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WOMEN AND WORK: CAN BABIES AND HUSBANDS COPE?

Despite the uncomplimentary reviews of the NBC News White Paper called "Women, Work and Babies," it was a good thing to put the subject out on the agenda for national discussion. Jane Pauley, America's most famous working mother of twins, posed the question "Can America cope?" with the phenomenon of mothers of babies who have full-time jobs.

The program was not about single parents trying to support themselves and their children. The program was about two-earner couples in which the wife (a) wants a professional career for her own self-fulfillment, (b) simply likes the extra money (to go on vacations, etc.), or (c) admits she can't stand being at home with her two children and would rather be anywhere else.

Any successful lawyer knows that, if he can frame the question, he can often get any verdict he wants from judge or jury. The question is not "can America cope?", but "can babies cope?" and "can husbands cope?"

NBC presented the problem from the feminist point of view and, true to form, offered the solution from the liberals' point of view. The New York Times review of the TV show, commenting on the ideological bias of the so-called "News" White Paper, called it "a plea for free lunch."

The message was that "society" should provide more taxpayer-financed day-care centers and employer-financed special benefits and job security for mothers. That's the way to "solve" the "problem" of the kids so that we can all shout "hooray for the two-income couple and self realization in the marketplace!"

Let's be blunt about this demand. Any plan for "society," or "government," or "corporations," to assume the direct and indirect costs of caring for babies, means imposing the real costs on the taxpayers and the general public, which, in turn, means on the singles, the couples who have already raised their families, and the couples who are living on a lower single income in order to provide full-time mother-care for their children. It's hard to think of anything more unjust.

Non-mother care of babies is very, very expensive. This is true even at the minimum wage rates paid to workers in most child-care centers, and even with the inadequate conditions and supervision in most child-care centers.

But cost is the adults' problem. From the babies' point of view, "day-care diseases" are more serious. Anyone who has watched flu bugs and other contagious diseases go through a family of several children at home must recoil in horror at the thought of 30 toddlers in diapers, all ill and screaming for their mothers. The NBC program admitted that day-care babies are 12 times more likely to get the flu than home-care babies.

Another major problem from the babies' point of view is the constant change of personnel. Babies don't adapt well to the high turnover rate of hired "care providers."

While babies are the biggest losers in any system of non-mother care, it was clear from the NBC program that husbands lose, too. When a woman has a baby and a career, the husband clearly ranks third on her scale of priorities, and a poor third, at that, because she's simply too exhausted for anything else even if she has any extra time, which she usually doesn't.

The lifestyle sections of newspapers have had many articles in recent months about how men in their 20s and 30s are rejecting or avoiding marriage. Is it any wonder? What man wants to risk a financial/emotional commitment, buy a ring and assume a mortgage on a house, when he will rank only #3 in the heart of the woman he loves?

All that talk about egalitarian marriages in which the husbands share 50-50 in child-care simply doesn't happen in practice, as Jane Pauley has complained so bitterly. The NBC program said that only 13% of husbands share baby-care as the feminists say they should, and that figure is probably exaggerated.

Jane Pauley tried to tell us that it is "the rule, not the exception" for mothers of small babies to be in the labor force and she predicted that the traditional Mom "seems headed for extinction." That was a gratuitous, self-serving slur to try to justify her own lifestyle. Fourteen million single-earner couples are in fact getting along today with $5,260 per year less income than two-earner couples, and staggering under the income tax burden that is so unfair to families with children, because those mothers are willing to make the commitment to give their babies full-time care at home.