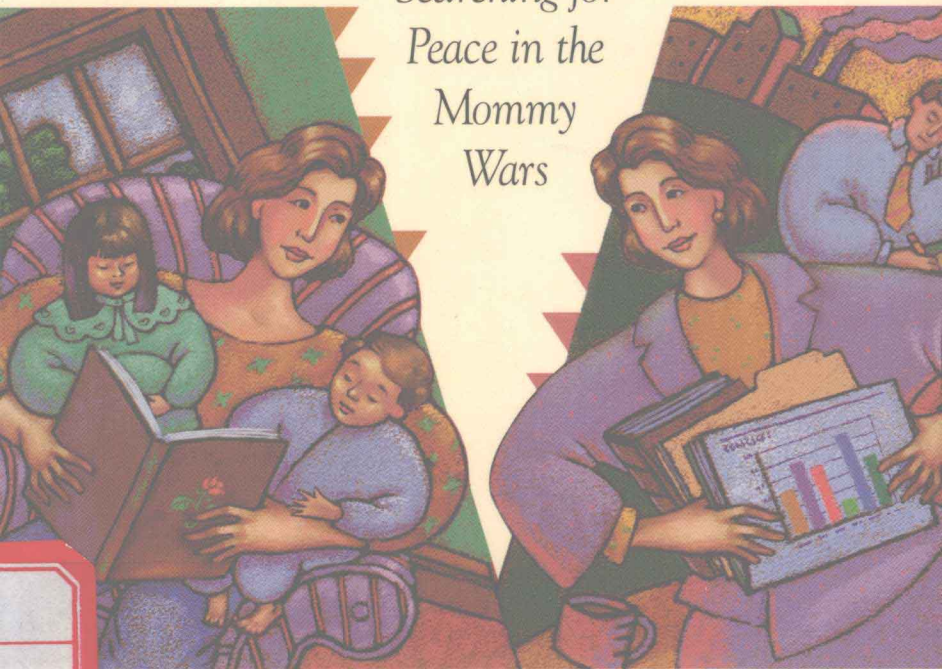


MOTHER IN THE MIDDLE

*Searching for
Peace in the
Mommy
Wars*



Deborah Shaw Lewis &
Charmaine Crouse Yoest

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*Searching for Peace
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Mommy Wars*

DEBORAH SHAW LEWIS &
CHARMAINE CROUSE YOEST



Zondervan Publishing House
Grand Rapids, Michigan

A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

Mother in the Middle

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

 **Zondervan Publishing House**

Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lewis, Deborah Shaw, 1951–

Mother in the middle : searching for peace in the mommy wars / Deborah Shaw Lewis and Charmaine Crouse Yoest.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-310-20692-8 (softcover)

1. Mothers—United States—Social conditions. 2. Motherhood—United States. 3. Working mothers—United States. 4. Work and family—United States. 5. Mother and child—United States. I. Yoest, Charmaine Crouse, 1964– . II. Title.

HQ759.L4854 1996

306.874'3—dc20

96-10549

CIP

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Edited by Robin Schmitt

Interior design by Sherri L. Hoffman

Printed in the United States of America

96 97 98 99 00 01 02 / ♦ DH / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“The Lord . . . lifts up; he humbles and he exalts.”

HANNAH’S PRAYER, 1 SAMUEL 2: 6–7

For our daughters

Sarah Lisette and Hannah Ruth

With Love,

May you grow to become wise women.

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A Personal Introduction— The Women We Are

Who is the Mother in the Middle? She is any woman struggling to meet the often conflicting needs of her family, her children, her work, and herself. Even in this post-superwoman age, when many of us are beginning to realize that we can't have it all—or at least, not all at once—we still expect mothers to be too many things to too many people, all at the same time. The mother in the middle is pulled in so many different directions; she is living with a divided heart.

You will meet many such mothers in these pages: from Madison Avenue executives to small-town factory shift-workers, from successful entrepreneurs to Kmart clerks. On the surface, they don't have much in common. But we found, as we talked to women all across this nation, from all different walks of life, that they had very similar struggles. They were all searching for peace.

We too don't appear to have much in common. As authors, we will speak with one voice throughout most of this book. Yet we are very different women who brought two distinct and varied life experiences to this project.

Deborah grew up in the fifties and sixties. Charmaine came of age during the seventies and eighties. We speak as members of two different generations.

Raised in small-town Georgia, Deborah is a born-and-bred southerner. Charmaine's family lived in the Midwest, the Northeast, and even overseas. For all of her adult life, she's

worked and resided in the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area. So we've seen the world from two different perspectives.

Deborah's area of expertise is early childhood education. She received her master's degree from the Erikson Institute in Chicago and has spent over twenty years in her field, writing curriculum, directing day care, nursery school, and mother's-morning-out programs, teaching college, and (what she loves best) working with small children in a wide variety of settings.

Charmaine's career has been focused on the policy side. She has researched and written about national family-policy issues and been a national figure in the pro-family debate, speaking to the media and lobbying and testifying on Capitol Hill. She is also pursuing her doctorate in government at the University of Virginia. So we come from different careers.

A conservative through and through, Charmaine's first job out of college put her political idealism into practice as she served in the Reagan White House. Deborah could never bring herself to vote for a Republican presidential candidate, even when her own sister was one of his speechwriters. So we don't always share the same political agenda.

It's probably no surprise, then, that we've approached motherhood from two different directions, bringing with us two different sets of expectations. Since we're going to tell you the stories of many different women in this book, let us begin by telling you ours.

Deborah

I always knew that I wanted to have children. I do not remember ever making that choice. I just knew.

When I fell in love with my husband, Gregg, in college and we discussed a family, I always told him I wanted twenty-five children. I was only half joking.

By the time we got married, we had settled on three children and thought it would be wise to wait several years to have them.

Four and a half years later we decided it was time to try to get pregnant. After a year, we wondered what was wrong. We saw the first in a long series of doctors. We became familiar with a wide variety of medical tests that intruded into our intimate lives. I took my basal body temperature every morning and recorded it on special graphs. We checked out every book on the topic from every library we had access to.

And every month I wasn't pregnant, I grieved.

Before, when I had thought about children, when we had talked about a family, I had known, with my intellect, that motherhood was an experience I did not want to miss. Now, each month that I did not get pregnant, I felt the loss on a deep, emotional level. I hadn't known how important having children was to me.

My longing for a baby was like an intense personal hunger that nothing else could fill. On more than one occasion, I left doctors' offices and wept with an intensity I had never known before.

Complicating our infertility problems was my career. I had graduated with a B.A. in elementary education. Afterward I had taken a job at a day-care center, teaching three-year-olds. That center was the worst that child care can be—you will learn more about it in chapter 7—but I fell in love with preschoolers.

Several years later I took the position of director at a Winkie Bear Child Development Center. My school was one of a small chain of day-care centers in and around Chicago known for their dedication to providing quality child care. I am proud, even today, to be able to say that I was part of the Winkie Bear Schools. We were the best that private day care could offer.

But as I saw children I loved going in and out of those doors each day, I knew I could never put a child of mine in any day care, even one as good as my Winkie Bear School.

By the completion of my third year as director of Winkie Bear, we had learned that I had several fertility problems. Two

different fertility specialists informed us that we would probably never have children.

My emotional frame of mind at the time made it very difficult for me to continue to work in day care. At my center, I saw children coming and going each day who were hungry for their mothers' time and attention, in somewhat the same way I was hungry for a baby. I would have loved to have taken any one of them home with me.

Instead, I resigned to start my graduate work in early childhood education, at the Erikson Institute in Chicago. And in early December we received the best news I think I have ever heard. I was pregnant. Our doctor called it a "miracle." We considered it a gift from God.

Nothing, not even the emotional turmoil of our infertility experience, prepared me for the intensity of childbirth. Holding our son, Andrew, to my breast, looking into his eyes, was exhilarating, earth shattering, life changing, empowering. The way in which I viewed life was forever altered.

Eighteen months later we had a second miracle: Matthew. To my astonishment, his birth was just as exhilarating, life changing, incredible.

And our lives filled up with miracles: two and a half years later Lisette joined our lives. Nineteen months after that, Benjamin surprised us by coming nine days early. Jonathan came along three years after Benjamin. And with each child came joy, tears, laughter, incredible strength, and a life of rich texture and variety. No two of them are alike. Each brings individual style and personality into our family mix. Each has enriched my life beyond measure. I cannot imagine my life without any one of them.

I had not known how much joy children would bring to my life. No one ever told me how hard or how stressful the work of mothering would be. But I count my children as first on my list of blessings.

Charmaine

Unlike Debi, I never had much interest in being a mom. Looking back, my husband, Jack, and I both marvel; neither of us were very interested in babies and children—they just weren't on our radar screen.

I did want children. That, however, is very different from wanting to be a mother.

I'm part of the career generation, and I soaked up all the superwoman messages like a sponge. Career was the thing. And by the time I became pregnant, mine was going very well. Beyond my dreams, even.

So even when I was pregnant, I still wasn't all that eager to become a mom. I was excited about the baby, sure. But not about the mom thing. And I wasn't having one of those glorious, bonding pregnancies; I felt miserable all the time. I had thought morning sickness meant morning, not all day!

I didn't want to leave my job: when I was seven months pregnant, I appeared on *The Sally Jesse Raphael Show*; at eight months, I was part of a panel discussion featured in *Good Housekeeping*; and three weeks before delivery, I appeared on *CBS This Morning*. I was working hard to prove to my co-workers that I was still the same professional and that nothing had changed. I didn't even have the nursery ready for the baby.

But at home, Jack and I were having long, agonized discussions about my life. These talks were liberally baptized with my tears. My whole existence had been geared toward advancing professionally, and I had driven so hard. But while working in family policy, I had read the data on infant attachment; I had seen the research on day care; I had learned how critical a mother's presence was to babies. I didn't want to leave my job, but intellectually I didn't see any way around it. As I lurched toward the most major transition of my life, resigning my position was strictly a head decision—I sure didn't feel it in my heart.

And then . . . there was Hannah. She was here.

Suddenly, unbelievably, being with her had nothing to do with research. My friends remind me that I just kept saying, "I can't imagine my life without her." For the first few weeks, I lived in sheer terror that something might happen to her that I could have prevented. Now it was all heart: no one, no thing, was going to come between me and my baby.

It hasn't been easy. I still remember the first time a former coworker referred glibly to a piece of legislation, pending on Capitol Hill, by an acronym, expecting that I would know what he was talking about. I did not. And suddenly I felt terribly out of touch.

But my decision was made; my course was set. Because I had decided in my head, fully expecting motherhood to be a difficult (at best) experience, I was set free to be surprised by joy in my heart. As I think back over the last two and a half years, some of my favorite memories are the worst ones: up all night with a sick, confused toddler who is throwing up every hour; waking up in the middle of the night to find that I'm sitting on the living room couch and holding a sleeping newborn, tired and disoriented and not remembering how and when I got there.

It's funny to think of finding peace in a house with a toddler and a crawling baby. Nevertheless, I have found mine. . . . Maybe that's because peace is such a close cousin to joy. That we have in abundance.

In the midst of all that divides us and makes the two of us different, we found to our surprise much to agree upon, much about motherhood that we share in common.

We are both mothers in the middle.

We have lived what we write about here. Between us, we have seven children, ranging from nine months to sixteen years of age. In the chaos of writing this book, they have served to remind us about and reinforce for us the importance of motherhood.

And the challenge. As our deadline loomed, Debi's son Matthew required oral surgery, and she coped with the scheduling challenge of having four children playing on (and practicing with) four different basketball teams in one season. Both of Charmaine's children simultaneously came down with their first-ever ear infections.

They needed us. As the mother of the two youngest children, Charmaine in particular had child care difficulties. The first baby-sitter left suddenly after two months, just as the children were settling into a routine. As the next baby-sitter tried to get to know Hannah, a spirited two-and-a-half-year-old, and John, a cheerful six-month-old, Charmaine had an experience that crystallized for us the struggle of the mother in the middle:

It had been a crazy morning, and at ten o'clock I was still in my bathrobe. I felt like a caricature of myself—the only thing that made me feel remotely like a professional was the impending chapter deadline looming in front of me. I had to get some work done.

The baby-sitter had the children in their coats, and they were happily headed outside to play. I heaved a sigh of relief and headed for the shower. Hannah started to balk. "No! You come, too, Mommy!" she cried. "You push the stroller."

My heart seized up. Was this a discipline problem, or did she need attention? I chose the former. "Hannah," I said firmly, "you go outside and play." And I got in the shower.

Through two closed doors and splashing water, I could hear two-and-a-half-year-old Armageddon. Bewildered, John joined in, and my poor new baby-sitter was in way over her head.

Dripping and furious, I climbed out of the shower. Tears streaming down her face, Hannah bodily threw herself at me and locked her arms around my neck. I knew in my heart that this wasn't about discipline. This was need. I just didn't want to face it. I had deadlines pending.

"Hannah," I said gently, "Mommy has work to do. I want you to have fun—you go outside and have fun playing. It would be boring for you in Mommy's office."

"Mommy," she whispered, almost inaudibly, "I want to go to you boring office."

And for much of that day, that's precisely where she was—under the computer table, happily cutting up papers.

This project was intensely personal; we too have struggled with the issues we'll talk about. In the process, we've come to believe that today's debate has lost sight of this essential truth: our children need us.

As we talked with the mothers in the middle, we laughed with them—and we cried. We despaired at times, but we were also inspired. We want to share those stories with you. We come away from this project with great hope. We believe there is common ground.

Perhaps our own journey to common ground was a little easier, because we are family: Charmaine's mother is Deborah's oldest sister. So Charmaine is Deborah's niece. Nevertheless, we saw the thing that brought us together reflected again and again and again in our discussions with the mothers who shared with us their joys, struggles, fears, and hopes: most mothers in the middle, even while feeling pulled in many different directions, want the best for their children.

We do not believe that society today is helping us in that quest. Indeed, we'll talk about ways in which the Mommy Wars are making it difficult—in some cases, nearly impossible—for the mother in the middle to make the best decisions for her children.

Yet we believe there is peace to be found. There is peace in the mommy wars. But far, far more importantly, there is personal peace for the mother in the middle.

Please, come along with us on our search.