or many families, resorting to day-care is far from the first choice — intuitively, most people realise that being with the mother, or father, or other consistent, loving family member, is essential for the intellectual and emotional growth of their children, as countless researchers and child psychiatrists are beginning to confirm.¹

Once the essential developmental benefits of children remaining at home under the care of their parents for the first three years are weighed against the developmental expense and the rising costs related to working and child care, it seems we are urgently in need of finding alternatives that can work for the family as a whole.

Clearly, children need to be with their parents — and parents need the time, money and support in order to be with their young children at home.
Unfortunately in today’s consumer driven world, it can seem there is simply not enough money to afford one parent staying at home with a child, nor enough time in the day to do what needs to be done, and it is most challenging for any parent to parent children at home alone in isolation. Marie Sherlock, author of Living Simply With Children, proposes that parents who choose a life of voluntary simplicity are finding they have more time and money available for spending with their families, and that there are myriad ways to create the real community and support that is so essential for raising children — and parents.

At first this might sound far too simple to be true, but living simply — sometimes referred to as ‘downshifting’ or ‘downscaling’ — is both the means and the end to a more meaningful life, claims Sherlock. A downshifter weeds out those aspects of life that are of no lasting value and concentrates instead on those matters that are important; for example, one may consciously conclude that owning an expensive car, designer clothing, and a palatial home are not necessarily their main values, but spending more time with family, working on worthy causes, and showing respect for people and the planet are of real value. Living simply is clearly a financial means to such a life. ‘By living simply and consuming less, you are freeing up time to focus on those things that matter most to you. Living simply provides a psychological and spiritual pathway to a more meaningful existence.’

What is most important to us?
First of all, Sherlock suggests we do some soul searching and take stock of our values and put into perspective, what is truly most important to us? For many people this reflection comes only towards the very end of their lives, when...
Progressive Parenting

What matters

Living Simply with Children suggests we start by gathering the family for a brainstorming session to come up with what truly matters individually and to the family as a whole, to share each member’s thoughts and feelings about the values they cherish. Some ways to access this may be to ask questions like:

- How do you define your own success?
- How would you spend your time in order to live a life of no regrets?
- What are our lives for, anyway?
- What are families for?
- What matters the most in life?

Then we can ask ourselves how each value could be lived in action in daily life, and to consider how it would be for the family if these values were practised every day?

From Living Simply with Children by Marie Sherlock

They see in hindsight what meant the most to them during the years that flew by, and perhaps regret just how much of their lives were spent otherwise. Sherlock proposes that we take the time for reflection right now, and ask ourselves what our most passionate values are, in order to clarify what a life of ‘no regrets’ would be like for us.

An essential part of defining one’s own family values ‘charter’ is to honestly question the values of our consumer culture that prevent us from truly living what matters most to us. Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it like this, ‘How is it that if you ask the average person what is more important to him, making money or being devoted to his family, virtually everyone will answer family, without hesitation. But watch how the average person actually lives out his life; see where he really invests his time and energy, and he will give away the fact that he does not really live by what he says he believes.’

One reason for this, Sherlock proposes, is that we haven’t actually taken the time to define what kind of an existence a ‘no regrets’ life would mean to us; the second stumbling block being that the values of our consumer culture are in a very real sense diametrically opposed to our own — and it’s the values of our consumer culture that we and our kids are bombarded with every day, dictating most of our expenditures and our thinking — even our interactions with our family, friends and neighbours. Its takes a clearly defined and fierce clarity of purpose to see through the fundamental corporate insistence that we live our lives in order to consume more; that success and happiness are to be valued in monetary terms only; that instant gratification is our birthright; and that fitting in and keeping up are more important than our own personal beliefs about the environment and social and economic justice.

Linda McDonough is a 39-year-old single mother who gave birth to one daughter and adopted another five years later. Linda says she couldn’t have done it — ‘that she wouldn’t have been able to have a family at all’ — without living simply. Linda emphasises that simplicity is a choice, and says sincerely, ‘I had a choice between using disposable diapers and having a child,’ referring to the costs involved in raising kids. ‘I chose the child.’ She adds that she also chooses not to eat out, to drive a smaller, older car, and to wear secondhand clothing, all of which allow her the luxury of having children.

It’s of utmost importance to remember that choosing simplicity is not about resigning oneself to deprivation, Sherlock says. By global standards, even a very simplified life in Australia is luxury for 95% of the world’s population. It takes on a whole other meaning when we know very well we could make and spend more if we wanted, but that we consciously choose not to focus on the unsatisfying accumulation of stuff, but rather, on the values, people, and causes that matter most to us and that make life rich and meaningful. ‘Simplicity is the antidote to all that materialism represents and to all of its soul sapping, mind conditioning, earth exhausting consequences. What one gives up in terms of unnecessary and unsatisfying excess is
Want more time? Work less!

Where does all the time go? Chief amongst the ‘time burglars’ is the ever increasing portion of our life that we dedicate to working — ironically, so that we can afford many of the items that lead to even further time spent occupied and, therefore, not shared with our families! Simplified families find more time to be together by working less, either by reducing to a single income with Mum or Dad at home, working part time in a tag team, or even on shift hours, so someone is always at home. Working from home is an increasingly popular option, either as an employee or self-employed. In Living Simply with Children, Marie Sherlock suggests we keep a time diary for just one week, honestly noting down the actual amount of time we spend on an everyday listed range of activities. See for yourself just how much of your own precious life energy you give over to these ‘time bandits’!

- watching television
- surfing the internet
- shopping and shopping malls
- commuting
- organising alternative care arrangements
- figuring out how to use our latest time saving gadgets!

... and then, ask just how much time this week was given to one-on-one time with:

- your spouse?
- pursuing interests that the entire family can enjoy altogether?

Can we afford a double income?

Many families who consciously choose to manage on a single income live by exchanging for the luxury of time, peace of mind, and shared happiness.’

Many ‘downshifters’ refer to the book Your Money or Your Life by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez as the bible of the simplicity movement. Their nine-step program guides readers to develop their financial ‘intelligence, integrity and independence’, and to find their own ‘internal yardstick for fulfillment’ to gauge whether their financial life is in sync with their family values. Explaining the equation, ‘money=life energy’, Robin and Dominguez tell us, ‘Money is something we choose to trade our life energy for. Our life energy is our allotment of time here on earth, the hours of precious life available to us.’ It comes down to this: If what we are truly wanting is nourishing, connected relationships with our families and time to pursue our real interests, then working harder and spending more is only taking us further away from what we really want.

reduce a family’s real income once all the expenses are deducted, such as: the cost of alternate childcare, additional medical expenses for young children exposed to germs while under non-parental care; extra taxes on additional taxable income; wardrobe expenses, mobile phone, commuting expenses, and much more; and expenses for paying someone else to do what there is no longer time to do, such as cutting the lawn, tax return preparation, small home repairs, and house cleaning services.

Everyone benefits

Being economically friendly is being environmentally friendly, and mostly it’s being health friendly too! Ernest Callenbach calls this the ‘Green Triangle’ principle, with the points of the triangle being health, environment, and money. His hypothesis is that what benefits one of these three typically benefits the other two. A good example is riding your bicycle more often: it’s good for your health, good for your pocketbook and good for the earth in terms of less pollution and less resource depletion. Doing the green thing, it seems, is doing the right thing, all the way around.

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Social economy

An emerging worldwide movement towards alternative social economies is shifting the focus from working fixed hours for a limited amount of paper money towards empowering individuals to literally manage their own work and money supply, and at the same time, participate in strengthening their communities, support their local economies, and forge sustainable networks of social support and meaningful contribution.

One such system becoming increasingly popular throughout Australia is called LETS, which stands for Local Energy Trading System (or Local Energy Transfer System). Originally started as a barter network model, LETS has become a full-scale community system which is growing in popularity with more than 200 networks in operation around Australia today.

One could say that LETS operates as a virtual complimentary currency, where people exchange skills and services directly with one another instead of money. How it works is that members list their skills and interests in a directory and contact each other directly to arrange trades, notifying the scheme’s treasurer of transactions so that accounts can be credited and debited. No money changes hands, and no interest is involved, as this is a currency designed exclusively for exchanging rather than storing value.

Find out more about a LETS network in your area at www.lets.org.au.

Simple childcare alternatives

Form your own babysitting co-operative and create a community of regular familiar friends that your child can grow and learn within, as you also grow and learn as parents, linked by the intimate bond of raising children together. Joanne Brunn, Family and Home Network author of Cooped Up? Start A Co-op! offers suggestions of how anyone can start their own co-op. Starting with even just a few families, you can work your way up to a comfortable number of about 20 families who live within a reasonable distance. No money is involved; rather, a measure of exchange is traded, which can be in the form of tickets, cards, even popsicle sticks, for every half hour or hour of babysitting time. Each new member receives 30 ‘tickets’, and you ‘pay’ as you go, so there is no bookkeeping required.

Each co-operative designs its own rules and guidelines, such as the min/max number of tickets (if you are out of tickets you need to do more sitting, and if you have too many, you need to use more!) and circulate amongst themselves a detailed list of all the members’ general information, availabilities and requests. One way of keeping it simple could mean that the presidency of the co-op rotates alphabetically every three months, with a co-op meeting happening at the end of each term. Experienced co-opers say often in reality it means sitting just 2 or 3 times a month for a co-operative of 20 families or so, but to bear in mind that the secret of co-operative success is to remain in circulation by regularly earning and spending, giving and receiving, and by this, actively creating your own community of support.

Family Day Care is acclaimed as one of the most ‘developmentally friendly’ alternatives to regular daycare for older toddlers. A maximum of 5 children are cared for in the safety and familiarity of a home environment, with a consistent trained care provider. Family Day Care Networks are subsidised by Centrelink on a sliding scale basis, and are administered by local councils in each state. Check www.familydaycare.com.au.

The Department of Family and Community Services (FCS) has just recently approved numerous projects under its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004-2008, including family assistance, child support and childcare. See a state by state listing on their web page www.facs.gov.au for approved projects that may be operating in your area, or contact the Department’s Planning Advisory Committee (PAC) to voice your interest!

Working from home

As many as one million Australians are working from home, as either business owners, freelancers, or home-based employees, and the numbers are increasing each year. 11% of employed Australians are working from home — and 38% are parents of children aged less than 15 years. People working at home welcome the freedom from office politics and distractions, reduced traffic and travel time, and saving money on travel and clothing, not to mention the greater tax advantages, greater lifestyle flexibility, even finding greater job satisfaction and independence. However, they also need to contend at times with the isolation of working at home alone, the expenses involved in setting up, and perhaps going a regular income. For others the greatest challenge is in separating work from the rest of one’s life at the end of the day. Most agree that working from
home requires good time management skills and a healthy dose of self-discipline!

Employed from home

Home-based work — also known as teleworking and telecommuting — enables people to spend part or all of their working time at home on a temporary or permanent basis. Many people already have all the technology they need to start — a computer and modem in your bedroom at the ready! Jobs that suit home-based work include: secretarial services, writers, editors, journalists, artists, programmers, researchers, web designers, webmasters, network administrators, telemarketers, desktop publishers, graphic designers, stockbrokers.

But be wary of schemes and scams! If a telecommuting invitation sounds too good to be true, it probably is....

www.seek.com.au is an Australian home-based employment placement agency. They list some of the Australian companies supporting home working.

Becoming a child care provider in your own home

For a mother who enjoys being at home with children, becoming a Family Day Care provider is one way to be with your child and at the same time make a livelihood and provide social interaction in the safety of your own home. With training and registration, the children under your care can be eligible for receiving Child Care Benefits as well. All child care providers need to consult the New Children’s Services Regulations 2004 on the Dept. of Community Services web-site www.community.nsw.gov.au.

Rebecca W. says, ‘I would say the greatest advantage to watching other children is being able to be with my own children while making a small contribution to our finances. Also, as time has gone on, my children and my ‘other children’ have become close friends, playmates, and allies.’ On the other hand, it’s not a vocation that suits everyone, says Susan S. ‘In my experience, I can only say you have to really enjoy being with kids to take on the regular care of other people’s, as well as your own’.

Integrating work, home, life...

Some families believe that having their children at home gives them the benefit of not only growing within the family context, but also that of learning through all aspects of daily life, involving them in everyday activities from working around the house, gardening, shopping, socialising, even volunteering in community projects together. There are a growing number of families who prefer this natural learning approach, rather than handing their care children over to child care providers and later, to teachers in order for them to be taught formally. Responding to the need to create income while valuing home education for their children, some of these families operate their own businesses from home providing everyone with many valuable opportunities to learn skills and to contribute in a responsible and meaningful way.

Beverley Paine, homeschooling author and consultant, reflects how, ‘from the earliest days of my writing home education articles and producing a networking newsletter in South Australia, my children were involved. They illustrated the magazine, helped put it together, fold it and put it in envelopes and sometimes addressed the envelopes. They gave me time to work on the newsletter and my writing by playing quietly and cooperatively and by understanding that my “work” was important to me.’ Beverley feels that a large part of their education occurred throughout the growth of their family’s business endeavours. ‘I feel that this helped to develop their very practical and organised natures and a common sense approach to life. Furthermore, working together and cooperating to achieve mutual and individual goals has helped us to build strong friendships.’

Simply Living

Whatever values a family may choose to live by, what it all comes down to is how we choose to live. Remember, there are no perfect mums or perfect families and we are living in a far from perfect world! What we can do for ourselves is define what really matters, and live accordingly, and by this we may find we are in fact giving ourselves the best chance to enjoy simply living — by living simply. Together! And while it probably won’t matter in five years whether you vacuumed every week, or went to a fancy hairdresser, it will matter that you spent time with your family, discovering the world anew with each member. Being there to immerse yourself in the intricate and intuitive work of raising children may well be the most important and rewarding job that you will ever have.

Part II of the Regaining Sanity series is about creating community through our own networks of support, and will appear in the next issue of Byronchild.

Footnotes

1. ‘In the first three years, every child needs one or two primary caregivers who remain in steady intimate relationship to that child’. Paediatrician T. Brazelton and child psychiatrist Stanley I. Greenspan: The Irreducible Needs of Children — What Every Child Must Have To Grow, Learn and Flourish.


5. Your Money or Your Life by Vicki Robin and Joe Dominguez.


7. See Natures Child nappy page www.natureschild.com.au

8. LETS In Australia: A New Tool For Community Development? by Colin C Williams, International Journal of Community Currency Research (IJCC) www.le.ac.uk/ulmc/ijcc

9. Join a Coop Welcome Home Journal, also appearing in FHN Discovering Motherhood.


11. Learn more about home education at www. beverleypaine.com

Home-based business sites

www.work-at-home-ideas.com

www.a2ebiz.com

www.smallbusiness.ninemsn.com.au

www.wahm.com (Work At Home Moms).

www.ecb.com.au (Entrepreneur Business Centre)

Additional recommended resources

• Family and Home Network
  www.familyandhome.org

• Families for Natural Living
  www.familiesfornaturalliving.org

• Bringing it Home — A home business start up guide for you and your family by Wendy Priestnall

• Early Child Care: Infants and Nations at Risk
  by Dr Peter Cook

• Smart Moms Babysitting Co-op Handbook
  by Gary Myers

• Maternal Desire by Daphne de Manneffe

• Discovering Motherhood published by FHN (Family and Home Network)

www.familyandhome.org

Related Internet Resources

www.simplicitycircles.com

www.onlinebabies.com

www.kidzalive.com.au

www.slowlane.com for Dads

www.puttingfamilyfirst.us

www.naturalchild.org/peter_cook/

www.downshifting.net.au

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