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style

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Rising inflation

The new boob jobs — and who's getting them

Slummy Mummy rejoices

It's all over for Alpha Mum

Firing blanks

Is your man's lifestyle letting him down?



SHE ROCKS

Bad girl, diva, soul queen,
wife: the continuing drama
of Amy Winehouse



At last, some good news for mothers – at least for the unsung majority of us who constitute the muddlers and befuddlers of the parenting world. We've done something right. A flurry of books and new research from the United States suggests that overambitious, competitive parents often end up with miserable, anxious offspring, while so-called beta parents, with more relaxed attitudes, tend to have well-rounded, less neurotic children. This will come as a relief to my friend who accidentally sent her child to school with a packet of cigarettes in his

book bag, and to the mum in my son's class who has discovered that, on the not-infrequent occasions she sleeps in on a school morning, she can get her

children out of the house in five minutes flat if she bribes them with breakfast at Starbucks.

No doubt in a few months' time, there will be some new study that contradicts those conclusions. But at least for now, it's fine to be a "good enough" mother. So let's enjoy the moment and crack open a bottle of wine to toast ourselves over children's tea, while the pushy mums martyr themselves on the treadmill of extracurricular activities.

I never thought I would lament the decline of that great American import, the yummy mummy. But, just as we thought it was safe to release our tummies from captivity again, along came something much more challenging: the super-perfectionist alpha mum. While there was always something elitist about yummy mummies (they need a large staff and healthy bank balance to support their lifestyle, and, generally, don't have to work), at least they were hedonists at heart and didn't make the rest of us feel guilty.

The alpha mums may be more democratic, but they make parenting a lot less fun. They are mothers of both the stay-at-home and the full-time-work variety (interestingly, they represent the most fundamentalist elements of both those camps), and they stalk the playgrounds of state and private schools. They rigidly control everything in their children's lives – from food intake and exercise to after-school Kumon maths and Suzuki violin lessons – all with the ultimate aim of ensuring that their children

HOW TO SPOT A BETA MUM

- You can tell what her children had for breakfast by looking at her jeans
- She has been known to wear pyjamas on the school run
- She forgets children's birthday parties
- She gets drunk at PTA parties
- You can't see the floor of her car for old sweet wrappers, assorted papers and general detritus
- She tries to remember what sex was like with her husband
- Her house is in a state of perpetual clutter
- She has rotten fruit and bribery sweets in her handbag
- She runs out of petrol on the school run

ILLUSTRATION: JACQUELINE BISSETT

Has Alpha Mum

I bloody well hope so, says **Fiona Neill**, aka Slummy Mummy. She's terrified us, and her

have the competitive edge over their peers.

I know of mothers studying GCSE Latin to help with homework, and mothers who monitor not just their children's sugar intake but also their starch intake; and, I have had the experience of trying to arrange for a friend of my son to come and play, only to be told that the child was unavailable for the next two months because of his timetable. That pales into insignificance next to the experience that a friend had recently, when she was trying to soothe a fellow parent about imminent music exams at their children's school. "Well, of course you're calm, because your children aren't going for distinction," she was told by the other mother.

And so, you see, alpha mums turn parenting into a serious issue and motherhood into martyrdom, and the result is that nobody has any fun. And, God, do we need a bit of that. Anxiety is the bindweed of motherhood, and we don't need anything extraneous fuelling our neurosis and self-reproach. Laughter is crucial in this culture of angst-ridden parenting.

I don't hold it against the alpha mums personally, because they don't define society; they reflect it. They demonstrate how we have become hostage to the opinions of self-styled experts, who have imbued parenting with a spurious professionalism that has ultimately undermined confidence in our innate ability to care for our kids. Motherhood is something best done by amateurs, and, actually, most of us bumble through it

pretty successfully. Most of us don't need parenting classes. We don't need to be told to regulate our alcohol intake during pregnancy or that smacking our children is a bad thing. Mostly, the alpha mums reflect what all of us know but try to keep in perspective: that we live in an age of huge competition and insecurity, when many aspects of parenting have become a private struggle. Consider the energy we all expend on finding good schools for our children, making the NHS work for us when we need it to and patrolling the internet on our children's behalf. The urge to micromanage life is a way of trying to provide a semblance of order amid what sometimes feels like a sea of uncertainty. □

The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy by
Fiona Neill (Century £10)



HOW TO SPOT AN ALPHA MUM

- Her children's activities timetable is more complicated than a Heathrow flight plan
- She has a copy of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* on her bookshelf
- Her nanny speaks Mandarin
- She schedules childbirth for the right month of the school year
- She knows the exact nutritional content and GI rating of what her children eat
- She schedules sex with her husband
- She has a drawer with cards and presents for all occasions
- She always manages to get a front-row seat at school plays
- She serves alphabet pasta at tea, so that her children can practise their spelling

had her day?

children, for far too long. At last parenting might be fun again