Linda Hirshman had a very thought-provoking article in The American Prospect last month on the phenomenon of wealthy, highly educated and once-ambitious women of the post-baby-boom generation leaving work to stay home with their kids.

Hirshman argues that the “failure” of 1970’s feminism wasn’t that it was too radical and ended up alienating younger women, who reacted by embracing the traditional sex roles their elders had rejected, but that it wasn’t radical enough. Over the decades, she says, feminism left the basic gender patterns of the nuclear family untouched, and when it began to pand to the clichés of mainstream society by subsuming all larger goals to the easily palatable idea of preserving women’s “choices” (wherever those choices might lead them), it completely lost its revolutionary potential — and women have been left holding the bag.

That’s a thumbnail simplification of an intellectually complex argument, but I want to get quickly to the point at which I will add my two cents to the debate, which has, since the article’s publication, been kept alive by David Brooks, Judith Stadtman Tucker and others.

Hirshman is ideologically opposed to stay-at-home motherhood. The crux of her argument is as follows:

The family — with its repetitious, socially invisible, physical tasks — is a necessary part of life, but it allows fewer opportunities for full human flourishing than public spheres like the market or the government. This less-flourishing sphere is not the natural or moral responsibility only of women. Therefore, assigning it to women is unjust. Women assigning it to themselves is equally unjust. To paraphrase, as Mark Twain said, “A man who chooses not to read is just as ignorant as a man who cannot read.”

My problem with this is that not all women — or men — are the same. Some women — and men — find “repetitious, socially invisible, physical tasks” mind-numbing and stultifying; some don’t. Some thrive on the competitive effervescence of the marketplace; some feel crushed by it. Many, in fact, now feel exhausted and, perhaps, dehumanized by the increasingly crushing, competitive and nonstop demanding marketplace of the turn of the 21st century, where Americans work the longest hours of any people in the industrialized world yet have less and less job security, shrinking benefits and essentially stagnant wages. Given the nature of work today, I don’t think it’s all that surprising that women who don’t take any particular pleasure in their work or have a particular sense of a professional calling or a particular need to make money should choose to opt out. I think that many men in similar circumstances would love to do the same thing. In fact, the very real phenomenon of men resenting their wives for choosing to stay home has, to date, been consistently underreported.

Work stinks for most people. Given the financial opportunity to Opt Out, a great many men and women alike, particularly those outside the upper middle class, would gladly do so.
The sociologist Philip Slater once put in a very funny way what I'm trying more flat-footedly to say here. This is from his 1970 book "The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point":

Many people would object that most women don’t want careers. I suspect that women themselves would agree, but I also wonder if deep inside they don’t feel the kind of puzzled uneasiness that we always experience when obliged to accept a formulation that makes us lose either way ... When we say “career” it connotes a demanding, rigorous, preordained life pattern, to whose goals everything else is ruthlessly subordinated — everything pleasurable, human, emotional, bodily, frivolous ... Thus when a man asks a woman if she wants a career, it is intimidating. He is saying, are you willing to suppress half of your being as I am, neglect your family as I do, exploit personal relationships as I do, renounce all personal spontaneity as I do? Naturally, she shudders a bit and shuffles back to the broom closet. She even feels a little sorry for him, and bewails the unkind fate that has forced him against his will to become such a despicable person ...

A more effective (revolutionary, confronting) response would be to admit that a “career,” thus defined, is indeed undesirable — that (now that you mention it) it seems like a pernicious activity for any human being to engage in, and should be eschewed by both men and women.

This quotation basically sums up the attitude that both my husband and I have to work — which, as you might imagine, has led to a certain amount of tension over the years. (Health insurance must be secured, and, by God, it isn’t going to be by me.)

It’s my belief that, with the exception of people with extreme Type A sensibilities, “full human flourishing” requires a certain kind of slowness in life, a certain kind of stillness, a great degree of relaxation, time for reflection and, at the risk of sounding downright nauseating, for meaningful human connection. Those things, however, are now a luxury for most people, given the nature of life and work in our time.

Whether Opting Out is ultimately good for women in the long term (after all, Divorce Happens) or good for their sons and daughters or good for the gender is another matter entirely. Hirshman’s article is primarily focused on the latter concern. My concern here is more purely human.

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Jan. 12, 2006  8:00 pm  
This Won’t Hurt a Bit  
Categories: Childhood, Parenting, Health

Talk about burying the lead.

You have to read to the very last sentence of "The Secret Truth," an article in The Boston Globe Magazine by Dr. Darshak Sanghavi about the vaccine/autism link and the parents who refuse to vaccinate their children for fear of it, to see the doctor take a stand in favor of childhood vaccinations.

"In the final analysis," he writes, "the secret truth about vaccines may be that, sometimes, personal freedom can be a dangerous thing.

But before he gets to this conclusion about the dangers of letting parents make their own choices on whether to vaccinate their kids, you have to wade through sentences like "Most diseases prevented by vaccines, like polio, measles and whooping cough, are now pretty uncommon, and many people ... believe the benefits of vaccines don’t outweigh the risks" and "So public health agencies try scaring parents into vaccinating, even though actual risks of any one child today getting polio or pertussis are extremely low."

Why the doubletalk?

Did the editors assign a sympathetic article on the vaccine-autism link, and the doctor, given the mountain of scientific evidence against it, couldn’t deliver? Did the magazine want something that would comfort,
rather than challenge, parents' beliefs, even as it gently drove home the increasingly unpopular message that vaccination matters — a lot?

I am writing a book now on the mystery of why so many kids are being diagnosed with so many issues, and it’s remarkable how often people, hearing of it, immediately ask whether I am writing about autism. After which, before waiting for an answer, they go on, “You know, it’s linked to the mercury in vaccines.”

Over and over again, the link between mercury — in the form of thimerosal, a preservative once routinely used in vaccines — and autism has been disproved. Or, better put, (who knows what the future will bring?) it has not been confirmed. (The Times had an excellent history of the autism/vaccine controversy last year.)

Meanwhile, formerly all-but-eradicated deadly childhood diseases are making a comeback, as Sanghavi acknowledges: In Britain, where vaccination is optional and immunization rates in recent years for the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine have fallen to as low as 62 percent in parts of London, measles is on the rise. Ditto in Japan, where parental choice on the matter of vaccinations has resulted in a yearly rate now of more than 100,000 cases of measles, leading to an estimated 50 to 100 deaths.

In the U.S., 85 percent of pediatricians surveyed last year reported they’d had parents turn down at least one recommended shot; slightly more than half of the doctors said that in the previous year they’d met at least one family that had refused all vaccines. Polio has shown up in Minnesota among the Amish, who are distrustful of vaccines. Whooping cough cases are at a 30-year high in California, where there were more than 2,000 cases of the disease last year, leading to at least seven deaths of babies.

Is publicizing these facts a matter of hype or scare tactics, as Dr. Sanghavi’s article might suggest?

Ask the dead infants’ parents.

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**Off With Her Head!**

A couple of years ago, I spent a Sunday afternoon visiting with my friend Ruth Marcus, who writes for The Washington Post. While our daughters played with Barbie dolls upstairs, we got out a map and plotted an escape route from Washington in the case of a terrorist attack. She used that anecdote later in the lead to a column about the anxieties of life under the threat of terrorism called “Life in the Orange Zone.” Almost immediately after the column ran, a reader called her to say, “The real reason you have to be anxious is that you let your girls play with Barbies.”

I talk about this incident in my book “Perfect Madness” as an example of the ways that people whittle down their intellectual focus to trivialities, instead of taking in and dealing with the larger issues that bring anxiety — or in this case, fear — to their lives.

I was reminded of it again recently, when I came upon a study reported in the British press that unearthed what seemed on the surface to be a disturbing new trend: Girls, aged 7 to 11, were expressing “violence and hatred” towards their Barbie dolls and acting on their emotions in the most barbarous ways — decapitating the dolls, pulling off their limbs and melting them in microwave ovens.

Now, I never have been one to believe that Barbie is The Root of All Evil. I don’t think that her ridiculous body proportions inspire girls to despise their own human forms. I mean, if a girl can’t distinguish between herself and a glorified piece of plastic, I think she’s got bigger issues than that of playing with anatomically incorrect toys (and her parents have a lot more work to do than just banning the offending playthings from their home).

My daughters have tons of Barbies. If I were, one day, to interrupt their play to explain that they shouldn’t look to the dolls as role models or aspire to emulate their smoothly inanimate forms, I think I’d receive the same look of withering disdain with which my 8-year-old daughter, Julia, recently greeted my declaration to my 5-year-old daughter, Emilie, that, if she did not cease and desist whatever incredibly annoying thing she was doing at the time (Poop jokes at dinner? The Underwear Museum?), I
would explode into a thousand little pieces on the spot and die.

"Mommy is exasperating," Julia explained to poor, frozen-in-terror, Emilie.

“You mean exaggerating,” I said.

“Same thing.”

Still, when I saw the headlines, "Barbie Under Attack," "Barbarism begins with Barbie," "Reservoir Dolls" they piqued my interest. (See this among others.) What had Barbie done, I wondered, to inspire such rage?

American researchers have postulated that girls may be jealous of Barbie for being skinny or for seemingly "having it all." Some believe that she connotes a frightening kind of adulthood at a time when girls are clinging still to childhood. But the British researchers, from the University of Bath’s department of psychology and school of management, found nothing of the sort.

What they discovered was, simply put, that a Barbie doll is just a doll. She’s a doll that girls are outgrowing at an earlier and earlier age. (Four, believe it or not, is now the optimal age of Barbie.) Barbie dolls also are cheap. Girls have a lot of them — and as a result, don’t consider them special toys.

When girls reject their Barbies — which they do now starting around age 7 or 8, as they enter the moderate firestorm so the so-called tween years (see Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer, another Brit, on this) — they feel free to slough the dolls off with all the violence with which they also throw off their earlier identities. Barbie represents to them all that is “babyish" and "girly girl," the University of Bath researchers reported, and today’s “tween" girls want nothing to do with those shameful aspects of their past. They want to be "cool.” And "cool” now means being a “tomboy.”

Food for thought.

Another tidbit: the gearing-down of the Age of Barbie is typical of a trend that marketers now call KGOY — Kids Getting Older Younger. It’s great news for toy makers: After all, if you can get Barbie bought, sold and done with by age 4, you’ve got that many more childhood years in which to sell newer and better and cooler toys to girls. But is it great for children?

At about the same time that the Barbie story broke in the Britain (See here for amusing commentary), a group of third grade girls here in the Washington area had a little pre-holiday party. The girls watched a movie, ate junk food and then ... played Spin the Bottle and Seven Minutes in Heaven, a game which was called Seven Minutes in the Closet back in my day, and perhaps, yours.

In my day, these games, which I learned about by reading Judy Blume, were understood as activities for pre-teenagers. When we played them, feeling very precocious and naughty in fifth grade, we folded our lips inwards over our teeth when we “kissed” in order to avoid fleshy contact. And in the “closet,” the boys hugged the walls, keeping as far away from us girls as possible.

Now the girls I’m writing of had no boys around to contend with. True to girlish form, they spent their closeted time giggling and whispering about each other (or so it was reported, third-hand, to me, by the mom of a girl cool enough to have been invited).

It all was very innocent, of course. And yet — the advent of Blume-style behavior now in girls as young as 8 makes me sad.

It’s fair enough to say that, in the mid-1970’s, the Judy Blume books spelled the intellectual end of my own age of innocence. I was 10.

With competitive soccer now starting in kindergarten, academic tutoring beginning in preschool, and catty parlor games now a part of girl life as early as the third grade, what’s left of the years that can properly be called childhood?

Does little-girlhood end now at 4?