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The mommy club: Black stay-at-home mothers look to one another for support - lifestyle parenting

Ylonda Gault Caviness

A few years ago Vanessa Monroe was an attorney at a Chicago law firm and the mother of one daughter. She spent her workdays juggling meetings, depositions and court appearances with the help of a support staff. Success was easy to measure: billable hours, kudos from her peers and favorable verdicts.

Now Monroe has three children, ages 7 months to 7 years, and she has traded in her legal career to be a stay-at-home mom. She still does a juggling act: reading to her toddler as she nurses the baby; cooking breakfast while dressing her eldest for school; grocery shopping between doctor's appointments, play dates and practices; paying the bills between loads of laundry.

"This is easily the hardest job I've ever had," Monroe says. "You go from the structure and control of the business setting to utter chaos. Your kids' needs cannot be penciled in; they can't be put on hold. To top it all off, there's the sense of alienation. One of the hardest things to deal with is the loss of your peer group."

This sense of isolation is common among many stay-at-home mothers. In fact, it led to the founding of Mocha Moms, a support group started in 1997 for Black women. What began in a small community in Prince Georges County, Maryland, has now grown to 55 chapters throughout the United States and abroad. Vanessa joined her local chapter last year. The women meet regularly to discuss everything from toddler tantrums to budgeting on a single income. But just as important, they do things for one another, like baby-sitting and setting up meal chains whenever a member is sick or settling in after childbirth.

It's clear by the number of organizations and Web sites that have sprouted in the past few years that many mothers are leaving the labor force, cutting back their work hours or pursuing work-from-home employment in an effort to find balance in their lives. Some social psychologists say this is especially true in the wake of last year's terrorist attacks.

Groups like [athomemothers.com](#), Home-Based Working Moms--which has grown from a small newsletter to a 600-member network since 1998--and [momclub.org](#) did not exist five years ago. But what Jolene Ivey, the founder of Mocha Moms ([mochamoms.org](#)), realized is that there were no organizations designed to support the special needs of Black mothers.

"You can say that mothering is the same whether you're White, Black or green," says Ivey. "It is and it isn't. I'm the mother of five Black boys. I can't raise them the way a White woman would raise her sons. I have to do things like teach them how to act if the cops stop them."

In White communities the notion of women at home minding the kids while dads support the family is a long-held tradition. Among African-Americans the trend is relatively novel. Out of necessity, Black women have been a strong and vital part of the workforce. According to the 2000

census, only 19 percent of Black families with children under 16 have an at-home parent, compared with 29 percent of White families and nearly 50 percent of Latinos.

Some Black stay-at-home mothers say they are often misunderstood. Those who left professional careers say friends and relatives sometimes charge they are "wasting" their education. Members of Mocha Moms often discuss ways to deal with family members who approach them for money, assuming that they are rich because they have decided not to work outside the home.

And then there are the changes in lifestyle. Monroe, once a makeup lover and connoisseur of MAC, Prescriptives and Chanel, now buys Mary Kay--not only because it's cheaper but also because she can shop at home. "Can you imagine shopping at a makeup counter with three kids?" she says with a laugh.

Jill Downing, a Mocha Mom member who lives in Fairmount Heights, Maryland, says her husband works for Amtrak and earns a modest salary. But she notes that they have adjusted their lifestyle in a way that some families are just not willing to do.

"We decided a long time ago that we didn't need to drive the latest model SUV or dress in designer labels," Downing says. "When people tell me, 'Oh, I can't afford to stay home,' I want to say 'Girl, you can't afford not to.' The school system, day care and aftercare cannot do for your kids what you can do: Give them stability, love and support."

The appeal of Mocha Moms, say those who belong, is that you can be with women who share your experiences and your priorities. They bristle at the notion that they are a bourgeois social club.

"Mocha Moms is not about status," Downing says, smiling. "If it were, they wouldn't have me. All we care about is that you support our mission. When you do, you support this whole village of Black children. We want to uplift and respect our stay-at-home moms, because the world at large does not offer us much support."

Indeed, so-called women's work has traditionally been undervalued in our society. In *The Price of Motherhood* (Metropolitan Books), Ann Crittenden maintains that if all the jobs of a wife and mother were added up--housekeeper, cook, accountant, event planner and more--they would encompass more than half a dozen professions and be worth nearly \$800,000 a year on the open job market. Crittenden also contends that mothers pay a "mommy tax" of about \$1 million each in lost wages over an 18-year period because their careers stall or slow down once they have children.

Brenda Wade, a family psychologist in San Francisco, says that because women are so devalued in society, support is key. She notes that Black women, especially mothers, who shoulder the bulk of caregiving, are highly susceptible to depression and alienation.

"When we feel isolated and underappreciated in the world at large as well as within our own communities, we are more likely to become overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness," Wade says. "So Mocha Moms, and, groups like it, are a much-needed way of bolstering the spiritual and mental health of these sisters."

Ylonda Gault Caviness supports her local Montclair, New Jersey, chapter of Mocha Moms and has two toddlers, Chloe and Trinity.

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