

High Investment Parenting — the HIP way to bring up your kids



The binding glue of many relationships is ProjectChildren Getty Images

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Middle-class parents intent on giving their kids the childhood they never had may be putting their families at risk

My husband and I were out for dinner; spruced up, child-free, and sipping from goldfish bowl-sized wine glasses. Optimal conditions for romance. But there was only one line of chat. Our seven-year-old had ripped his trousers, could my husband darn them? Yes; if you get me beige cotton. They loved those meatballs but next time buy pork, as well as beef; they'll be softer. I've got a meeting on Thursday, can you take the 11-year-old to cricket? All our emotion, attention, energy, was focused on the children. Not a word about us. It was unity — of a sort.

We, it's glaringly apparent, are a High Investment Parenting couple — ours is a modern style of marriage where the binding glue of the relationship is 'Project Children'. Identified by Richard V. Reeves, policy director of the Brookings Institution's Centre on Children and

Families in the US, the HIP marriage is typically comprised of a middle-class, liberal, graduate couple, who both work but whose relationship, above passion and duty, thrives on the shared commitment of raising their kids. They prioritise family life over earning oodles of money, and often look after the children alone. They pass the parenting baton: while one parent looks after the kids, the other rushes off to a meeting and then, after the meeting, runs back and looks after kids while the other does the food shopping or does gym class. Sex isn't dead but it's frequently missing in action.

On the plus side, the HIP marriage is the karmic opposite of Tiger parenting (the familial equivalent of North Korea, where the children are spiritually crushed; their only option to obey and conform). We HIP parents are — when we're not frazzled to a crisp, negotiating our work/play rotas — warm, intuitive, nurturing. We're child-centric without the flashy, egotistical hysteria of the Alpha couple. And yet, we HIPsters are not that chilled, we are consciously, anxiously, a world away from the benign neglect of our own parents, whose more traditional marriage model — where 'Dad earned enough to keep your mum in dresses, and the house nice' — felt, for many of us, emotionally deficient.

Indeed, the drive behind many HIP marriages is to exorcise those bittersweet memories. My friend Gina, 45, a TV producer, from London, says, "In the Seventies, if you put a roof over your children's heads, fed and clothed them, even if you were middle class, that was enough. But I was unhappy as a teenager. No one noticed. I want to be around my kids, making sure things happen for them. I'm over-compensating because I had to fend for myself — and my husband is the same. We spend a lot of our couple time with the kids."

It's a common theme: "My father wasn't really involved in my upbringing," Mark, 40, a musician, from Cardiff, says. "His main interaction with me was discipline, and homework some weekends. But mostly he worked. He was a bit of a stranger. What's real wealth? Is it a pension pot at the end, or is it seeing your family in their prime, and experiencing that?"

Since 2009, marriage in England and Wales has steadily increased. In 2011, the provisional number of marriages rose by 1.7 per cent to 247,890. Penny Mansfield, director of the relationship charity OnePlusOne, says that in 2014, "marriage is more likely to be middle class. It's poorer people who are not marrying." The net result of feminism seems to be that successful, educated, financially independent women are choosing marriage: the women who least need support from a man are gaining the power from this institution that their predecessors were denied. Those who were once the currency of marriage are now its investors. Their children are the majority shareholders.

Anastasia de Waal, deputy director of Civitas, the Institute for the Study of Civil Society, concedes that the beneficiaries of this modern marriage style are not only women, no longer stuck with the bucket and mop the minute they return from the office. "The shift of men going into the home" means that they are less likely to feel defined solely by the size of their pay packet.

Within this, the HIP marriage style is a growing UK trend, believes the London-based psychotherapist Caryn Nuttall, "with guys being prepared not to go for the big job but to re-evaluate, decide they'll earn enough to give precedence to being at home with their families. That's a shift. It's the very beginning, although it's harder here [than in the US], because money is harder to come by. But the emphasis is moving away from working all

hours, money money money, to spending time at home, focusing on the children and what's best for them. It's about showing your kids another, healthier value system."

When I scrutinise Reeves's definition of the HIP marriage, it is astonishingly exact, as though he's been secretly filming us. No slurping of posh coffee in bed together on a Saturday morning after an x-rated roll around our crisp white duvet. Instead, mum or dad falls out of bed at dawn, pours coffee into an ugly insulated cup to burn their lip on as they transport their young hero to his or her 9am sporting engagement. Yes, we slap every date onto Google calendar. We did love *This is 40* (indeed, were incensed that it was the lowest grossing Judd Apatow movie) and, admittedly, *Modern Family* feels like home.

Reeves's big claim is that the HIP relationship will "save marriage". Those at the front line are not entirely convinced. Rachel, 42, a doctor, from Manchester, is still reeling from HIP-induced havoc. "Apparently," she says, "there's less sex in relationships where they share all the tasks." Meaningful pause. "It's relay childcare. He's in the kitchen, I'm supervising bath time, by the time you've eaten, you can't be bothered to talk. I'm not saying you don't have a relationship but, after all those years of the children's early development, when you closely interact with them non-stop — reading, playing, drawing binary codes on a whiteboard — it dawns that you've put your partner on hold, and you have to salvage something of yourself."

She calls me again, from the car, speaking over her daughter who is shouting in the back, to add, "If all your attention is on your children, your marriage will self-destruct. The children never learn who their parents are; they only ever see an interaction that involves them. They don't learn compassion. But there are four people in my family, and the children are just two of them. It's bad for everybody. You have to be selfish and not tend to everybody else all the time, or you'll fail. Now when it's bedtime, I say, 'Mum and Dad need time alone to sustain their relationship,' however crazy that sounds."

Elaine Halligan, of The Parent Practice, which provides parenting workshops and coaching, is in firm agreement. If we are too fussing and devoted, "we're in danger of creating a generation of children unable to think and act for themselves. Not doing too much for our kids is a vital gift we can give them, as we want our children to be independent thinkers and doers. Over-protected and over-scheduled kids develop habits of learned helplessness; a victim mentality. They often don't trust their own judgement and abilities."

She adds, "If your children see that we don't sleep or eat well, neglect our friendships, and don't get to do activities we enjoy, then they may well expect that for themselves. Or they may treat you like the slave you are being. A family starts with you. As the core, how you feel emotionally and physically, is therefore the bedrock of everything. We need to take good care of ourselves so that we can be proactive, effective, be good models and be in charge."

Indeed. While the HIP marriage is a privileged lifestyle — available to the fortunate few who can manage to pare down their workloads and survive, whose reduced joint incomes can still keep a family afloat — it isn't perfect. As Halligan says, "Once again, we're in danger of losing that ever-elusive parenting balance." The tacit understanding that intimacy will take the hit seems to be widespread.

“We share the drudgery,” says Mark, a graphic designer from Essex. “The minute you take the mum out of the kitchen, the mum in the kitchen job still has to be done. The problem is solved by fathers coming forward. But you need two incomes. So the era of the family outing is over. I’ll take the kids to the seaside while you work. Unless you can afford staff, High Investment Parenting is your only option. We’re the children’s service crew: personal trainers, chefs, tutors, cabbies. But one sacrifice is your romantic life.”

It seems as though the woman often leads the HIP charge, and the man falls into line. Mansfield notes that “for women, one of the main sources of satisfaction seem to be their relationship with their child, whereas for men, it seems to be their relationship with their partner”. Helen, 39, an accountant, from Surrey, says, “My husband is equally committed to the kids, we share duties, but I choreograph everything. He is invested but as my subordinate. And when we’re launching into a parenting project like a piano exam, he often feels that I’m not there for him — and it’s true. Sex is the last thing I feel like because my kids’ happiness is paramount, and my emotions and mind are elsewhere.”

This arrangement can work for a while but long-term may pose a risk. De Waal agrees that, fabulous as it is to tend to your darlings, putting all your emotional eggs in one basket can rebound on all of you. “If you don’t take care of your adult relationship because you’re being super-parents, you lose that tie to each other, and that makes your relationship vulnerable. You can’t really parent well unless you have a good relationship. That plank of stability between the parents makes you better able to serve your children.”

Indeed, Nuttall adds, “If the child becomes the family business, when the child leaves home, what’s left? It’s not fair on anyone, especially the child, who’ll feel an undue responsibility in holding the marriage together. It doesn’t matter how much time you invest in your child if they don’t feel secure. It’s lovely to give children a very strong sense of themselves, but important for them to know that other people have needs too. Otherwise you breed a narcissist. They fall apart if they’re not the centre of things.”

I confess, a year ago, amid our intense devotion to childrearing, a marital frost descended. It was clear that High Investment Parenting, although it was a rich source of joy and pride, couldn’t sustain the marriage alone. My husband — who, between work, ran our nine-year-old’s cricket team, helped all the boys with maths, cooked chicken pie, discussed the kids’ every emotion — was miserable about us. He was bored. He felt neglected. He was neglected. He didn’t want to be, as a friend puts it, “in a dreary, sexless marriage, where you tough out the boring old relationship because the kids are more important”. Nor, I realised, with stark horror, did I. We cleared the plastic toys out of the lounge and made more space for ourselves, physically and emotionally.

Nuttall advises, “Be aware of the kid in your partner. We’re bigger but we’re basically still children. We also need encouragement and reassurance. It’s important to stay in tune with your partner, to really dig down and talk, at gut level, not merely on a superficial level of “take the rubbish out” — to really communicate.” Underlying this are the basic principles of a satisfying relationship: “That you feel held, safe, supported; you know the other is absolutely, unquestionably there for you — you are each other’s rock.”

Deep, honest conversation keeps intimacy on a simmer — as does, Nuttall says, “a touch, a hug, a kiss, a spontaneous gesture of affection, just making eye contact”. Make time for

date night (a babysitter costs, so get a friend to come over, then return the favour), or simply sit the kids in front of a film on Sunday morning. “Put a notice on your bedroom door and let the kids understand that Mum and Dad sleep late on a Sunday and aren’t to be disturbed until that sign is off the door.”

The danger is that if neither partner confesses to emotional starvation, even as the children flourish, a marriage may just wither. Mansfield says, “We do see couples who cox and box in terms of jobs and who looks after the children. That’s growing. There’s a sense, in this arrangement, of teamwork. Both parents talk about how to bring up the children: a common goal, a source of connection. There’s nothing more closely connected to each of you than the child you’ve produced together. But if, at the heart of it, the marriage is all about the children’s needs, one of the adults might well hit 40 and want to find someone else who finds them interesting.”

This is the final irony: being a slave to your children can ruin your relationship. Whereas letting them run wild now and then does wonders for their resilience. These days, my husband and I still have an HIP marriage — but there’s a little more High Investment Partnering too.