

Screaming on the Inside: The Unsustainability of American Motherhood with Jessica Grose

Jessica Grose: [00:00:00] you're gonna still have the feeling. I think what the research I've done and, and. Talking to so many people has allowed me to do is reflect on that guilt a little bit more, and understand whether I feel guilty because I am actually doing something that I feel conflicts with my own values.

Or if I am feeling guilty for, because I am comparing myself to somebody else or, or some other thing that isn't actually, serving me or my kids.

Debbie Sorensen: That was Jessica Grose on psychologists off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of Act Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book Act for Burnout.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm [00:01:00] Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No more.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Jill Stoddard: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

Debbie Sorensen: Hi, this is Debbie. I'm bringing you today an interview I did with Jessica Grose, who is a New York Times writer and author of several books, and her latest book is Screaming on the Inside, the Unsustainability of American Motherhood. And we talk all about some of the systemic and cultural

challenges going on with parenthood and specifically motherhood in the world today.

And Yael is here with me today to introduce the conversation.

Yael Schonbrun: I love this conversation, but I also just have to say I love Jessica Grose. I'm a huge like geeked out fan of hers. She's a New York Times columnist, writes [00:02:00] all about parenting. She's very funny, she's very sweet, she's super witty, and I had the great good fortune to have my book come out around the same time as hers and.

I feel like I hit the lottery because we had a couple, I had a couple of book events where I got paired with her, with Emily Oster and then a New York based event, and it was like the highlight of the entire book launch is that I got to hang with Jessica Grose and by the end of this New York event, I like got to hug Jessica Grose.

And it was like I have arrived at some level of fame and fortune because I get to interact with this super cool human who's doing amazing. Ground shifting work in the parenting sphere. So I was really excited that we got to get her on our podcast to talk about her book, which is a really powerful book.

Debbie Sorensen: you'll hear me being a little bit of a, a little bit starstruck with this one because I read her column in the New York Times all the time. I have read so many of her articles and they've been really helpful and informative to me, and so for me to have a conversation with her was pretty cool [00:03:00] experience.

Yael Schonbrun: Totally, and I just have to say one of the major themes that I think is threaded throughout her book and also throughout. Most of her columns in the New York Times is this idea that there's no one right way to parent. And it is such an important message and I'm, I'm grateful that she continues to bring it up because there's so much in the media that says like, this is the right way to parent.

If you're not doing it this way, you're screwing up your kids. If you're not doing it that way, you're a bad mom and. It's so corrective in healing for her to continue to bring up the science and, and the, and the message behind the science, which is that there's lots of right ways to parent. And in some ways, you know, the, the best way to parent is to figure out what works best for you and your family and your children.

And again, you know, the science on this is really clear and the way that she messages it is just so powerful. And, and again, so like reassuring.

Debbie Sorensen: One of the reasons I follow her work and was so excited to have her on the podcast is because I think it's really crucial that we take a look at these [00:04:00] systemic. And cultural factors in general with all kinds of things that we might be struggling with.

You know, I do a lot of work with burnout. I'm writing a book on burnout, and I think that it's really crucial when you talk about burnout to acknowledge the context in which it's happens. And I think I. A lot of parents are stressed and overwhelmed and they can feel guilty and just, it can be really tough.

I think sometimes to be a parent, it can also be really awesome and amazing. I think we can agree on that and so would Jess Grose. Um, and sometimes that feels really hard and I think that there's something really validating about.

Being aware, like, yes, of course. No wonder sometimes you feel overwhelmed because it's really hard and maybe you don't have enough help. And there's all these expectations and stressors and role demands, and so far from making us feel like even worse about things, in my opinion. I mean, sometimes it's a little, you know, bleak out there to think about it in this way because it feels really big, but [00:05:00] I actually feel like I, I talk about this a lot in my clinical work with my clients. Like, yeah, you're, you know, you have a nine month old baby and you're stressed out. Well, this is really hard. And I actually think that that just even as an intervention can be really helpful because it helps people make sense of their experience.

And be more compassionate toward themselves. Right? It's not your fault. This is just a hard situation, and I think there's so many pressures on motherhood right now that that is the case,

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, those reminders. It's not you, it's our dang culture it's not you. It's just the nature of early parenting when you have a small human being who is totally dependent on you and isn't letting you sleep or eat or, you know, finish a thought without screaming in your ear. It, it's hard. And the structures of our society and the history of parenthood.

Has really set it up to be that much harder and, and it is, I think, a really important message that if you're struggling, it's not because you are doing it badly or there's something wrong with you. It's just kind of at this point, the nature. And there are things that [00:06:00] can be done to make it easier. And

what I really appreciated about this conversation, because I think the conversation can get pretty dark and bleak and.

Hopeless in some cases is that you guys end on a really positive note with, you know, things that we can appreciate that, that actually are getting better conversations that are happening, um, social progress that is happening, you know, as we speak. And, and it is, I think, a really nice, um, part of the conversation to end on because again, it can otherwise feel a little bit dark.

Debbie Sorensen: That's right. So listen all the way through so that you can hear the hopeful part at the end, and we hope you find the. Conversation informative and also validating of your own parenting challenges.

Jessica Grose is an opinion writer at the New York Times who writes a popular newsletter on parenting and was the founding editor of Lenny, the email newsletter and website. She writes about women's health, culture, politics, and grizzly bears. She was named one of LinkedIn's Next Wave Top [00:07:00] Professionals 35 and under in 2016. And a glamor game changer in 2020 for her coverage of the pandemic. She was formerly a senior editor at Slate and an editor at Jezebel. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, New York, the Washington Post, Business Week, Elle, Cosmopolitan, and many other publications.

Her new book that just came out this year that we'll be talking about today is called Screaming on the Inside, the Unsustainable of American Motherhood. Welcome to the podcast, Jess. I'm so excited to have you here today to talk about this.

Jessica Grose: Hi. I'm so happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, you're welcome. I have to say I'm a little bit, um, starstruck because I read your articles all the time. We must be very like-minded because I subscribe to the New York Times and about once a week I click on a headline without looking at who the author is, and it's your article and it always calls to me.

So I think we must have some common interests or something like that.

Jessica Grose: Um, well, I always appreciate that. Um, the greatest compliment I feel I [00:08:00] get from readers is that I am in their brains. And so

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Jessica Grose: that's, that's, I, I strive to sort of articulate. Um, Articulate things that are on people's minds, but they don't have a place to talk about it. So I really appreciate your saying that.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, you're doing that and I'm glad you have the platform that you have and I think that, yeah, I think that it's, um, I had the same experience reading your book, screaming on the inside, which is that I feel like I know you because you tell a lot of your personal stories and you kind of weave together your experience going through pregnancy and parenthood, and it's a social commentary I think, about the state of motherhood and the systemic problems that are so stressful.

Um, but you do that. In part through your own story, and so I feel like I know you, and so it's kind of funny to be talking to you now and realizing that now I actually know you a little bit.

Jessica Grose: Yes. That's so funny. Um, it's funny, I [00:09:00] mean, I, I actually wrote about this today in another context, but, um, I'm very careful about what I do share. Um, I only share what I feel like I have really digested deeply and. So it doesn't, it, it might feel deeply personal and in some ways it is, but in other ways it's like, it's just one part of my experience.

Uh, it's been sort of digested and worked through, and there's lots of other stuff that I don't share. And, uh, And that's always sort of a conscious choice about what I feel comfortable with and what I, I hope for readers to take away. So, um, yeah, there, it's always, it's, it's always complicated sort of drawing those boundaries.

But I think it's something that anyone who writes in an even vaguely confessional mode sort of has to deal with.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think we deal with that on the podcast too, [00:10:00] because we like to talk about our experience as a way to get the ideas from psychology across, but we also try to be thoughtful about it. And I think I appreciate what you're saying. It's like you don't divulge necessarily. Overly personal information or things that you haven't really worked through.

Um, and so it's not the whole story, but it's definitely a fine line I think sometimes what to share and what not to. Um, and I think when I read your work, both the social commentary part and the personal stories of yourself and the people you interview, I think one of the things that's really important, Is how validating it is.

And that's part of what I'm hoping for in the conversation today, is to lay the groundwork, you know, what's going on here with motherhood, especially parenthood in general, but motherhood especially, and I want people. And oh, and then at the end of the conversation, I'll hope we'll talk a little bit about some strategies for what to do.

If you're resonating with this conversation, but I think it kind of starts with the sense [00:11:00] of I'm not alone, right? That this is, it's not me. It's not you as an individual. That there are some society societal pressures and expectations that are kind of, you know, working against us. And I, I think that's a really important thing that your book does, is that it gives that sense of like, oh, it's not just me.

Right?

Jessica Grose: Right.

Debbie Sorensen: the very powerful first line of your book is, I failed at Ideal Motherhood before I even had a child. And that is a perfect example I think, of a line that really resonates because as a mom I so often worry about like, am I doing this right? All the other moms seem to have it together more than me, and I hear about that a lot in my clinical work as a psychologist.

Um, I was wondering if you could share a little bit like. Before you even got pregnant with your first child, what were some of the ideal mother sort of stories and expectations that you had maybe internalized, that you heard around you and that kind of worked their way into your [00:12:00] mind?

Jessica Grose: Um, I think the biggest one was this idea of being natural and, uh, you can't see me, but I, there's like error quotes in my voice. Um, and I. Felt very strongly that I shouldn't be on any medications when I got pregnant, um, at all, any kinds of medications if I could help it. Um, and the idea being that I could make this, you know, perfectly healthy environment for my child.

Um, And so as part of that, I went off antidepressants to conceive and it seemed like a good idea at the time. And then I had hyperemesis. And so that means you're throwing up all day, every day for weeks and weeks and weeks. Um, and I got incredibly depressed and I ended up going back on antidepressants, and that felt like a violation of some kind of ideal [00:13:00] that I had hit.

I had internalized, and I can't even tell you where I got it, because it wasn't like people in my life were telling me that. Um, I would say my medical caretaker's

attitude towards all of this was strenuous, neutral in a way that I think was actually bad for me, only because they didn't. They just basically were like, oh, do whatever you want.

It'll probably be fine. They didn't tell me like, here are the risks and benefits of this decision. Here's how you should weigh these things. It was more just like, do what you want. It'll be fine. And um, in retrospect, I wish I had had more information. Um, but that was the biggest one before I became a mom and I was the first person in my friend group to have a kid.

So it wasn't even like, there was a circle of same age moms around me who had norms that I was observing, like I, I was the first one creating that. So maybe I had some [00:14:00] norms that made, you know, gave implicit ideas to my friends. I don't know, I'd have to ask them. But, um, yeah, it just felt like, you know, that was the idea that was floating around and I, I really internalized it very deeply and then felt terrible when, um, not only.

Did I go back on medication, but I was just so sick, which again, that was not something I had any control over, but it felt like I was do, there must be something wrong with me that I couldn't create this like perfect healthful environment for the baby. Um, although what's funny is, Uh, my, both my daughters were nine pound babies, uh, and very, and they were past their due dates and, you know, knock wood, very healthy.

Um, so even though I was, I wasn't healthy and I worried so much about the effects of, um, especially the hyperemesis on my older daughter, like none of the sort [00:15:00] of, um, side effects that I worried about. to, came to pass.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Uh, and that example, I love that example. And I think those kinds of, I guess, myths and expectations continue through the birth. You know, sometimes people feel like they failed at the birth because they used medication or they had a C-section and it didn't go according to their plan and. You know, throughout the whole pregnancy and even, you know, into childhood as you're feeding your kids and doing all these, you know, choosing what kind of activities they're doing, I think those kinds of expectations stay with us.

And I was actually thinking of an example as I read your book from my own life, when I was going through the point of pregnancy where I couldn't eat anything, all I could pretty much eat was like carbs, like bread and crackers and cheese, like just plain cheese. And I was. Carrying a bagel and cream cheese to work one day and in the elevator.

This old man like gave me a hard [00:16:00] time about it because I was obviously pregnant and he was like, oh, you shouldn't be eating that. It's bad for the baby. And I was just like, I was so mad that he said that. And I was just like, you know, this is all I can stomach right now. I just don't need that pressure.

And I

Jessica Grose: But also like a bagel is not.

Debbie Sorensen: I know.

Jessica Grose: It's just carbs. Like who, like we need carbs in our lives.

Debbie Sorensen: Exactly. I had carbs, I had protein. It was delicious.

Jessica Grose: Exactly.

Debbie Sorensen: on, dude, you know, don't gimme a hard time about this. It's just so sad though. Cause I think that yeah, those kinds of of messages are absolutely out there. Um,

Jessica Grose: Yeah. And I mean, I, I say this in the book, but I actually, I. Feel like in some ways my, the birth of my older daughter was easier because I already felt like I, I had already sort of learned through that very difficult pregnancy that having expectations of [00:17:00] things that you can't control does not lead to good.

Emotional outcomes. So I didn't even have a birth plan because I was like, I don't even want to have an idea of how this is gonna go. I, I, I'm gonna go to the hospital when I go into labor, and if I want an epidural, I'll get the epidural. And if I don't want an epidural, then I won't. Um, and I didn't even want, and, and again, I'm not recommending, I'm not recommending this as a way to live.

Like I think a lot of people feel very com more confident in their births, um, when they have a plan. Um, but for me it was way more freeing to not have. Stated intentions because I could be like, I've never been through this before. I don't know how I'm gonna feel. And I wanted to leave, um, leave it open to feeling, to just listening to my body and how I felt about it.

Does that make sense? Without putting any sort of sense of, oh, it should be this way, or this is how [00:18:00] I want it to be.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I had more of that approach with my second child because she was, She came three weeks early and I hadn't even packed a bag for the hospital yet. And she, uh, my water broke and there it was. And I had no plan whatsoever. And it was so much, I was just like, okay, whatever. We'll see what happens. And it was way less stressful to me.

And my first one, I was of course anxious and I was much more, had a sense of how I wanted it to go. And I was, it was a pretty traumatic birth. We actually did an episode. I think about a year and a half ago on birth trauma. And of course the one that was like, I was just winging it was, but it was also my second.

So my body was probably just ready to go, you know? But yeah, it's so interesting, I think sometimes how those expectations can add a layer of stress that that don't necessarily help.

Jessica Grose: Yes, yes.

Debbie Sorensen: One of your chapters is on the history of. Motherhood, especially in America. And I learned so much [00:19:00] by reading that chapter.

Just in terms of how we got there, and I know it's an extensive, you did a lot of research on this, so it's a pretty extensive overview of the history of what's been going on related to motherhood for quite a long time. Um, but so it's too much to talk about the whole thing today, but I was just thinking about when I compare.

My role as a mother today versus how I was raised, you know, in the seventies and eighties, late seventies, eighties. Um, and then the way that my grandmother raised her six kids who I think she didn't really pay probably very much attention to them as individuals. I mean, she had six and it was a different time.

Um, so I know this is kind of a lot to ask, but can you just give kind of a nutshell of like what we're seeing at this current cultural moment, um, in terms of. Parenting and, and what it means to be a parent that might be different from a couple of generations ago.

Jessica Grose: Um, I mean, so. I think [00:20:00] especially cer in our grandmother's times, but certainly in our great-grandmother's times, that was before antibiotics existed. Um, the childhood and maternal mortality rates were so much higher. We can't even imagine, um, how much grief and loss there was. Um, and often children. Were part of the economic engine of the family.

So if you lived on a farm like kids had, you know, serious chores, starting as young as three, but definitely by the time they were six or seven. Um, and if you lived in cities like. Kids were going out to work in the factories. I'm not saying that was good, but like that's what happened. So this idea of even childhood as, uh, an, an adolescence as these protected states, that just wasn't how people thought, um, of having kids.

Um, and so, um, there was [00:21:00] less emphasis on parents and how. They could shape children's lives or how everything they did affected a child's health because there was more, um, There just was so much more loss. And so as medicine got better, and as you know, we moved towards, uh, a society where children do not their, you know, child labor laws were passed, we, we sort of created this new.

State of childhood. Um, and because the United States is such an individual, uh, an individualized society, uh, and we rely so much on the individual and we don't have social safety net policies and universal healthcare like many of our peer nations, there's just sort of I this idea that. Um, you know, anything that happens to your children is on you, good or bad.

You have control over it, which is so just totally different than the way we [00:22:00] used to think about, um, the way that we used to think about raising children, having children. Um, and so, yeah, I mean, and it's just not tenable. Um, there's so much outside of our control. Um, and I especially see this in my kids who are now.

10 and six, they're who they are. Um, I can, you know, I'm sure I, I don't think that parenting is meaningless. Certainly I'm not saying that, but like, uh, I can see where, what my husband and I do beyond just sort of creating a, a mostly safe and open environment and a consistent environment. Um, Does not affect who they are or how they perceive the world, um, in sort of a day-to-day way.

Um, so I, I just think it's, it's too much. We can't be responsible for, you know, [00:23:00] all these things that are outside of our control.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And one of the things that you say, that concept that's in your book that I think will really stay with me, is this idea that mothers are to blame, right? And we're kind of responsible for the family. I mean, that's the perception, but then we're also kind of build as being a little bit incapable of that responsibility.

Like we need to do things a certain way. We need to rely on products and method and parent me on products and methods and parenting techniques. And there's almost this sense of we're responsible for it, but we can never get it right and we can just bend over backwards trying it. To me, it feels a little bit just exhausting to think about it, but I think that's kind of true.

That's how it feels to me at least.

Jessica Grose: That's how it feels. And it's also, it implies that there's one right way to do something and everyone agrees. I have spent years looking at research about different aspects of parenting and the way that the actual medical and [00:24:00] sociological research talks about things and the way it's presented, um, in social media and in popular culture is wildly different, which is to say, uh, it is so much less certain.

In the actual academic literature than it is often presented, uh, in, you know, the way we see it on social media and also there's a ton of disagreement. There's a ton of disagreement. Um, if there were one, there's just not one quote unquote right way to raise children. It's not, look around you, you can't tell.

I mean, and especially I think, um, mothers who are. First time mothers whose children are very young, I think are, are sort of the most susceptible to these messages because you don't get feedback from your child. You don't know if you're doing it right. And it's your most precious resource. It's the most, you know, you, you feel like the, um, ev the [00:25:00] stakes are really high, um, with every decision you make, whether or not that's actually true.

Debbie Sorensen: Right, and that's what you're being told. I mean, you're, that message is out there, and you're right, like often it's contradictory messaging like, well, one one's resource tells you to do this. The other one tells you to do that. It ends up being overwhelming.

Jessica Grose: Right.

Debbie Sorensen: Um, and you make an important point, I think too in your history, your chapter about the history of motherhood, about how the standards that are out there that we've, we've talked about a few of them, that they're also embedded in a history of racism and classism, and I was just wondering if you could say a little bit about that, cuz I think that's such an important point that we really wanna make sure that we talk about today.

Jessica Grose: So, um, the, I, I mean, our idea of who an ideal mother is, is rooted in a history of. Being a country that enslaved people and [00:26:00] oppressed recent immigrants, and so. If you look especially at, you know, the 20th century when there was this idea that a good mother did not work outside the home. I do think we are moving away from that.

But you know, definitely for all of the 20th century, the idea was like if you're a good mother, you don't work outside the home. Um, but of course black women and immigrant women, Always worked outside the home and many could not, you know, their families could not be supported without, you know, both. Both or, or you know, in the case of single mothers, the mother themselves working.

And so just to sort of think about that. And then there's many ways in which over time laws, um, codified that sort of. Racism and classism. So there's a law in the earliest 20th century that basically, um, excluded domestic laborers from receiving welfare for their families. And of [00:27:00] course, most domestic laborers were black women.

And so it didn't outright say black women are excluded from receiving this welfare. But in actuality, that was how it played out. And so there were sort of many moments over time where it was. Social morals, but also laws that really excluded, um, women who were not white and not Christian from being the so-called ideal mother in the eyes of society.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And, and we'll get back later to talk more about social media and Instagram and everything that's happening there, because I think that's really a fascinating thing that you cover. Um, but it's almost like you picture this. A serene, like lovely looking mother who's just loves her kids and has got it all under control.

And then you think about the reality for a majority of women, I mean, there's like a privilege to that image. You know what I mean? And, and I think that that's, sometimes that assumption [00:28:00] is based very much on a level of priv privilege that a majority of the people do not have.

Jessica Grose: Absolutely. Um, and I also think it just denies. All of us agency and it denies us the whole breadth of desire and humanity that frankly, dads are allowed to have. Um, which, you know, that's not fair.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. Yes. Yeah. Well, as we continue our walkthrough history, I wanna just talk a little bit about Covid, and I'll say this, Jess, that your pieces in the New York Times at the time that we were going through Covid just

we're so powerful. I think there's a reason you got a lot of, um, What, you know, you got that award from Glamor for being, for your writing about the, during the pandemic, because I think you were one of the first people, at least one of the first people whose work I came across that was acknowledging how disproportionately the [00:29:00] pandemic was impacting women and working moms.

And I, I was one of those people, my work from home office was right down the hall from the kids, and so my husband and I were both working from home, but I was the one doing a majority of it. And I think that was the case for most of the women that I know. Right. And like you nailed it in your work. Can you just say a little bit about that, about, you know, I'm sure this is another thing that, that there's a lot to talk about here, but just in terms of covid and how that, how that impacted women specifically.

Jessica Grose: Yeah, I mean, so obviously even in non covid times, moms in heterosexual relationships do the majority of work, like of domestic work. That's just, it's true now. It's always been true. It has definitely gotten better over time, but not as quickly as you would think. Um, especially because, you know, women are working way more hours outside the home, so you.

You would think that there would sort of be a little bit more moved towards a fully egalitarian division of labor. But [00:30:00] I think that's, honestly, if I'm being honest, I don't think that's ever gonna happen, but we can still improve. Um, so, um, but because it was sort of the status quo of. You know, moms doing the majority of domestic work.

Um, I think, and because there's just so much to do in every day, um, for all parents, uh, maybe they didn't think that hard about it. It just was the way it was. But then when everything fell apart and there was no more help and it was just parents relying on themselves, uh, inside the family unit to do absolutely everything, um, I think.

How untenable that situation beca was, became much more clear and it made a lot more people think about how maybe their lives had been unsustainable and unfair before the pandemic. But I mean, certainly during those, I would say, I guess it would, I, I think March to September, um, of 2020 was the worst.

Part of it. [00:31:00] But the after effects continued to ripple in terms of kids having to quarantine for a long time if they got covid. And in terms of the fact that we're still missing tens of thousands of childcare workers from before the

pandemic. So childcare was already very hard to come by. Pre pandemic, it was very expensive.

It was the same as people's mortgages in a lot of states. Um, and now that is worse. With inflation, with the lack of, you know, care providers available. So, you know, I think it just isn't the way that people have ever raised children. Um, it. Has always been a community endeavor. It should continue to be a community endeavor.

Uh, many countries outside of the United States, multi-generational living is the norm. Um, and I moved in with my parents for a part of the pandemic just so my husband and I would, wouldn't have to take the leave from work. Um, and [00:32:00] it was great. It was wonderful. Um, and I sort of think. The way we are. Part of the problem, and we sort of touched on this earlier, is that it, everything is so individual and it's supposed to be just everything is your responsibility and your problem, and if you can't hack it, there's something wrong with you.

Um, and I think that in so many ways is so damaging for parents, but it's also so damaging for kids because they do better when they have. Many trusted adults in their lives. Um, I always, you know, we have a, we have friends who, um, are spend a lot of time with our kids, uh, and are very close to them, and it's really good for my kids to have someone who's not.

Their mom to, you know, go to with problems or concerns. Um, because, you know, taking advice from your own dumb friends when you're in [00:33:00] elementary school is, is not always the way to go. Um, so it's just, it, it's better for the whole family unit when they, when kids know that they have many people in their lives that love them and wanna support them.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, and definitely, you know, there was that isolation during the shutdown period of Covid, of course. But I think generally too, you know, families typically don't have that level of social and community support. That they used to have. And then there are also aren't really systems to help with that gap, at least.

I mean, not to the degree. Yes, there are some systems out there, but not to the degree, degree that we need this to support the challenges of parenthood. You know, we don't have that village that it takes to raise a child anymore, typically.

Jessica Grose: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: and then, and you also write about some of the challenges of being a working mother in the [00:34:00] workplace and just the ideal worker, you know, that you think of the modern worker, sort of the expectations on that and how that's incompatible with parenting and caregiving in general, which most of us will have to do at some point in our lives.

Right?

Jessica Grose: Yes.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, so could you talk a little bit about what that looks like, sort of what the ideal worker is in a lot of workplaces and how that's incompatible with caregiving responsibilities?

Jessica Grose: Um, so the Ideal worker is a term coined by gender scholar Joan Williams. Um, and it's the idea that you need when you, your employer, expects you to work as if you have no outside obligations and no life outside of work. And so, um, Women who have children, Are obviously the most publicly unable to be the ideal worker, and they've sort of [00:35:00] taken on the mantle of fighting for, um, sort of more flexible workplaces for things like paid family leave.

But I think that really masked. To the fact that, uh, care, most people, regardless of their gender, are going to have to do some caretaking in their lives, or they're gonna have some part point in their life where they, um, have their own medical needs or their own sort of, you know, outside work obligations, um, that prevent them from being the ideal worker that many employers expect them to be.

And so, um, I think it would be, Much better for everyone if we sort of took it out of, you know, the flexibility that I think is often associated as something moms want when they have young kids. I think if we made it something that was. A, available to everyone, and b, less associated with moms and women because we, you know, there's still a lot of misogyny in the world.

Um, I think [00:36:00] there would be less resistance to it, and I think, um, we could make systems that were more sustainable for everyone as they go through their lifespan, because again, It is very unusual that you will never have to caregiver anyone, um, be it an elderly family member, a spouse, a child, um, and it's very unusual that you'll never, you know, through the 45 years that most of us.

Uh, work in our lifespan that you'll never have an illness that takes you away, that makes you unable to work, you know, 40 or 50 hours a week. Um, most people have that experience and so, um, it's just very strange that it's been coded in the workplace as like, oh, these are, it's like a mommy track. This is a mom thing.

This is what moms want. It's like, no, this is what a lot of people want and need to have full lives.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, and it's not really. Built into [00:37:00] the system at most workplaces. I mean, yes, sometimes there are things like maternity leave of course, and that kind of thing. But I think it's almost like this big problem whenever in most workplaces when something like that happens. And actually one of the most heartbreaking stories in your book, and there were a lot of heartbreaking stories, but one of the most heartbreaking to me was there was someone that was working, I think at a grocery store and had to stay home because it was.

A snow day or something like that, and their child was not able to be alone and got fired over that. And I think that's the reality in America for too many people, which is that it's almost like you have the choice. You can be there for your, your child who needs you or caregiving in general, or you can keep your job.

And it's that that's not an okay place to be.

Jessica Grose: Right. And, um, I, this wasn't in the book, but this was something that I did for my column. Um, I talked to a woman who did a lot of polling among Republicans and, um, Paid leave is very popular, [00:38:00] um, among Republicans, how we fund it, that's where the devil is in the details and Democrats and Republicans disagree with how that should work.

But she told me the story of doing focus groups. Um, and she was talking to a Republican conservative guy who lived, uh, in a rural area in the Midwest. And he. Really wanted paid to leave because he was an hourly worker and he wanted to be able to take care of his wife who had just had a C-section. She couldn't walk, she couldn't hold the baby.

Um, and he didn't have that. So there. Is already a lack of care, uh, professional medical care and, and nursing care in rural America. And so it wasn't like there was someone he could easily hire or if he like not, and he didn't of course have the money to hire someone to help his wife. Um, so he really was desperate for paid leave so that he could, you know, simply be with his wife.

After she had a baby, which is [00:39:00] a very normal thing to want.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Jessica Grose: So I think again, it's like been weirdly sort of gendered and politicized when it's just such a very human thing to need.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, that's good to know. Most people agree on that. And if you think around the world, you know, some countries are doing much better than the United States in terms of this, and so we need to get it together people, right?

Jessica Grose: Yep.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well, let's go back. To the, to the social media and the history of, you know, I think what's happening now at this cultural moment with the way that motherhood is portrayed in social media in general.

I think your chapter, you know, kind of writes about this evolution from blogs that had some thoughtful pieces about the challenging of motherhood to the way that. That motherhood is being portrayed on social media now, the these days. Can you talk a little bit about, okay, just generally speaking, what are these images that we're getting right now from places like Instagram?

Jessica Grose: [00:40:00] Um, so I mean, I think even the most educated viewer of social media who intellectually knows, we're not seeing the whole picture. Social media is the highlight. Real people are always showing their kids looking perfect and well groomed and enjoy and themselves enjoying motherhood and, uh, their houses looking perfectly clean.

And, uh, again, even though we know that it's, and especially the people who make money off of it, are. Literally selling us a vision of motherhood. Um, I think we can f we can look at those images and feel less than if our kids don't look perfect all the time. If our house is a mess, if we are, are simply not enjoying it, um, in a way that, uh, other people seem to be, and we don't know the context of their lives.

You know, who knows what's going in the background of that shot. But again, these images are very powerful.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think you [00:41:00] described, you know, there's always like a sparkling kitchen and perfect hair and all these things. I mean, yes,

there are some people out there showing more, you know, the messy kitchen or whatever, but I, I can really relate to that. It's like, I know intellectually when I see that, that it's somewhat performative and that they're probably, you know, that's not the whole story.

And yet I do find myself, as much as I sometimes go down a rabbit hole of Instagram, I, it just sometimes makes me feel really terrible about myself. I mean, what do you, what are, what are your thoughts about the psychological impact on that and how it feels to moms who are, you know, trying to do their best, but they're looking at all these.

Supposedly so-called perfect Instagram feeds.

Jessica Grose: I mean, honestly, I would be off social media if I didn't have to use it for work. I think at this point, um, it is more negative than positive as a force in people's lives, but I. I think people [00:42:00] should block and mute more aggressively. Um, if seeing someone's social media is no longer serving you, um, you don't have to feel bad about disengaging, even if it's a friend.

I mean, I tell, I don't remember if I told this story in the book, but, um, I had a miscarriage. I definitely talked about. I've talked about having a miscarriage between my two kids. Um, and I had a friend who was, uh, had the same due date as the. Uh, pregnancy that I lost, and I absolutely could not look at her social media for the entirety of what that pregnancy would've been.

Um, and I think drawing those boundaries for yourself is incredibly important, and nobody can do that for you. You've gotta do that for yourself. Um, and it is a little bit at like picking a scab. Um, it feels good in the moment, but ultimately makes you feel worse afterwards.

Debbie Sorensen: That's the perfect metaphor for it because it's sort of, yeah, it's like picking a scab in the sense that you kind of know that this is kind of, it [00:43:00] feels icky and yet there's something about it that you keep doing it. Ugh. Yeah. I can relate to that. Yeah, and I, I think that, um, Hold on. I had a thought. What I, what was I gonna say? I think that paying attention to that, that impact, like how is this making me feel? And then choose it. You know, do I need to be off of it? Do I need to be more careful about who I'm following and what I'm looking at? Because of course, they have algorithms and so you can either go off of it completely or choose which sources you wanna pay attention to or try to.

Yeah, like unfollow the people that are making you feel that way, that are making you feel not good enough, or that are making you feel depressed or anxious or perfectionistic. It's like, let's just disengage from that and see that for what it is.

Do you, so it sounds like you've been a little bit more cautious about who you follow recently. [00:44:00] I'm just wondering, since you wrote the book and you did the research on the social media piece, have you changed your behavior in terms of how and what you're consuming around partly social media, but also just parenting information in general?

Have you, have you changed anything in your own life based on this?

Jessica Grose: No, um, not really. I already didn't look at that stuff. Um, I only tried to look at it for work. Um, I try not to follow any influencers of any kind. Um, So I already had sort of pretty strict boundaries around it, and I always talk about how, you know, my older daughter was born in 2012, um, so Instagram was not what it is now.

Um, and I'm grateful about that actually. Uh, but I vowed that I was not going to Google anything, um, when my daughter was a baby. And if I had a question, I would just. Ask my pediatrician or my parents. Um, and I think that served me quite well because I think that sort of having the [00:45:00] avalanche of information does more harm than good and makes it really hard to sift through, um, and know what's, you know, what's gonna work for you.

Debbie Sorensen: That's very smart of you, Jess. I think you're an integration. I hope people are. Listening to this, actually one of the things, so, so let's sort of move a little bit more into like, okay, what should, what can we do to counteract that, um, uh, counteract all this? Um, and one of the things that you say is quite simple.

You say, what if the bar for being a good mother, quote, good mother, was simply that your children felt safe and loved? And when I read that, I just felt an exhale.

Jessica Grose: Mm-hmm.

Debbie Sorensen: wow. How simple would that be? I mean, what would change do you think, for most moms, if that was the bar? It's like, my kids are safe and loved and that's really the main thing I need to worry about.

Jessica Grose: I mean, I think the biggest thing would change was their brains would just have more space for other things. I don't know. I think, and those other things, the [00:46:00] sky's the limit. Who knows what it could make room for in their minds and then in their lives, um, as a result of that. So I think that's sort of the biggest, um, change.

We're just sort of torturing ourselves into what end.

Debbie Sorensen: If we, you know, we talked earlier about mom guilt and I'm curious when we'll get, because mom guilt, you know, it's kind of hard to totally avoid mom guilt, I think. Um, Maybe conversations like this can help, but I think we all probably feel it from time to time. I'm wondering how you personally unhook when you're feeling mom guilt, or if you notice that showing up in your life.

What, how do you respond to that?

Jessica Grose: I mean, you can't avoid the feeling. Um, you're gonna still have the feeling. I think what the research I've done and, and. Talking to so many people has allowed me to do is reflect on that guilt a little bit more, and [00:47:00] understand whether I feel guilty because I am actually doing something that I feel conflicts with my own values.

Or if I am feeling guilty for, because I am comparing myself to somebody else or, or some other thing that isn't actually, serving me or my kids. Um, so, you know, Maybe if I feel guilty because, um, I was distracted by work and my kid was asking me a question, um, and I wasn't fully present for them. It's like, okay, well that, that guilt is maybe telling me something useful.

Um, that I needed to find a way to be more present with my kids in the, you know, hours before and after school. And, and that's not necessary, it's not always, um, bad to feel guilt when you're. Violating something that is valuable to you, but then it's like, I'm always a really big fail on anything that involves like a costume or dressing [00:48:00] up.

Um, and I just don't feel guilty about that anymore because it's not my thing. I think schools ask too much of it. Um, I just don't, you know, I, my kids are gonna survive feeling vaguely embarrassed that whatever they were wearing wasn't the perfect thing that everybody else was wearing. It's like, yeah, that's, I don't.

I don't feel guilty about that, uh, in the way I used to when my kids were really little and their Halloween costumes were always deeply janky. And that's just how it was gonna be. Like, I'm not crafty, I'm never gonna be crafty. It's, it's what it is. So I think, um, just being able to reflect on those feelings in a more productive way rather than letting them overwhelm me.

Debbie Sorensen: I love that. It really goes back to values. You know, what's important to you, what's, what's gonna work best for your family and your kid and your wellbeing. I think I often get sucked into. Mom guilt when I hear about all these activities that all the other kids are doing. But I know for a fact that my kids like downtime and my [00:49:00] family does better.

You know, we're all very busy and so my family does better when we're not overscheduled. And I keep having to reorient to that. Like it doesn't matter if they take all these enriching activities every day of the week, but that's gonna have a big impact on our mental health, and that's really important to me.

And. I need to not get sucked into that pressure just because, you know, somebody else in the neighborhood is doing X, Y, Z does not mean it's right for me or my family.

Jessica Grose: Exactly.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Um, and, and I think we already talked about a comforting idea from your book and which really the parenting research does bear out, which is that there isn't a foolproof set of rules that are gonna always result in this amazing, well-adjusted perfect child. Like, it's much more complicated than that. And to me, I mean, I think that that's another idea that you raise in the book that, um, I think is, takes a little bit of the pressure off, right? Is the sense of there's no one like [00:50:00] perfectly right way to raise a child.

So don't even try, right?

Jessica Grose: Right.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Okay, so you have two daughters and I have two CH two daughters, and let's just imagine that maybe some of them are going to become parents someday. What are some of the things that you hope would change for them between, you know, the world as it is now and when they're ready?

Our kids are about the same age, actually. So what would you hope would change between now and then?

Jessica Grose: Um, I hope that there is paid parental leave at the federal level. I hope that, um, There is a functional system of childcare, um, and I hope they feel less stressed between the different roles in their lives. Um, I think there's so much sort of perfectionism rampant in all areas of our society now, and I think for a lot of people, [00:51:00] not just moms, but I think that, um, It is, especially for moms.

And so I just want them to feel less anxiety and less pressure. Um, and I think actually having meaningful social change is the way to get there. Um, rather than, you know, again, I. I feel like a lot of the solutions just are things that are ultimately more work for, for moms. So like anything that requires, uh, um, you know, self, self-actualization or, or self-care or, or renegotiate, like there's.

Always so much put on moms to sort of solve these problems for themselves. So anything that takes it away from sort of individual problems to solve and, and makes communities better places for, um, parents and children, I. Is what I hope for them. I mean, even something like the built environment of most cities in the [00:52:00] United States is really family unfriendly.

There's not enough parks, there's not enough walkability, there's not enough green space. Um, so things like that, that would benefit not just my kids, but everyone, um, I think would be an environment that I would be excited for them to have children into.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, that sounds really good, and thank you for making that point, that if it's another thing that is on. The mothers themselves to try to fix through self-care, through, you know, st quote stepping up or whatever it is. Um, that's really, this is a problem that we all need to band together on, in, on that more cultural and systemic level.

Um, I'm really glad you said that cuz it shouldn't be another, like, what are we all not doing enough of? That's not moving the needle. Um,

Jessica Grose: Yeah, and I mean, I honestly, sometimes I'm just like, just care less, care less be do less. Leave your kids alone, like, like I honestly think we're just putting too much thought and [00:53:00] effort into all of this. Um, and I know that sounds weird cuz it's like, oh, our kids are so, you know, the most important thing to us, but that doesn't mean we need to actively meddle in their lives.

Um, and I think about that all the time, especially with my older daughter who's going to middle school this fall. Like, I want her to feel confident in the world and in her own decision making and, um, in the person that she is outside of me. And I, I, I mean maybe this is just. My kids, but like they tell me my business all the time, like they have their own.

And I'm honestly, it makes me proud. I want them to have their own ideas about the world and their place in it. And so, and it goes by so fast. Um, I only, she'll be in sixth grade in the fall, which means I have six more years with her at home. Um, which is so devastating to, [00:54:00] to me. But, um, I want her to feel like as she gains more independence, that she feels a real sense of agency in the world, um, and that she feels she can navigate that world without me there beside her.

Um, So, yeah. Um, I think just do less. That is so we're doing too much. We're doing the most all the time.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Yeah. I love that. Well, one final question here and then then we'll wrap up for today. So I just, I think that sometimes I think it's so important to read about the context of what's going on and the cultural pieces of it and the systemic, and sometimes I do get to a dark place about the world and it's really important to me to find hope, um, in the midst of all this.

And I'm just wondering, Jess, are you feeling hope? Are there any positive changes that you're seeing that give you a little bit of hope about where [00:55:00] things are headed?

Jessica Grose: Yeah, absolutely. I think more people are talking about this, these conversations. I feel like more people are raising their kids, um, to be aware of these dynamics. I think, you know, people who are raising boys are, are raising them to be more aware of these dynamics and again, Um, what I just said was that moms need to do less.

And so like raising a generation of young men who who are willing to take up dismantle, I think is also extremely important. Um, and so I see signs of hope all over the place, and I also just don't find despair to be a particularly useful emotion. Um, and I feel like there's just more conversations happening among people of different political stripes.

I mean, I've had. Um, a lot of, um, productive conversations with conservatives who are really concerned that people don't wanna have kids anymore, and understand that part of the reason people don't wanna have kids is because the,

there is no social safety net for [00:56:00] them. And so I think, you know, I. Understand the way that our political system works. And so you need allies from every walk of life to move legislation that will help everyone forward. So I do see that so much more now, um, especially when you look back at newspaper articles from. 30 years ago, the way that so many people talk about, um, things like childcare and paid leave as yuppy entitlements.

No one would say anything like that anymore. It would be so unpopular, um, to frame it that way. And I think we don't see that as movement forward because we don't have the material changes in, um, in our lives to show for it. But it matters and it will, I do think in the long run it will happen.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Well, and I appreciate the work you're doing to be a voice in this space, because I think that that, like you said, there are more conversations happening [00:57:00] about this, and you have. Done so much terrific writing in the New York Times and other places. And then of course, your book, which let me just give the title again for people who wanna read it.

You should definitely check it out. Screaming on the inside, the Unsustainability of American Motherhood, because I think your voice is really important here, Jess. Um, and so thank you and thank you for coming on the podcast. Um,

Jessica Grose: pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, you're welcome. Where can people find you online? Obviously the New York Times, and they can find your book.

Where can people find you who are looking to read more of your work?

Jessica Grose: Um, so, uh, mostly I just, I am writing my twice weekly news letter at the times. Um, and so they should subscribe to that. Um, and. My last name is spelled g r o s e. So if you just Google Jessica Gross New York Times, you will find all of my stuff, um, for the, for them. And then, uh, my website is jessica.gross.com.

On [00:58:00] Twitter, I am at Jess Gross. And uh, on Instagram I'm at Jess Gross rates.

Debbie Sorensen: And I promise it won't be any of that toxic parenting stuff that is going around. It's gonna be helpful.

Jessica Grose: Yeah. I mean, I don't, I, I, I'm, honestly, I, I even kind of post less and less there because I'm just like, I, as a journalist, I feel like I have a kind of do no harm.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Jessica Grose: So I'm always like, uh, very conscious of any dynamics I might be feeding into that I'm not, that I'm not happy about. So, uh, yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes. Well, thank you Jess. It was really nice talking to you today. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Jessica Grose: My pleasure. Take care.

Debbie Sorensen: You too.

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