

## [Mom Was Always There](#)

Category : [January/February/March 2002](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2002

### PARENTING

## Mom Was Always There

How one highly educated mother chose to forego a career for a stable home

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It was the spring of 1974. one sunny afternoon at 4:00 after school was over, my brother and I raced home. He was nine years old and I was eleven. We knocked at the door with impatience, eager to show our art projects to Mom and tell her about the essay contest results. But when the door opened, it was Grandma, not Mother. "Where is Amma? Why didn't she open the door?" I asked incredulously. "She will be back any minute," replied Grandma. "She just went to the grocery store."

"Why isn't she here?" asked my brother unhappily. "Now listen." responded Grandma, in a soft and firm voice. "I am here for you. So, go and change. Your mother made these snacks just for you." Did we do what she suggested? Oh yes, but not without a few complaints. We wished Amma was home for us—like always.

Grandma, my precious grandma. She had been living with us since I was five. Even though we loved her dearly, we expected to see our mother as soon as we arrived home from school. "Why couldn't Amma finish her grocery shopping before four o'clock?" we wondered aloud as we nibbled our snacks.

Looking back at that episode today, I am amazed. Although we were both young, we could see a difference between them. Grandma and Mom were both loving and dear, but Grandma was Grandma and Mom was Mom.

By 1991, such childhood memories lay buried in the deep recesses of my mind. At that time, I was a research assistant at Texas A&M University, working for my doctorate in bioorganic chemistry and dreaming about my future and the wonderful scientific career that beckoned me. That year something very simple yet extraordinary happened during an annual schoolparty at our professor's house. This party was attended by my married colleagues and their spouses. I was talking to a co-worker named Lisa when Sandy, a senior scientist and friend, interrupted us.

"I had to get away. It was too much for me. They are back to the same old topic of babies and childcare, and they're oblivious to everything else," she was saying as she gestured with frustration at some stay-at-home moms deeply engaged in conversation at the other end of the room. "Don't they have anything else to discuss?"

She was single and alone and it was obvious that she felt out of place. I simply smiled. Not having any children at that time, I didn't know what to say. Soon it was all forgotten and we were busy discussing an upcoming seminar.

When my husband and I returned home that night, I could not help but think of those stay-at-home moms and their choice of life. I had a very disturbed sleep and woke up frequently with questions about the children we would have one day. I wondered how those children would affect a career and if I would be able to successfully balance that career with the needs of a family.

It was the first time I was giving serious thought to such questions, and there were no apparent answers. Yet, in spite of this confusion, I knew two things for certain: I loved children and enjoyed being with them. I decided that I would just cross that bridge when I came to it.

Three years later, as I was busy applying for jobs, I learned that I had conceived. I was filled with delight. Then, I had a successful job interview, and cold reality started to sink in. All the happiness disappeared. When I placed a hand on the baby in my womb, I was filled with sorrow and anguish. I did not know what to do. When

my husband came home, I shared my conflicting feelings with him. He listened to me and said with an understanding smile: "I will not influence you either way. You should do what feels right. I will support you a hundred percent no matter what you decide."

Fortunately, by then I had learned through regular meditation and practical experience that the best way to make a correct decision during periods of confusion and doubt was to listen to the voice of the heart. In the days that followed, I recorded my emotions and feelings to clarify my thoughts.

I wondered to myself if I had worked so hard for my doctorate only to give up a career. Not necessarily. Choosing to stay home wouldn't have to be a binding decision. I could always return to work, I thought.

Being a scientist is very important to me. I love asking questions and searching for solutions in science. "Now, be honest and pragmatic," I tell myself. "You are not pursuing the Nobel Prize. While there are thousands of scientists around the world already working for the benefit of mankind, you are the only mother of your child. If you are unwilling to give that child undivided love, attention and time, then why should anybody else want to—except for money?"

If I go to work, who will raise my child? Baby sitters? Daycare centers? No, I cannot even bear that thought. It is my precious child we are talking about. I want to be the first one to hear him say, "Amma." My biggest weakness is cherishing whatever is "mine." How can I bear to see my child running toward a baby sitter with joy? I would be filled with jealousy and guilt if I did not take care of my own children.

My morals and values are not the same as those of the childcare provider. I don't mean to be rude, but it is a fact that morals and values are relative, and no two persons think alike. Children are precious and have to be treated with wisdom and love. Like wet clay, they can be molded in any way. Why should I trust somebody else with this job when I know that kids have very impressionable minds and hearts? Especially when child psychologists and pediatricians from different schools of thought agree that the first few years of a child's life are developmentally crucial.

Will a single paycheck be enough? Yes, if we are careful with our spending and live within our means. It will not be easy initially, because I have always been financially independent. Interestingly, my individual needs don't seem to be important any longer. If I put them on a scale against the love I felt for my unborn child, they would not weigh very much.

If I were a working mom, would I be able to sleep peacefully at night? Or would I be too exhausted and stressed from juggling family needs with job demands? And most importantly, what about the discipline of the child? Could I be strict in good conscience? Or would I react defensively when I saw that expression, "You are never here, Mommy."

I wrote a journal posing dozens of questions and uncertainties. Coming up with one foolproof answer was not an easy task. I had to clear my head, put the intellect aside and think with the heart. Finally, I went for a long walk and sat down exhausted in a park. As I wistfully watched the setting sun, I heard the joyful shrieks of small children. They were urging their moms to push the swings higher and higher toward the sky. Suddenly, I remembered that afternoon in 1974 when my brother and I returned home from school and Grandma had opened the door. Instinctively, I knew the answer to my dilemma. "Amma was always there for me," I said to myself. "Don't you remember how unhappy you were on those rare occasions when she was unavailable? Why should you deny your child the happiness of having a full-time mom—a privilege that you enjoyed and cherished as a child?"

My heart was now content as it superseded my personal concerns and the intellect. Later that night, as

I lay in bed, I asked myself, "During the twilight years of your life, what is it that you will reflect upon? Will it be some wonderful scientific accomplishment, or will it be the children for whom you were unavailable?" The answer was crystal clear. The childhood years had to be treasured or they would simply fly away. My scientific career could definitely wait for a few years—despite the loss of seniority and other advantages.

I was now filled with a sense of relief. I had spared myself the agony experienced by thousands of working mothers. No one could put this into words better than Golda Meir, the mother of two and the first woman to become Prime Minister of Israel. She said: "At work, you think of your children you have left at home. At home, you think of the work you have left unfinished. Such a struggle is unleashed within yourself that your heart is rent."