The inbetweeners

Trapped by the conflicting demands of her career and children, the modern working mother seems doomed to feel that she's failing both – as *Antonia Hoyle* (pictured) has discovered. So how do you break the double-guilt cycle?

Photograph by **Sophia Spring**

As soon as I walked into my daughter's bedroom I knew she was ill. Rosie's forehead was clammy and her little body listless. Instinct told me she should stay at home. And yet in two hours I was due to interview an actress. As a freelance journalist whose reputation depends on reliability, I couldn't cancel.

So I soothed Rosie's brow and swiftly deposited her at nursery before her child minders realised she shouldn't be there. With a knot of anxiety in my stomach, I rushed to the interview – only to realise, with two minutes to spare, that I was at the wrong studio, on the wrong side of London. The actress had to wait 30 minutes for *me* to arrive. Luckily she was a mother too, so more understanding than most. But as we finally spoke – my distraction so palpable that I pronounced her name wrongly – my mobile vibrated incessantly in my handbag. I didn't have to look to know it was Rosie's nursery calling.

Later that morning, as I cradled my feverish daughter in my arms, I sobbed tears of self-loathing – for being a negligent mother who put her career before her child, yes, but also for failing at my career.

That day flashed through my mind recently when I read about a study showing that more working mothers than ever are trapped in an endless cycle of guilt: feeling they are bad mothers because they work and bad employees because they have a family. The research found that working mothers spend 25 per cent of their waking hours worrying – five hours a week more than working fathers. "This illustrates the double burden, the pressure to be 'good' mothers and 'good' workers," says Shira Offer, the assistant professor who conducted the research at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

In an age of attachment parenting, in which we're encouraged to devote ourselves to our child's every development, it's not surprising that we suffer guilt. But increasingly we mothers expect ourselves to shine at work too. It's considered taboo and unfeminist to admit we can't cope, a betrayal of the modern myth that equates motherhood with invincibility. But the truth is I'm not as good a journalist as I was before I had my children, Rosie, three, and Felix, one. The glittering career I once envisaged for myself is crumbling quicker than my daughter's bath crayons.

Dr Elle Boag, a social psychologist at Birmingham City University, says that growing pressure on working mothers – both external and internal – contributes to a feeling of intolerable stress. "We want to prove we're capable of this dual

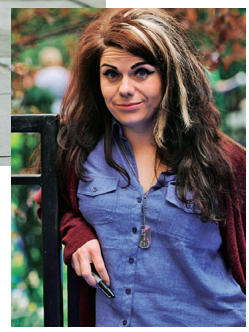
role that's expected of us, that we may have babies but we can still be the best employee, almost *because* we have children, not in spite of it. The pressure comes from the media and society, but mostly it comes from ourselves."

She's right. Perversely, I am more driven than ever, desperate to show I am not defined by motherhood. But my ability lags behind my ambition. Post-children I am distracted, indecisive and less confident. I am more prone to mistakes and often counter-productively manic in my desire to succeed.

I don't think I'm alone. Surely no working mother can be as competent in her career as she was pre-children – at least no working mother who still wants to see her children and doesn't have a house-husband or live-in nanny. On a practical level, we don't have the time. Even on the four days of the week when my children are at nursery I spend three hours a day getting them up, washed, dressed and fed. At 6pm, when magazines and newspapers are preparing for print, I am fielding editors' calls while wrestling the children out of grubby clothes and reading bedtime stories. There is no "off" button in my brain that allows me to switch from one role to another. In a recent interview, Stella McCartney was refreshingly candid about this: "It's not really like that, is it? You're reading the bedtime story and suddenly you remember a call you didn't make. The idea that you can have no life outside of that one moment doesn't make sense to me."

Then there is the crushing exhaustion that comes with motherhood. It's not just the fractured sleep but the physical energy required that makes me forget even basic tasks. As my friend Anne-Marie, a management consultant and mother of two, puts it: "The lack of sleep and continuous juggling all interrupt my concentration and take their toll on my performance."

My children are inevitably affected. When I've done a poor job I am irritable. When I need to meet a deadline I thrust the iPad in their faces. Rosie begs me to put my phone down. The cumulative lack of confidence in both my mothering skills and career is self-perpetuating. Before I became a mother I naively imagined myself flitting effortlessly between groundbreaking investigations and park trips with toddlers, wowing editors with my writing before relaxing in the chubby embraces of my babies. Perhaps I'd write a novel in my spare time. That seems laughable now. With every month I haven't measured up I feel more conflicted.



Stella McCartney and Caitlin Moran (right) have both been vocal about the pressures that working mothers face

Maybe when my children are older it will feel easier. But I'm not sure. Rosie and Felix may be better able to look after themselves, yes, but they will need picking up from school at 3pm. There will be packed lunches to prepare, homework, school holidays and teen angst to navigate. My friend Nadia, also a journalist, has five-year-old twins who have just started school. "My working day is dramatically reduced to five hours now," she says. "Your career can never be the same after kids. You can't commit in the same way. Your priorities change, whether you like it or not."

None the less, there is a widely held belief that motherhood improves our time management and spurs us on to greater success. In *How To Be A Woman*, Caitlin Moran argues that mothers are by nature "superhumanly productive", adding, "Give a new mother a sleeping child for an hour, and she can achieve 10 times more than a childless person."

In a recent interview the shadow childcare minister (and working mother) Lucy Powell said, "We are not sitting on Facebook or coming in with a hangover. When we are working we are on it – and making the most of every day, because when you are at home with family you have got to be on it every minute as well."

> I am more driven than ever, desperate to show I'm not defined by being a mother. But my ability lags behind my ambition

But such thinking distorts and romanticises the role of motherhood while ignoring the mental chaos brought on by exhaustion. "Whereas men can shut down and compartmentalise their work, relationships and children, women are wired to multitask and find it hard to switch off emotions," says the therapist Marisa Peer. "It is genetic. Our brains are built differently."

My husband Chris, a financial analyst, copes better than me. Of course he does – his career hasn't suffered. Because I'm the primary carer he can be at his desk from 7am to 7pm. He goes abroad for business meetings. He's a brilliant dad but sometimes – such as last week when I had to turn down an interview with a film star to take our son to a doctor's appointment – I feel resentful. My salary may not be as high as his, but my job was no less hard fought for.

Why don't working fathers worry in the way mothers do? Elle Boag believes it is

Previous pages: hair and make-up by Camilla Hewitt at S Management, using Bobbi Brown. Children's clothes by Mothercare. This page: Getty

down to social conditioning rather than genetics. "Men are programmed to see their job as provider, so they don't suffer guilt when they're not at home. Even as pre-schoolers children learn that men – like Postman Pat and Fireman Sam – are the workers."

I am lucky to have the option of quitting work, but I can think of nothing worse than becoming a housewife. The dominant narrative throughout my teens and twenties was that women who sacrificed their careers to look after their children were somehow inferior, devoid of substance and lacking in drive. Not one of my graduate friends is a stay-at-home mother. Our careers – whether in government policy, finance or the media – didn't happen by accident. They're too precious to squander. And given that I have been a mother for three years and a journalist for 13, it is not surprising that my identity is still as defined by my career as it is by motherhood. Why would I go to great lengths to get a first-class degree and fight my way on to the career ladder, only to give it all up a decade later? Nobody ever warned me that my efforts may one day be rendered obsolete. I, like other working mothers of my generation, was set up to fail. The idea that we could "have it all" was a misleading fallacy.

> I, like other working mothers, was set up to fail. The idea that we could 'have it all' was a misleading fallacy

And it's a recent one. In 1975 only 40 per cent of mothers worked, compared with 67 per cent today. My mother, who began her teaching career only after my brother and I had started school, tells me that she had no interest in paid employment while we were both at home. Other mothers stayed at home too. It was what they did.

But we are better educated and more ambitious than our mothers' generation – for most women going back to work is now the norm and financially necessary. Since 1996 the number of working mothers has risen by 800,000 to 5.3 million. We may be entitled to a year's maternity leave, but 28 per cent are back in paid work within six months.

Social media also encourages us to compete. My Facebook news feed is filled with updates from working mothers who are up until dawn meeting deadlines. And there is no shortage of prolific working mothers to emulate, from Yahoo's chief executive Marissa Mayer to Karren Brady to Facebook's COO Sheryl Sandberg, who famously implored mothers not to quit work in her book, *Lean In*. But as I read it I felt incredulous, because without the money Sandberg has to invest in childcare most of us can never follow her advice. Despite all our efforts to shatter the glass ceiling, just 21 per cent of women are the breadwinners in their relationship.

Karren Brady (above with her daughter) and Marissa Mayer are two working mothers who appear to have – and do – it all

Cheaper and better childcare would help – I pay £1,900 a month to send my children to nursery. In Sweden each child is guaranteed a place at a public pre-school and no parent pays more than three per cent of their salary for it. As the costs are so low, over 78 per cent of mothers with children under seven are at work. (It's perhaps no coincidence that three of the top five countries in the United Nations' World Happiness Report – Sweden, Denmark and Norway – also have heavily subsidised childcare.)

Employers could do more, too, by supporting those buckling under the pressure of new motherhood and by offering flexible hours that don't hinder career development. That would help women such as my friend Paula, whose daughter has just started school and who had to quit her accountancy job to do freelance book-keeping because her company couldn't accommodate her needs. "There was no middle ground. I could either work full-time like my colleagues, who put their children to bed over the phone at their desk, or go freelance and take a 60 per cent pay cut."

We also need to shift responsibility on to partners. From next April fathers will be able to share 12 months' leave with the mother after the birth of their child. It is a step in the right direction – but how many fathers will take it? Perhaps, too, we should realise that we don't have to cater to our child's every whim, that we can sometimes put our careers first and that it's not the end of the world if they miss ballet practice or the babysitter puts them to bed. "Being bored and unfulfilled is as bad as not being there because you're at work," says Boag. "It is the quality of your relationship with your children that counts, not the quantity of time you spend with them."

Most importantly, however, we must lower our expectations of ourselves and realise that, whether we like it or not, motherhood will affect our potential at work. We must learn to say no when we feel overwhelmed and stop beating ourselves up when our efforts fall short of perfection. We must be honest with our employers – and ourselves – about how much time we can devote to work. We can't expect to compete with women who don't have children or perform as well as we did pre-motherhood. It is disingenuous and self-defeating to try. Accepting our limitations is the only way we will keep our careers, our families and our sanity intact.

Getty