

Motherhood: Why Society is Making it the Most Stress-Ridden Career

An [op-ed](#) published last week in the *New York Times* has confirmed that motherhood is the most controversial and stress-ridden career of the 21st century. Author Kim Brooks knows this better than most. For her, it all started with a knock on the door by a police officer with a warrant for her arrest.

The reason? She left her 4-year-old son in the car for a couple of minutes while she ducked into a shop. As she made clear, it was not a hot day, and she “cracked the windows, child-locked the doors and set the alarm.”

There is no law in Virginia – where the “incident” occurred – against letting your child wait in a car, she points out. Her offence, according to the officer, was “child abuse and neglect.”

Shocked, Brooks was at a loss as to how to proceed. She decided to reach out to other American women to see if she wasn't alone in this bizarre turn of events, and collected similar stories of women who had found themselves on the wrong side of the law, simply through a commonsense but socially reprehensible parenting judgement.

One mum Brooks spoke to was charged with “felony child endangerment” for not wanting to wake her sleeping daughter in the back seat, and leaving her there for a few minutes, with the windows open, to pop into a store. The police officer commented while arresting her, “Stay-at-home mom's too busy shopping to take care of her kid?”

Another woman had been charged on two counts of felony child

abuse and sentenced to 18 years (yes, years!) supervised probation, because she had no childcare options and had to leave her two children in the car while she went to a job interview.

Brooks sees these examples as proof that the hyper-alert supervision mothers are expected to meet in the US is a bourgeois criterion. Because,

“In a country that provides no subsidized child care and no mandatory family leave, no assurance of flexibility in the workplace for parents, no universal preschool and minimal safety nets for vulnerable families...in effect makes it a crime to be poor.”

Brooks is en point when she observes, “when a mother is intimidated, insulted or demeaned because of her parenting choices, we call it concern or, at worst, nosiness.” Unlike women hurled abuse in any other situation, “a mother, apparently, cannot be harassed. A mother can only be corrected.”

Not only is the unrealistic expectation to facilitate totally risk-free childhoods wearing mothers out and making them an easy target for spectators. Children are going mad being pent up indoors, enclosed in small backyards, plugged into technology and buckled up in seatbelts. This could even be contributing to [the rise in ADHD](#).

It's a vicious cycle. When we deny our children “the luxury of being unnoticed, of being left alone,” we surely are heightening the risks of things like childhood obesity, anxiety, screen addictions, depression and loneliness. Creating a restricted, censored and cottonwool-wrapped climate for our children is far more likely to give rise to these things than if we allow a little risk-taking.

Here in Australia, [it is illegal across every state to leave a](#)

[child unattended in a car for any length of time.](#) In Victoria, my home state, penalties range from fines of \$3,690 to up to six months jail time. By law, a parent is committing a crime each time he or she leaves their children in the car in order to do something so simple as pay for fuel.

What if it might be the safer option to leave the kids in the car sometimes? Perhaps there's a busy road to cross to reach the bakery, or the car park's full of reversing vehicles to navigate small children through. The situation of leaving a child in a car has been catastrophised to such an extreme that responsible mothers making sensible decisions are in danger of being incarcerated.

And we wonder why so many mums flock back to work soon after having a baby. Or why post-natal depression is on the rise. Why should they take on the doomed-to-failure social prescription for their role, and risk being made into social pariahs at every turn? Especially when their monumental efforts in child-raising otherwise goes largely unrecognised?

Yes, there's the risk of something happening beyond the mother's control, like tripping and getting concussed or being hit by a vehicle. This renders her risk assessment for leaving her children for an intended minute or two useless. But should we let such wildly unlikely possibilities veto our judgements? If we really lived like this, we'd all be buying lottery tickets every week.

Being expected to supervise your children every waking moment is exhausting, impractical and unsustainable. And when motherhood has become a "lifestyle choice" there's little room for sympathy for the struggling mum. She didn't *have* to become one.

I have heard it said that "what's good for the mother is good for the child." If she can assess the risk level of an environment and deem it safe enough to leave her children

momentarily unsupervised, should we think her a child abuser?

It's easy to divvy out safety rules when you're not dealing with ground-level reality. Yes, teach society the dangers of leaving a child in a hot car for any amount of time. But don't criminalise mothers who make level-headed decisions regarding the welfare of their children, whom they have no intention to "wilfully neglect."

—

Veronika Winkels is the mother of two young children. She writes from Melbourne. This [article](#) has been republished from MercatorNet under a Creative Commons license.

[Image Credit: Flickr-Tina Franklin [CC BY 2.0](#)]