

## **Toddlers, Teen Moms, and Timeouts: The Role of Class and Gender in Reality Parenting Programming**

Our television landscape is currently littered with documentaries, docu-dramas and reality programming that seeks to expose a range of salacious and scandalous images of motherhood. Programmes such as *Half Ton Mum* (2007), *Octomom: Me and My 14 Kids* (2009) and *Too Old to be a Mum* (2010) present an ostensibly real look at some of the more shocking representations of motherhood that exist in the contemporary cultural climate. Moreover, even those programmes that seek to correct well meaning but ultimately 'poor' parenting such as *Supernanny* (2004-2010) and *Extreme Parental Guidance* (2010- ) tend to focus on the image of the incapable, ill-equipped and incompetent mother. In short, such programmes find a myriad of ways in which to deride and dismiss motherhood in general and working class motherwork in particular.

Reality parenting television focuses on working-class families, so that incompetent, incapable and inarticulate motherwork, maternal care and domestic duties tend to be laid at the door of the economically, socially and educationally underprivileged. Tracey Jensen makes the point that culturally deficient working-class parents, and in particular, culturally inappropriate working-class mothers are over-represented in such programming (Jensen 2010, 189). Galit Ferguson goes on to tell us that these working-class mothers are asked to acknowledge, appreciate and adhere to a more restrained, rational and thus middle-class mode of parenting (Ferguson 2010, 95). While working-class mothers are deemed pathological and psychologically unhealthy, middle-class parenting practices, maternal dispositions and domestic proclivities are marked as appropriate, desirable and indeed normal (Jensen 2010, 189). Fiona Green tells us that 'mothers are the central characters, and through the structure, presentation, and narration of their stories, viewers are encouraged to evaluate and judge how they fulfill their roles. These programs constitute specific ways that mothers are to behave and be scrutinized' which exploits maternal, working, consuming and classed anxieties (Green 2007).

It has been suggested that the less than subtle class subtext that flows throughout reality parenting television stems less from the parental styles on display, and more from the post-production and voice-over narration. Zoe Williams makes the point that 'there's a sense in the edit ... that the wealthier you are, the more agency you have, as a parent, the more your decisions ought to be respected as the result of considered thought' (Williams 2010). Williams goes on to suggest that a 'poor family is never idiosyncratic, it's always just doing it wrong. A rich family has to be doing things incredibly, grotesquely wrong, to garner the same judgment' (ibid). In short, the genre positions middle-class stay-at-home motherhood as the preferred, correct and only acceptable version of maternal care, duty and attention.

Reality parenting television suggests that mothers are 'able to choose freely and cleanly how they will inhabit their space, speak to their families, the kinds of food they consume, and the sorts of practices and habits they perform' (Jensen 2010, 189). What it ignores, overlooks and denies of course is 'the economic, material and geographical realities which shape and limit choices unevenly' and thus impact on maternal care and domestic duties (ibid., 189). In short, those women who are struggling financially, living in claustrophobic conditions and unable to find time to not only clothe and feed their children, but to also educate them inventively, entertain them and inspire them creatively are held up as 'poor' mothers.

## References

Ferguson Galit (2010), 'The Family on Reality Television: Who's Shaming Whom?' *Television & New Media*, 11:2, pp.87-104.

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Williams, Zoe (2010), 'The Powerful Cynicism of Parenting TV', *The Guardian*, Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/feb/09/cynicism-parenting-tv> (accessed 10/08/2011).

Please see:

Feasey, R (2012) *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television*, London: Anthem for further debates on this topic - [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Happy-Homemaker-Desperate-Housewives-Communication/dp/0857285610/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1351000097&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Happy-Homemaker-Desperate-Housewives-Communication/dp/0857285610/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1351000097&sr=1-1)