabble rouser and not hard enough at developing some kind of theme or pattern or making some kind of sense of it all. She also uses exceptions to the rule to illustrate her cases and this comes at the cost of her credibility, making observations that could very well be legitimate become weak and questionable.

Example: Valenti describes how incredibly difficult parenting can be. She offers a first-hand account of taking care of her newborn daughter. She's holding her precious bundle in her arms, successfully breastfeeding her after much difficulty and--oh no!--baby sneezes on her breast. Those are not the words she uses. I think she says "booger" and "tit." Sooo, what do I say to this? Comical? Maybe, but her reason for this story is to bolster the case that parenting is thankless, difficult, painful, exhausting, and basically, gross. Umm. Maybe. Depends on how you look at it. And I would definitely say that this applies more in the *newborn* years than later. But parenting goes on for much longer than the 3 months of newbornness. Or the 18 months of toddlerhood. Or even the 10-ish years of childhood. So to rest her case on that anecdote is specious.

She also contradicts herself. She talks about how modern families are splintered from a larger community. How historically there was more support for mothers than there is now. Good! I like this idea. She gave some decent history to back it up. Then she goes on to say that she gave her baby a bottle in public and another woman offered to help her with any trouble she might be having with breastfeeding (something the author gives a lot of time to describing). She decides that she can either view this woman as someone who is reaching out to her in a spirit of sisterhood or as a judgemental asshole. Her verdict, upon later deliberation: asshole.

So, why do women feel this way about each other? That might have been a more interesting chapter. What makes us push each other away? And judge? And label? She does a *lot* of both in her book while urging us to stop judging each other. Basically, it is OK to judge another mother *if* she adheres to the "attachment parenting" or "natural parenting" philosophy. Otherwise: not OK to judge.

sigh.

One fascinating point she develops (a bit) is: Jenny McCarthy and the anti-immunization craze in the larger context of mothers taking ownership of the health of themselves and their children. She explains why the google generation does this and how women have historically been mislead or had their needs ignored by the larger medical community. Hooray! *But* when women choose vaginal birth over medicalized birth, she feels that this is a conspiracy of the Natural Parenting movement and that women are being dominated by another

dogmatic group over their best interests. (Exception to this is the woman who was forbidden to have a vaginal birth by her hospital, over her own wishes--another interesting case.)

Valenti documents the costs of mothering. She briefly mentions that our society is moving toward co-parenting, but she reports studies showing how lousy a job we are doing at accomplishing equitable parenting. Men don't help. Women do the double-shift when they work and have kids. In studies, men caring for children are "caregivers" or something, while women are invisible. Men get more professional benefit from having families, while women are paid less, work more and suffer social stigma.

I guess what I was hoping to see is more of a *parenting* perspective. How much of parenting *has* to be gender based? Why is it, still? Why do parents matter and why doesn't our society recognize it? How could we remunerate it or adjust our system so that women (or men--but I don't know the particulars, here) who leave the work force to take care of kids *for a while* (the nature of parenting *changes* over time, I really think Valenti missed the boat on that one) can re-enter society as members just as valued as those who never left the work force?

She paints a pretty grim picture of mothering. (It really is "mothering," more than "parenting". Dads don't breastfeed. She makes little or no case for Dads leaving the workforce and struggling to get by. She really kind of blows off Dads as anything much more than an added burden for mothers.) For just a little bit, she admits that mothering demands are different for affluent women and economically disadvantaged ones. But she goes on to say that all women should work outside the home and to do otherwise leaves women unhappy and neurotic about their kids. Sure, there are some, but perhaps not *all* women go down that rabbit hole? And if they don't, what drives them to do this with their lives? (Valenti gives examples of women talking about mothering as a "prison" or "a job with no benefits" etc.) We don't really get the other side.

...until Valenti describes another way that some modern families are different from ones in the past. Another strong point, and one that I thought her whole book would benefit from developing more, is gay couples fighting for the right to have children, and to have spouses. She also could have looked into male stay-at-home parents more than just saying that at the moment they are a statistical anomaly.

Why, given all we know about how gender oriented the roles are and how poorly women fare (another big theme in this book) when they marry and have children, would anyone fight for the right to have these options? Maybe through examining people who do not have children "by default" (an interesting point and one that Valenti argues, convincingly, is both bad for children *and* parents) she could actually answer the question her title asks: Why Have Children? That's the book I want to read.

This, however, is not it. Still, I give it three stars for raising some interesting issues.

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## Ciara says

i was almost tempted to file this under "books by celebrities" because the only reason jessica valenti was paid to write this book is because she is jessica valenti &, as such, has a built-in audience, to a certain degree. valenti was involved in writing this book when she was still pregnant with her daughter, & i kind of wish i could see what she would have written had she had the pregnancy & birth she had expected. instead, she developed HELLP syndrome (a severe form of pre-eclampsia) & delivered early. her daughter was in the NICU for almost two months.

i WISH valenti would have written about this a little bit, because i had a similar experience & it really threw me for a loop & i have felt kind of isolated talking to others preemie/NICU moms. but instead, valenti did what valenti does: she wrote a book full of facts & figures readily available to anyone halfways familiar with the topic at hand, rehashing tired old arguments that have been hashed a million times before, & really contributing nothing new to the conversation aside from possibly introducing the topic to her legions of followers, because what the mommy wars debate really needs is a bunch of twentysomething non-moms weighing in with their irrelevant opinions.

i knew this book was going to suck when valenti was all, "anyone who has ever used a breast pump knows that it's impossible not to feel like a milk cow." first of all, wow, what an original & hilarious observation. not. second of all, i use a breast pump at least four times a day, sometimes twice as often, & i do not feel like a milk cow. i feel like i'm doing what i need to do to provide nourishment for my daughter, not to mention the other babies who have benefited from my over-supply (i donate the extra milk i make to moms in need--i just gave away two coolers full to a mom today whose son is severely underweight). pumping might suck if you have a bad attitude about it, & i can't say i was stoked to have to do it at first. but my baby was in the NICU, too tiny to breastfeed, a situation that valenti is familiar with, so i did what i had to do & i developed a good attitude about it.

comments like valenti's really serve no purpose but to be all girlfriend-y &, you know, "breast pumps! amirite?!" i HATE this about valenti's writing. make an argument, don't try to buddy up with me with your stupid, unoriginal assumptions. underlying all of valenti's writing about how mothers should work because otherwise they are undermining the entire role of women in the public sphere, & how any woman who truly believes that being a parent is the most difficult job she's ever done is just kidding herself because the alternative is to plunge into despair over how meaningless her life has become now that she has diapers to change, & how studies show that parents are miserable sad sacks, is this weird bitterness that her birth didn't turn out the way she expected. i mean, i get it, my situation was almost identical. i was admitted to the hospital & within a week, i was having an emergency cesarean & my baby was in the NICU for nearly a month. it sucked. it really sucked. & if i had tried to write a book about parenting in the midst of that, it probably would have said, "fuck this noise, this fucking sucks."

one of the most aggravating things about this book is how much valenti used the internet as her source material. so much of the book seemed structured around various arguments that people have had online. i guess a person could argue that the culture wars are online now, & what happens online is a reflection of our offline lives or something, but especially in light of the fact that valenti is best-known for starting a blog, it just felt really insular & irrelevant to me. like, "major feminist breaking news!: one time someone left a mean comment on a blog." come on. i mean, i can see how this would pass as major feminist news to someone who makes her living dicking around on the internet & is just completely cut off from the world of women who, say, work at taco bell or whatever & are more concerned with paying the electric bill than sending their kid to prep classes in order to apply to preschools. i just wish valenti had any inkling whatsoever of how incredibly privileged & out of touch she is. the closest she got was writing about how if you have a "mind-numbingly boring" job "in a factory," then maybe quitting to stay home & do the mind-numbingly boring work of taking care of your baby kind of seems like a step up--or at least a lateral move. but statements like this serve as a counterpoint to her greater argument that if a woman CAN work a job that involves her intellect, she SHOULD. leave the drudgery to the drudges, i guess?

UGH.

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## Katie says

Between the title and the blurb, I was hopeful that this book would break some new ground in the ongoing debates around motherhood and child-rearing in America. That perhaps it would break up the tedium of the endless "mommy wars" by discussing some of the less-explored facets of the topic, or taking a unique perspective that had not been already heard in hundreds of variations, from the New York Times to parenting forums to the playground, in the last 15 years or so. In the past few years, especially, the flow of controversial books on the role of mothers and "parenting" has seemed relentless. Yet for all the creative ways publishers have found to market these books (You're Doing Parenting Wrong: Feminist Edition; You're Doing Parenting Wrong: How the French are Better than you; You're Doing Parenting Wrong: Fear the Chinese Mothers!) they all boil down to the same several arguments rehashed again and again. Did Valenti, best known as founder of the "third wave" feminist blog Feministing, find a new facet to explore, or best of all, a bold and better alternative path?

Sadly, the answer is no. Rather, this book reads as a kind of summary of all the ground that has been covered exhaustively by others. It is a brief, shallow book, with a timid thesis and many half-hearted supporting anecdotes. There is, of course, the usual belching up of statistics that one expects from any nonfiction book of this type anymore. But they do not fold into the body of the book in a meaningful way, but rather wash over the reader in a bland way like the reading of a stock report on NPR. The whole book seems rushed and tentative, and reads like an overly long blog post rather than a finished opus. The anecdotes are not written up in a way to hook the reader in. Many conclusions are reached by way of contested or unsupported "facts" and assumptions, Valenti does not "show her work" as you would expect in a typical nonfiction work. The whole thing is neither a solid well-researched work of nonfiction argumentation, nor a personal opinion or account that coheres as a story for its own sake. I was left wondering why she wrote the book, as she does not seem particularly informed nor particularly passionate about the topic. A curious fact is mentioned in one anecdote, that she had an editor for this book on motherhood while she was still pregnant with her first child. The book is then, perhaps a contractual obligation and material opportunity more than a labor of love or political conviction.

I should have known I was in for a disappointment even in the preface, as only a page or two into the book comes the first "Mad Men" reference, tossed out casually and offhand, a kind of dogwhistle letting us know that this book is by and for a very specific demographic. This is yet another volume about the neuroses of the chattering classes, dressed up as a work of general interest. This is a book calculated to sell itself, and then self-destruct in admitted irrelevance. Valenti got to write this book because she's Valenti, she was known to a publisher and an audience, and it was thought that a book on motherhood by her would be marketable to that niche. But the truth of the matter is, we did not need her book. What we need is a book by someone else--lots of someone else's, really--who is not part of this upper crust coastal elite set, mostly based in Manhattan, who dominate the discourse on parenthood and everything else in this country. I will give Valenti credit, at least, for nodding here and there in the book to the fact that the "debate" she is entering into is a rarefied and elitist one, that all too often columnists from the Times or the Post sit down to hash out "what's wrong with parenting" and "what should mothers do" and really they are only talking about the parenting of the economic top 10% and the mothers who are elite professionals with many options available to them. But we don't need or want to hear wealthy white women concede, with liberal guilt, that the discourse leaves out the rest of us, or to allow for our existence with a token nod and a bone thrown out in a passing paragraph or anecdote. We need to be included in the conversation, for the good of all. They can wring their hands that we need more daycare options, or work flexibility, or parental leave, they are very good at such hand-wringing. But has it ever yet changed a thing for the practical conditions of actual mothers outside their elite social circles?

In fact it comes across as condescending and a bit frustrating when Valenti nods at us, saying that the debate about staying at home versus working is different for women whose jobs are low-paying and not particularly "intellectually stimulating," and then proceeds to continue right on into that same hackneyed old "debate" and take a hackneyed side in it. Women should work, she says, as it's not good to be economically dependent on another. What of the fact that work at a living wage is increasingly not available? That student debt chokes the aspirations of the middle class? That working class women may have to leave their children not in a posh Mandarin immersion preschool, and not a not-optimal daycare, but one that is actually miserable and insufficient? All in order to work a miserable job that barely pays for daycare and electricity, as if to add insult to injury. She wrings her hands--the specialty of the chattering classes--about what would happen if "more and more" women became stay-at-home-moms, and how that would sabotage the plight of "women" (professional women) as a class. But there is no in-depth examination of this thought, and there is no in-depth exploration of alternatives. She tosses out some thoughts, and then sort of shrugs, and the book ends.

The only chapter that really brought anything new and of interest to the table was the one about imprisoning bad mothers. The anecdotes were interesting, and here Valenti may have actually found something to discuss that has not been beaten to death already. But alas it is like all the chapters in the work, a slim and fleeting blog post, and it is over before she has a chance to really look at any of the ideas in depth.

You will miss nothing important, no new contribution to the already nauseating and tiresome referendums on "how mothering should be done, seen, and felt about" if you skip this book. Which is really too bad.

This was an Amazon Vine selection. I was not obligated to give a positive or negative review, only my honest opinion.

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## **Angela Risner says**

I chose not to have children, and I've read the studies that show those of us without kids are happier in general. However, parenthood as a whole still fascinates me. It is a difficult job with lots of responsibility and I've seen it create both joy and depression.

Valenti explores the issue of parenting as a new mother. Her birth story did not go as planned - her daughter was delivered via C-section at 28 weeks due to several complications. Due to the worry over her daughter's survival, she did not have that overwhelming feeling of love toward her child that many women speak of.

This isn't the first time I've heard that - for various reasons. Of course, if something had just caused me enormous pain and wasn't allowing me to get much sleep, I would have some issues loving it as well. I think that many women don't feel the overwhelming love toward their children that they expect to and often feel as though they're bad mothers.

Valenti discusses the unreasonable expectations of perfection that come along with parenthood. I have to agree - no one is harder on women than other women. Mothers seem to be the best at judging each other. You didn't make your baby's food from scratch? You're a failure. You put your child into daycare? You're a failure. Your child isn't signed up for a million and one activities? Yup, you guessed it - you have failed.

One of the biggest reasons I chose not to have children is because even with fathers being more involved than ever, I knew that the majority of the care would still fall to me. No matter how much he promises to help and that everything will be 50-50, it really doesn't happen that way. Unless you're willing to pump to

have enough milk on hand for shared feedings, if you're breastfeeding, it's all you. Who cleans up the vomit and diarrhea? You do. Who takes the children to their dental appointments, their doctor appointments, to get their haircuts, to shop for school? You do. When a woman is home with her children, she is "parenting." when a man is home with his children, he's "babysitting."

When people ask me if I'm going to have kids and I say no, I get the third degree. Yes, it's getting better, as more and more couples are choosing to not have children, so it's not as out there as it once was. But people still tell me I'll change my mind, that I'll regret it. I doubt it. I am 40 and am thrilled with being able to sleep in when I want to and that I can spend my disposable income the way that I choose. I don't have to worry if my child is getting bullied or if they're in the right school or playing the right sport. But if a woman announces that she is going to have children, that decision is taken at face value and no more questions are asked.

There was a lot of great information in this book. There no wasted space - every page is filled with facts and studies.

I recommend it.

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## **Heather says**

Something I strongly dislike about society is the fact that it's the default to assume someone will have kids. Whenever I tell someone who doesn't know me very well that I don't plan to ever have children, I am met with a shocked face and something along the lines of, "but why NOT?" I feel a better question should be, to someone who chooses to have children, "but WHY?" Valenti comes at the to-have-kids-or-not-to-have-kids question the second way, which is why I read the book in the first place. While Valenti does have a child, she actively asked herself why she wanted to become a mother before making the decision to have a child. And then she spent time researching a ton of stuff about parenting, specifically motherhood as it is "supposed" to be in society, and how children impact a person's life in such myriad and complicated ways.

I can't say I found a ton of stuff that was earth-shattering in here but it was certainly a compelling read. Valenti doesn't waste a page in here – it's a short book but it is packed with a ton of information about all kinds of studies related to parenthood and child-rearing. Mostly what I found in here validated what I already knew in some cases and suspected in others. She spends time discussing how judgmental parents are toward other parents, how society puts this pressure on parents (mothers especially) to be absolutely perfect and that every single tiny little decision made as a parent can have such a profound effect on the children that the "right" decisions must be agonized over, for fear of doing the wrong thing and ruining your children forever. In reality, every parent knows that other parents are just doing the best they can with what they know – so why do we judge parents so harshly? That is just one topic of many that Valenti covers in the book.

I enjoyed Why Have Kids? and I think it's a valuable contribution to the other books out there about parenting in today's world. I think Valenti has a unique view point and what she has to say is definitely valuable and worth hearing. I admire her as a feminist writer, have for a long time, so I'll continue to read whatever she puts out there, on any topic.

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## Kelly says

To be honest, this book is mostly useful as an overview of the major points of the "to have kids or not to have kids" debate circa the early 21st century. I imagine it will make a great reference point to a PhD student in 100 years or so, and some enterprising librarian ought to mark it out as a future source right now. If you're a woman who has ever struggled with this question and therefore clicked on far more of the clickbait-y articles about this topic than you should have, then you won't find a lot new here. And some of it isn't even about the question of having children- there are also chapters about the "mommy wars" and shaming women after they've already made the choice to have kids about how they choose to parent their kids.

The three things I \*did\* like about it and wish more people thought about were:

- 1) Valenti's insistence that parenting and raising children is a political issue that belongs in the public realm. The idea that it isn't is a weirdly, specifically American one- this idea that parents, and parents alone are somehow responsible for everything about their child. That they shouldn't need help with childcare, that their choices determine nearly everything about how their child will be in the future, that they should \*literally\* sacrifice their lives for their child. People feel this way because there is no safety net for parents in America- there's no common child care that we all have access to, no universal maternity leave, nothing that puts children on a more even playing field at the start, so we all don't feel like we're dealing with putting our child's entire future happiness on the line with every decision. The more we tell women that raising kids is "the hardest job in the world" and that it's all up to them, the more we tacitly push the issue back into the personal realm and de facto tell mothers that while you're awesome, we are going to do nothing to help you except tell you how great you are every once in awhile. I completely agree with her that the American system of childcare- or lack thereof- does not at all reflect our supposed reverence for mothers. Put your money where your mouth is, America.
- 2) Taking off on this, the idea that parenting is a "job" instead of a relationship. It is constantly framed this way by many parents- and I get why, there's a lot of toil involved. But it messes with our mindset thinking of it that way and possibly ruins our relationship with our kids. One of the women she quotes here says that if parenting is a "job" then it raises the specter of possibly failing, of having performance reviews, of \*working\* for your child in some weird twisted way, and having that mindset makes parenting a drudgery. Parenting is about having a fulfilling relationship- and when it isn't, that's also how we get competitive parenting. People need to realize that a lot less about their child than they think is determined by what they do and therefore chill out a bit and stop making it a full time job, or a "job" at all. A big reason why a lot of people hate it.
- 3) Which brings me to three. My favorite part of the book was where she had women talk about how they are afraid of becoming parents because of the enormous expectations placed on you when you have a child. How you're expected to be perfect and if you're not, the answer is effectively: "Well, you made the choice to have a kid, so too bad, you're responsible forever and you can never never never be done with it. And if you want to be, you're the worst person in the world and should burn in hell." (Some of this may be implied rather than said, but less than you'd think.) WOW. No wonder there's women in here talking about waiting to be "paroled" when their kid turns 18. The first two things combined along with the judgment that people bring on each other as a result, the heavy, heavy burden of expectations that is placed on people, well... is it any wonder people are opting out of that, even if they might have been inclined to have kids? This one lady in here said something like "I would maybe have liked to have kids... but not the way things are now." Yes, there are lots of other reasons people choose not to have kids (financial, environmental, worries about genetic conditions, physical dangers to the mother, childhood trauma, just not wanting any, etc.), but this I think is an underdiscussed reason for sure.

Basically, to sum up: We need to raise kids as a community and the government needs to match its rhetoric and get in there to help, parenting is not a competitive sport or a job and we all need to stop eyeing each other up and treating it that way, lots of people make decisions about how to parent or whether to have kids for different reasons and it's really none of your business either way. Parents are \*people\* and have the right to remain so after they become parents- parents don't actually determine everything about their kids in the end. So everybody ease up and enjoy your kids and family a little more rather than worrying about whether the parents next door are doing it better than you. And vote for candidates who support universal maternity leave and solutions for early childhood care. And we'll all be a lot happier.

I don't find a lot to disagree with there.

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## **Emmy says**

This review has what could be considered spoilers- but this type of book doesn't really have spoilers.

Valenti wants to get past the mommy wars about breast vs bottle and SAHM vs Working mom's- in fact she often seems to want to get past the idea that mother's are the best ones to raise the kids. Valenti states "if we can manage to beat back the guilt and sense of personal failure that so many women buy into--and feel no shame when we admit child rearing can be tedious and thankless undertaking...then we can start to take on the broader social and political issues that are really what chip away at the joy of parenting."

I agree that moms do not talk enough about how hard it can be, especially at the newborn stage. I believe admitting it and talking about it greatly helps all women. If we can admit it is hard and that we need help, then a lot of walls and barriers can be brought down.

Valenti breaks the books into two sections entitled Lies and Truths. Within each section she discusses such truth or lies such as "Children Make you Happy" and mothering being "The Hardest Job in the World". She uses statistics and studies to support her claims throughout the book. As a former Licensed Social worker who graduated in Psychology, I have become a bit of a skeptic of statistics (especially statistics who sources are not cited, which this book had several of). I learned that for every study out there supporting one theory, there was another stating almost the opposite. I also learned that depending on how you skew or present the statistics, it can greatly change (or appear to change) the actual outcome.

In her book, Valenti quotes a study by Jennifer Barber which found that 60% of those studied reported their pregnancies as planned, 30% as mistimed (meaning the pregnancy was wanted but the timing was not exactly as planned), and 10% as unwanted. My own daughter could fall into the unplanned category; we knew we were ready for a second child but didn't want one born in the fall for school/holiday purposes, well surprise- we got pregnant about 4 months sooner than planned. Valenti goes on to use this study in her book when talking of neglect and blames it on the "high" number of unwanted and unplanned pregnancies, lumping the two categories together to call 40% high. So yes, I am a statistics skeptic.

Also, as I read these chapters, I couldn't help but feel.... okay so what is your point already? Are you going to ever state any solution or just bring up "problems" that so many others have already discussed.

I did appreciate that Valenti was very forthcoming with her views and opinions and did not try to have a hidden agenda. While I often did not agree with her views, I appreciated that she was honest even stating you might want to throw the book across the room at times (which I did). Though I believe since becoming a

mother, Valenti is beginning to rethink some of her feminist views-- in this book she states that as women have become empowered leading to 'mom knows best' that this has "sparked a nationwide health crisis- the anti-vaccination movement." If women are supposed to be independent, strong, capable women who can do anything- than why have these beliefs lead to a crisis?

Also, I found it interesting (and a little suspicious) that in thanking her editor she reveals that fact that she began writing this book before she even had her baby. If this is supposed to be from a Mother's perspective, how can someone that is not a mother write this? The fact that she did become a mother while writing this might be what led to some of the inconsistencies throughout the book.

I did agree with one of Valenti's objectives in the book that if people were to have more honest conversations about parenting and all of it's joys, troubles and hardships than mothers could avoid the secret depression they often harbor.

Valenti spends a lot of the book coming to the idea that society needs to accept and support these new notions of mothers and so needs policy and societal changes; but I came away from it feeling like she was offering a band-aid for a broken bone.

So what did I get from this book?

It was a quick read that definitely gets you thinking. It would be a good book to read to get some serious and probably heated discussions started; but don't read it expecting any real solutions or even much new material to add to the debate already out there. I agree with Valenti in that more honesty and acceptance needs to be shown by and towards parents and parenting and that alone could help parents find more joy in parenting. So while I won't be throwing it across the room, I also will not be reading it again.

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## **Natalie Minor says**

I'm glad Jessica Valenti wrote this book, and I'm glad I read it. I don't think she necessarily says anything untrue or offensive (though she's not afraid to be provocative) - but the reason I didn't quite love the book is that I thought it was a bit sloppy.

It seemed repetitive, and it was so focused on making the point that being a parent is hard that it almost forgot to answer the question posed by the title, which is really what made me want to read it. Her recommendation for how we can be happier, more balanced parents is literally squeezed into the final three paragraphs.

I'd like to read something a bit more explicit from her on what we need to do - something that isn't slapped in there as an afterthought.

Also, this is really minor, but for some reason it really irked me: several times throughout the book, she cites studies that she disagrees with and indicates that all these studies should be taken with a grain of salt, debunking their methodology or simply scoffing at the results. But she treats the studies that align with her own hypotheses as the gospel truth. It felt, at times, like she was bending her research to fit her reality and not the other way around.

Still, this is a conversation that needs to happen, and I think it's an important (and brave) book to have

written.

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## Julie Ehlers says

My feelings about *Why Have Kids?* are similar to my feelings about Jessica Valenti's earlier books, *Full Frontal Feminism* and *The Purity Myth*: namely, that this is a good introduction to a complex topic. Like other feminist writers before her, Valenti observes that motherhood in the U.S. is rife with contradictions—a lot of lip service is paid to revering mothers, yet our culture fails to support them in meaningful ways, such as with affordable child care, universal health care, and family-friendly workplace policies. This book also takes on some sacred cows, such as the idea that all women automatically bond with their babies, or that every mother finds joy in her motherly duties and is wholly unconflicted about them. Her thesis is that looking at motherhood in a more realistic way can only help mothers and children, and it's hard to argue with that (although I'm sure some people will find a way!). In short, if you can handle Valenti's typically meandering, bloggy style, you'll find a lot here that's worth considering.

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## Gail says

In what is essentially the American version of Elizabeth Badinter's polemical "The Conflict," feminist Jessica Valenti has a lot of controversial things to say about women and motherhood; unfortunately, like Badinter, she doesn't take the time to focus her discussion, hone her points, and effectively advocate for reform - and isn't amusing enough to make up the difference.

Though it touches on wide-ranging topics, "Why Have Kids" reads like one long blog post (complete with annoying typos and citation of random online comments as evidence) questioning the wisdom and responsibility of stay-at-home parenthood. Valenti writes, "In a perfect world, the United States would provide a wage for housework and child care - after all, it's labor that contributes to the economy." But since "that's not the world we live in right now," she claims that full-time parenthood is not a job - because it's not that hard, important, or rewarding - and asserts that "women should work" for their own benefit as well as out of obligation to other women and society at large.

Before addressing these incendiary claims, it's important to note that Valenti argues against a background assertion/assumption that anxious, perfectionist parenting is the new norm. Is it a trend among relatively wealthy, first-time parents? Yes. American parents as a whole? Not that I've seen. (Valenti writes, "I'm sure some parents have learned to let go, but I haven't met many of them." I would be happy to make some introductions.) Moreover, Valenti clearly oversteps when she suggests that stay-at-home mothers definitionally (or even just largely) fuel this perfectionist fire and embrace all-encompassing, omnisacrificial motherhood. Stay-at-home mothers may be at greater risk for "total motherhood," thanks to their occupational investment in the role, but many of us do the job and also demand the flexibility (from our kids, spouses, community members, and budgets) to carve out a "life independent of [our child(ren)]." All that is to say, while over-parenting and subsuming motherhood are real problems worth discussing, Valenti's exaggeration of their scope creates a shaky foundation for many of her contentions.

As for the real meat of her argument, Valenti writes: "[I]n my relatively short time as a parent, I've heard from dozens of people telling me that what I'm doing is the hardest, most important job in the world. . . . Do American moms really believe that diaper changing trumps pediatric oncology? Or that child rearing is

harder than being a firefighter or factory worker? And if we do believe the hype, if full-time motherhood really is the hardest job in the world, why isn't it paid? If it's the most rewarding, then why do so many of us have other people care for our children? And if parenting is the most important job in the world, why on earth aren't more men lining up to quit their frivolous-by-comparison day jobs . . . ? Now, this idea - that parenting is the most difficult job in the world - may just be cultural hyperbole, but it's also a lie that too many of us have bought into."

Um, okay. Deep breath. Aaaaaaaand go. I won't waste much time on her argument's flippant overstatement and unhelpful logical fallacies (suffice it to say, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, that our country always rewards hard, important jobs - like teaching and nursing - with high salaries; and that men as a group are widely known to jump at the chance to do important work regardless of prestige or compensation). I'll also try not to follow in Valenti's footsteps and conflate the "hard," "important," and "rewarding" issues.

First, do I believe that stay-at-home parenthood is harder than, say, Barack Obama's job? No, I do not. But I've been a catering gopher, a public high school teacher, a law clerk, and a practicing lawyer; and stay-at-home parenthood is as hard if not harder than those positions. There are a handful of jobs that are undeniably harder than stay-at-home parenthood, but that does not mean that stay-at-home parents who believe their job is hard are deluded or delusional. If Valenti truly believes that "when we see parenting for what it is - a relationship, not a job - we can free ourselves from the expectations and the stifling standards that motherhood-as-employment demands" - that is, that the job is only hard because we're making it hard on ourselves - she's the one who's deluded. I can conjure Valenti's image of a mother run ragged by "elimination communication" or a drive to constantly stimulate her child, but I think there's a lot of daylight between that woman and the one who narrowly avoids action by Child Protective Services. Along that spectrum sit many stay-at-home parents working extremely, but not unnecessarily, hard.

I quibble with Valenti's theory as well as her facts. She seems to think that people tell stay-at-home mothers that their job is hard as a way to both patronize and placate. I believe the reverse is true. The stay-at-home-parenthood-as-a-difficult-job narrative is one that prevents others from taking advantage of women. As the term "second shift work" acknowledges, "child care, housework, and domestic responsibilities" often remain at the end of a work day. The only way to convince a working parent to split this evening work equitably, is to ensure he understands that a stay-at-home parent's first shift is just as hard as his own. (If stay-at-home parenting were less difficult, a longer shift would be justified and working parents everywhere would be within their rights to plop down on the couch and watch TV while their spouses bathe children and scrub floors.) Seen through this lens, emphasizing the difficulty of stay-at-home parenthood works to value women's contributions, not diminish them.

Furthermore, we absolutely do "need to start thinking about raising our children as a community exercise" and reject "solitary caretaking" as too demanding; but doing so would make stay-at-home parenting a truly viable job option on the difficulty front, not eliminate it as one.

Now, is stay-at-home parenthood more important than Barack Obama's job? No. Is it so unimportant that it ought to be eliminated from the range of employment options available to women? No. Valenti quotes Linda Hirshman and others who assert "that women who choose to stay at home and raise children - especially those who are of the privileged upper-middle-class variety - are doing a disservice to other women and society at large." "Whether they leave the workplace altogether or just cut back their commitment, their talent and education is lost from the public world to the private world of laundry and kissing boo-boos." Valenti adds: "We mock these moms as neurotic overachievers who are obsessed with their kids, but perhaps their zealous parenting is just the understandable outcome of expecting smart, driven women to find satisfaction in spit-up. All of the energy they could be - and maybe should be - spending in the public sphere

is directed at their children because they have no other place to put it.” These arguments - that full-time parenting isn’t important enough to merit women’s time, effort, and skills - ignore two critical facts: private contributions become public and civic engagement comes in a variety of forms.

Education - academic, democratic, psychological, and sociological - is one of the most important issues for any society’s future. Valenti poo-poops the argument that stay-at-home parents are educating and socializing their children under the heading of women living for the accomplishments of others rather than achieving themselves. The problem with this reasoning is that plenty of respected occupations exist largely in order to maximize others’ contributions to society. No one argues that early childhood educators aren’t working. Where does that leave Valenti? With a numbers game. Daycare centers generally shoot for a five to one ratio. If I have four kids at home am I gainfully employed? Three? Is it the opposite of the environmentalists’ reproduction mantra so that if I’m doing more than just caring for my own replacement, it’s a job? I just can’t swallow the idea that whether or not my occupation serves society is determined by the number of children under my care - or, even less logically, whether they’re mine.

Moreover, Valenti simply can’t prove the claim that “[i]f you’re giving 80 percent of your life to your children, maybe you’ll add 1 percent of difference in your child’s life.” Her question - “how much extra work will really make that much of a difference?” - is an open and legitimate one. Surely some of us go overboard. But my qualitative observation says that having a person who is invested, focused, and skilled teach children things like how to manage their emotions, how to embrace life’s trial and error process, and how to empathize makes a big difference in the people who those kids become. When I work to produce children who are intellectually curious, sociable, responsible, and happy I serve the public interest as much as a daycare worker, teacher, or athletic coach. Does it really help women to pit me against my gynecological oncologist friend in order to determine the exact relative importance of our jobs? Or does the fact that her husband stays at home with her son undermine that family’s net contribution to the world as well?

Valenti also fails to acknowledge stay-at-home parents’ public engagement. While staying home with the kids, I’ve served on a committee at the Seattle Children’s Hospital, facilitated an open play space for Seattle First Presbyterian Church (of which I am not a member), given my school board and city council members a piece of my mind, conducted food and book drives for local charities, organized half a dozen clothing swaps for other parents, participated in a city clean-up, and rallied other parents to help the YWCA’s efforts to normalize holidays for homeless children. Only one of these events happened on a weekend. While I may be uniquely committed to volunteerism - a.k.a., another mockable “neurotic overachiever” - my fellow stay-at-home parents often contribute in civic-minded ways. We also bear the brunt of maintaining our families’ and communities’ social fabric. And don’t forget the blogging; stay-at-home parents’ contributions to the public consciousness through written expression ought not to be ballyhooed. In sum, stay-at-home moms can be and often are women employing their continued dynamism to society’s benefit.

Third, there’s the question of stay-at-home parenting’s rewards and price. Valenti underestimates the benefits my current job provides me. Sure, some women will relate to descriptions of the “boredom of stay-at-home momism,” but others - and not just those with experience limited to “low-paying professions” as Valenti implies - will tell you that all jobs are a mixed bag (anyone loving legal document review?) and more enjoyable to some than others thanks to individual affinities and skills (think of the guy who works the front desk at the gym grinning like a pig in shit, or the sommelier who believes civilizations rise and fall based on wine pairings). People have multiple intelligences - including types that come in handy when parenting full time like kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist - but as Susan Stiffelman notes in another context, “we live in a society where . . . the highest salaries are paid to those most proficient in mathematic and language skills. . . . We tend to minimize . . . other forms of intelligence, underestimating the value of their contribution.” Folks who choose to provide childcare for their kids rather than paying someone

else to do it may actually enjoy that work; others, especially those suffering from dissatisfaction and depression, should contemplate a job change. In other words, Valenti's "not that interesting" point doesn't serve to invalidate stay-at-home parenting as a choice for women; it just calls into question whether too many of us are choosing it in error.

Valenti bemoans the "longer-term sacrifices borne primarily by the parent who quits: the lost promotions, raises and retirement benefits; the atrophied skills and frayed professional networks." These are absolutely valid concerns worthy of discussion, but also on the agenda should be what women - especially "elite stay-at-home mothers" who "opt-out" of the workplace - gain. For example, Valenti takes issue with the following statement by Caitlin Flanagan: "'The kind of relationship formed between a child and a mother who is home all day caring for him is substantively different from that formed between a child and a woman who is gone many hours a week.'" I don't believe that "women who work[] outside the home . . . miss[] out on the joys of parenthood" or that the difference is large, categorical, or always beneficial - but I perceive a difference. In the case of my family the difference works to my advantage (and to my kids').

But I don't just offset this lovey-dovey connectedness (or smug self-satisfaction, depending on the viewpoint) against "the lost promotions" and whatnot. Valenti also leaves off the balance sheet the skills that stay-at-home parents develop. Like many others, I consider my decision to "opt-out" to be like choosing a sabbatical from paid labor rather than retirement. Wikipedia enlightens: "In recent times, 'sabbatical' has come to mean any extended absence in the career of an individual in order to achieve something. . . [,] typically to fulfill some goal, e.g., writing a book or traveling extensively for research." I plan to rejoin the workforce, certainly by the time my kids begin school, and I believe I'm accomplishing something in the meantime, not just for them but for me, and not just for private-me but for professional-me. In the last four years I've gained patience, perspective, creativity, and unflappability. I've enhanced my ability to multi-task, problem-solve, network, resolve conflict, manage time, and handle "difficult" personalities and behaviors. I will certainly be a superior lawyer or teacher for this growth, perhaps even better than I would have been with four more years of work under my belt.

Finally, Valenti argues from symbolism that the institution of the stay-at-home mother tells women that "their natural role is only that of a mother." If that's the case, then society tells my husband that he is nothing more than a marketer, and Lord knows that's not true. I see the point she's getting at; there definitely are tricky identity issues involved with conflating your work and private lives. But they're not insurmountable on an individual or institutional level.

In sum, Valenti comes off as truly wanting to both "think critically - and be critical - of parents' choices," but she largely sacrifices the former for the latter in a way that saddens me. She sets up the straw man of the omnisacrificial mother and knocks her down. She overreaches her arguments' fair and logical extent in urging all stay-at-home mothers to return to the paid workforce rather than simply asking themselves probing questions. Should I change the way I approach my work? (Am I making it too hard on myself? Can I make my days more social? More societally beneficial? Do I need to carve out more time for my own interests?) Should I make a job change? (Am I good at stay-at-home parenting? Do I enjoy it? Could I better serve the world by changing careers?) Instead, Valenti essentially says, "Oh, you've got a flat tire and a crack in the windshield? Go get a new car. Better yet, walk. Your emissions doom us all." Even if you buy Valenti's conclusion that "women should work," she offers no insight for women who have opted out not by choice but because available full or part-time positions aren't workable for them. Part-time work often doesn't cover the cost of childcare, demands more than twenty hours a week, requires more labor per dollar than that asked of full-time employees, or for a host of other reasons isn't currently a legitimate option.

In focusing more on being critical than thinking critically, Valenti puts the onus on individual women to

shoehorn their desires and ambitions into the glass slipper offered by society, rather than pushing the few novel ideas she throws out (like establishing some sort of wage system for stay-at-home parents) or brainstorming others (such as institutionalized support for childcare and other domestic labor swaps among families, putting social pressure on working parents to do more around the house, bringing the concept of job-sharing to law firms so that mothers can pool their time to meet billable hours and divide the salary, or creating legal positions that do only upstream work like research or first-drafts and therefore don't require constant or consistent availability, to toss out a few). We need real change to expand the choices available to and tenable for women, not further limitations.

Valenti's one accomplishment in "Why Have Kids?" is fanning the flames to keep an important conversation raging so that others can do a better job than she at organizing around solutions that will help women thrive.

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## **Melissa says**

Prepare to tear your hair out over this one. In America, women are told that raising children is the most rewarding thing we could ever possibly do, as well as the hardest. "Moms have the toughest jobs in the world if you're doing it right," says Oprah. I guess this makes it easier to feel better about yourself when you're exhausted & changing diapers & trying to dress someone who hates pants today & getting screamed at by your toddler & getting woken up in the middle of the night because someone can't find his dinosaur blanket that happened to be sitting three inches to his right – true story! The satisfaction gained from such a narrative is tenuous at best, especially if you believe that having a C-section means you're not being a "natural" mother; if you're getting catcalled in a coffee shop because you either gave your baby a bottle ("Breast is really best!") or you actually unsnapped your bra ("Put that away, it's disgusting!"); if you worry at the end of the day if your three-year-old who's taking Spanish, ballet, art class, and gymnastics is getting enough stimulation (my guess = yes). Throw in moms who are subject to criminal action for attempting to have VBACs, a mom whose son was hit & killed by a drunk driver who fled the scene, who was sentenced to more jail time than the person who killed him, and yeah. Why have kids indeed?

I am tremendously lucky as a mom. I had just two weeks of postpartum depression after my son was born & then things got easier. During the time after his birth when all I wanted to do was lay on the floor & sob, my husband was around to help me & be joyous enough for the both of us. I got three months of leave through my job & my mother, who works for the city as I do, was able to donate sick leave so I could get paid for the full three months. My husband got one week of paid time off from his job (thanks Teresa!) because he's a great employee, has worked at that store for years, and also maybe because I worked there for years before him & was also a great employee. We both have extended family that live in the same city as we do. We are also lucky enough that we can work less than 40 hours a week and still pay our bills, if not for much else. I'm not a high-stress person & I have so far been comfortable not worrying if G is stimulated enough, if he's eating enough, if he should be taking Spanish lessons already. He is happy, healthy, smart, and a wonderful little boy. All of these things conspire to make me pretty overjoyed about my decision to become a parent, even if I did think we'd made a terrible mistake the night we brought him home.

What the hell are we supposed to do about women who don't have the same life as me? What about the woman who can't afford to take leave? What about the woman who doesn't have a partner or family nearby or a good friend network? What about women who don't have health insurance, or who don't feel that magical Mom connection everyone is "supposed" to feel the moment their child is born? Why are we forced this narrative that parenting is wonderful & easy – but if it's not, you damn well better make that sacrifice? I say we all go a little easier on ourselves as mothers. Let's take all the energy we use on judging



women on UrbanBaby.com who make different choices than us & turn that on our government & ask for mandatory paid maternity leave.\* Let's ask for flex time, for mothers to make as much money as their childless counterparts. Let's stop reviling women who don't want to have kids – it's not the only thing we are put on this earth to do, you know. Let's advocate for America to start acting like it's as great as it says it is – no more mortality rates that make “giving birth in this country more dangerous than in Kuwait or Bosnia,” no more increase in C-sections before lunchtime & shift ends in hospitals.

\*Really, it is an absolute *travesty* that America offers no mandatory maternity leave. Nothing makes me more angry at this country than that fact.

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## Bookphile says

Reading books like this restores my sanity. I found myself nodding along with so many of Valenti's points. I suspect that this is the kind of book that people will slam without reading, and that's an injustice. Valenti is bringing up a lot of points that could seriously impact families for the better, regardless of their parenting styles, socioeconomic status, etc. There is work to be done here. More complete review to follow.

Full review:

Though the title of Valenti's book is provocative and sure to inflame, this is not a book that's making an argument against parenting. What this book actually does is take a critical look at the social and cultural constructs surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting, and break them down piece by piece. Valenti is attempting to open a dialog that is long past due, one that forms a cornerstone of American culture and that has a lot of influenced not only on how successful we are as individuals, but as a culture.

Divided into two parts, Valenti's book takes a look at some things she terms "lies" and others she terms "truth", but her ultimate conclusion is this: we need to have a much more honest dialog about parenting, its challenges and rewards, and what society needs to do to support parents before we can really make any progress, and she is absolutely right about that. The only way we're ever going to progress beyond the wage inequalities, the ridiculous "mommy wars", and the continuing discrimination against parents who are members of a minority is by having an honest and open dialog about how parenting looks in America and how we really want it to look.

I'll start with the "lies" portion of the book. In it, Valenti considers such cultural constructs as "mother knows best", "breast is best", and that having children will "complete" a person. I found this portion of the book so refreshing, because so much of the rhetoric surrounding these kinds of issues reeks of condescension and outright misinformation. It is designed to make women feel badly, to convince women that they ought to chain themselves to home and hearth, ignore their own well-being, and subsume themselves completely, all in the interest of maintaining some impossible standard of perfection. Valenti isn't arguing against breastfeeding or stay-at-home moms--and, as someone who has both breastfed my children and decided to be a stay-at-home mom, neither am I. Instead, what Valenti says--with which I wholeheartedly agree--is that people should be empowered to make the decisions that are best for them and their families. Instead, we currently live in a society that ignores years of scientific research in favor of creating a hostile environment in which women are made to feel inadequate for being unable to live up to an unrealistic image of the uber-mom.

The "truth" section deals with discussion of such issues as the decline of the nuclear family and the rise of women--and men--who are choosing not to have children. We have a sort of cult of the "traditional" family in this country, and Valenti is making an argument for why it's a myth that it's unnatural for people not to want to be parents, or that children who have same sex parents are somehow damaged. Valenti cites a great deal of research to back up her points, and she illuminates the fact that a lot of the misinformation serves as a smoke screen that prevents us from having truly fruitful discussions about what we need to do to improve society, which would improve outcomes for everyone.

Valenti shows how entrenched interests buck against truthful dialog because it doesn't serve them well to have a progressive discussion about the nature of families and parenthood, and how their regressive policies damage all Americans. Rather than mothers banding together to work toward affordable, high-quality child care, the current system encourages women to viciously tear one another apart for the decisions they make about their work/family balance. Rather than Americans demanding more flexibility and better pay from their employers--which would have serious impact on the quality of home life for both parents and children, they can argue about whether or not children are best served by families that observe traditional gender roles.

As I read, I couldn't help but feel like Valenti was helping to bring some sanity back into the world. The bottom line is that most parents dearly love their children and want the best for them. Yet, rather than taking steps to ensure a brighter future for their children, parents are often either bogged down with crippling guilt over their perceived failures or they're busy waging war against one another over the choices they've made.

For my part, I'm with Valenti. Let's talk about what makes Scandinavian countries so successful when it comes to family/work balance and the overall happiness and satisfaction of women. Let's take a look at our broken systems in the United States (health care, education, support for working parents) and figure out what we can do to fix them so that all Americans will have better outcomes, which in turn would lead to better outcomes for our country as a whole.

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## **Jen says**

While I agree having more discussions about things like the high cost of child care, non existent maternity leave and quality of education are important, this book hit a sour note with me. Disclaimer, I have 3 kids, and I am very satisfied with my choices.

I was curious,however, to find out what the author thought would suffice as an answer to her question. I admit I often find myself bristling at the current trend that debates to death whether or not parents are happy with their charges and in their roles. Number one..don't ask the newbies ( like this author, who I believe starting writing while preggers). They are tired, worn out and underappreciated. Ask a grandmother, someone with perspective for petes sake. Seems like so many parenting debates center on those early years...there's a whole lotta parenting left after sleeping thru the night!! Two where did we ever get the idea that only the easy things are good and fun? Kids will not at every moment make you happy. Nor will your dog, husband, best friend or perennial garden. That's not necessarily a reason to forgo them.

I never like when an author tells me something is true when its just her opinion, and the final part of this book is no exception. I felt like the stats were sketchy and skewed. Just seems like the wrong question to ask, why have kids. I'd rather ask how to make life more bearable for parents, and those who chose not to have kids.End of rant ;)

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## Jessica says

I got more out of some parts of this than others. *Why Have Kids?* was one part "Have you heard of the Mommy Wars?"; one part "My nipples were bleeding!", i.e., Valenti voicing personal surprise at how harrowing parenting can be, in part because of the pressure (some) parents now put on themselves; and one part genuinely interesting discussion of laws, policies, and attitudes that dehumanize parents--mothers in particular. Maybe I found the last piece most interesting because I am a lawyer, and "child-free" (which is what this book tells me I am called). But to me, it was the only topic I didn't feel rehashed ground that had been covered already, ad nauseum, both in the press and on every parenting forum. Some of the discussion of "work" was also engaging, in particular Valenti's revised stance on whether mothers should work outside the home and her treatment of the narrative we seem to love about parenthood / motherhood being "the most important job" anyone (or, a woman) can do.

On the whole, I felt like this book wasn't too demanding of Valenti and was probably calculated to be an easy seller (though I bought it for \$4 on Kindle, woot) rather than groundbreaking social criticism. Most of the quotes were just things people said on blogs or internet forums. Low hanging fruit.

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## Jaclyn Day says

There are so many things swirling in my head after finishing this book that I'm not sure where to start! First, the obvious: I liked it. After writing this post last week (<http://blog.jaclynday.com/post/320042...>), I read the book over the weekend and found myself highlighting almost every other paragraph on my Kindle. There are so many important things in this book—things that shouldn't just be important to moms. It's a book that every woman should read and every man too, for that matter. Why?

It's difficult to have a frank conversation about parenting and the many challenges and rewards that can be a part of the experience. As Valenti points out, there are huge issues that can affect parents in this country that go virtually unaddressed because we're all so obsessed with whether moms are breastfeeding for a specific length of time.

The book is divided into two sections. The first is divided into chapters under the heading of "Lies," while the second section is headed "Truth." A few of the lies Valenti addresses are "Children Make You Happy" or "Women Are the Natural Parent," while chapters under the Truth section include "Smart Women Don't Have Kids" and "Death of the Nuclear Family." As Valenti mentions several times, they're inflammatory topics. They don't need to be (can we have a conversation about anything "taboo" in parenting without it becoming thermonuclear?) and I'm sure that much of the book will be dismissed by angry mothers or fathers as written by someone who isn't a good parent. How could a mother possibly question whether children actually make you happy? Isn't that exactly what women are put on this earth to do?

It's these kind of provocative questions and examinations that make this book really intriguing and especially valuable for a new mother. Bloggers sometimes address these topics and you'll see the occasional news article about it too, but it's rare for an entire book to be written about the parenting experience in this way.

My only frustration with the book was the occasional lack of depth. Valenti would present really interesting

facts (legislation introduced criminalizing miscarriage if it seemed self-induced in various states, for example) but would be on to another topic a few paragraphs later. I sometimes wanted more background information or more discussion on certain things and didn't get it. I understand why she probably made the decision to keep the book short—you could discuss the background and various aspects of parenting politics for hundreds of pages, probably—but I thought there were a few missed opportunities throughout. I think the most glaring issue (even though I hesitate to call it an “issue”) is that you'll find this book doesn't clearly answer the title question. I also think this was purposeful as there's no easy answer to that question, but it's bold to title a book with the question “Why Have Kids?” and then leave the reader to come to his or her own conclusions based on the contents. I would have liked to have read more about Valenti's own experiences. How did she reconcile all of her research with the fact that she is a mother herself? How has that role changed her both good and bad? She included several personal stories about her daughter's birth in the book, but her daughter is a toddler now. Has anything changed with the passing of time? Would she have another baby?

Aside from those things, this book is really remarkable if for no other reason than Valenti is willing to discuss things that we're all a little uncomfortable talking about. For fear of what? Judgment? Guilt? That “mother's guilt” is a major factor in what Valenti says is the continued marginalization of mothers in this country. Instead of these legions of mothers mobilizing to confront problems like affordable child care solutions, they're down in the trenches of message boards squabbling about whether or not they are living up to an unrealistic standard of perfection. Instead of us talking about how our country's maternity leave policies are severely flawed and potentially harmful, we're reading about Jessica Simpson's pregnancy weight gain.

Valenti wrote:

"And if it's not the media and books, it's the constant one-upmanship between mothers that keeps parents in their place. Are you breastfeeding? Co-sleeping? Baby-wearing?"

One of the most important messages in Valenti's book is that the typical “mommy wars” controversies are arguments that only a small percentage of mothers in this country are having. While this relatively small percentage of middle-upper class women are arguing about whether SAHM (stay at home moms) or working moms are better parents, there is a huge number of parents in this country that don't have the luxury of choosing one way or the other. Valenti's chapter about the sometimes overtly racist language used by mothers to describe their modeling of childcare after “third world” techniques is a cannot-be-missed portion of her book.

One of Valenti's final points was particularly good:

“We need to do away with the idea there is a ‘natural’ way to parent—whatever way we choose to parent is the natural way. Once we let go of a maternal (and paternal) ideal that doesn't exist, we can do the real work of loving our kids and have fun doing it. American parents need to support one another—especially those of us who don't fit into the ‘good’ or ‘perfect’ mother model. When one mother is punished, we're all punished. We can fight against policies that criminalize mothers for being mothers and that dictate that women are less than human when they're pregnant. We also need to accept that the world is changing, and that there isn't one kind of family, so we need to support all kinds, not just in our personal lives but in our political and social actions.”

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