

Mother of all choices

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Geraldine West with son Lukas at daycare centre. Photo / Doug Sherring

When French justice minister Rachida Dati was photographed on her way to a cabinet meeting looking svelte, sophisticated and stress-free last month, five days after giving birth to daughter Zohra, women's groups were quick to jump aboard a judgmental bandwagon.

Why's she back at work so soon? How could she foist her newborn off on to someone else? Where are her priorities, her maternal instincts?

Catapulted from one pigeonhole to another, the sudden tabloid favourite has gone from being France's most famous solo mum to its most talked-about working mum.

But the 43-year-old has stayed, well, mum, on why she "courted controversy" (to quote Wikipedia) by going back to work so soon. While commentators have suggested she didn't want to expose her portfolio or a chink in her armour, we'll likely never know her reasons or any misgivings unless she spills all to a women's mag one day.

That doesn't stop the world at large from speculating. From birthing to breastfeeding, just about everyone has an opinion on baby matters - and most don't hesitate to offer it.

"From the moment you get pregnant, you immediately have to listen to other people telling you how you should do things," says direct-marketing specialist Felicity Christie, 40, who lives in Remuera, Auckland with businessman husband Stuart and their two children.

As soon as she put Alice, 2, and Lorimer, 6, in Remuera's Stepping Stones childcare centre, each at 5 months, she copped flak. "It's like, if you don't stay home with your child, you must not be as good a mum."

Former prime minister Helen Clark faced outrage when she promised dawn-to-dusk childcare in a bid to woo women back into employment for the good of the economy. "We need more workers," she said.

There are childcare centres now with refrigerators full of bottles of expressed breast milk, each labelled with the baby's name.

Parents often pop into centres during the day, both to check in and chat. They will be given detailed information: how much milk their baby has drunk, how many nappy changes.

Centres have specialist staff, most of whom have completed early childhood qualifications or are studying towards them.

For under-2s, the Ministry of Education requires a minimum of one adult to four children, so they'll be getting plenty of individual attention. And you can forget those check-in phonecalls: two-year-old business TinyTelly, set up in Auckland and Far North childcare centres with plans to expand this year, provides anxious parents with webcam visits.

A record 11,000 Kiwi babies aged under 12 months are enrolled in childcare, as more and more mothers decide that for whatever personal, professional or financial reasons, they need to go back to work.

Those mothers (and it's usually the mothers) court the same controversy as Dati. Every mother interviewed says there's a strong social expectation you should stay home for your baby's first year.

Geraldine West, a 25-year-old receptionist and administrator from West Auckland's Henderson Heights, faced down criticism after going back to work (first part-time, now four-days-a-week) when Lukas, now aged 1, was 4 months old. "My workmates were absolutely horrified that I was putting him in daycare so young."

With a similar timeframe planned for her second child, due in July, the comments keep coming. "Some strong-minded friends have told me I should take a year off with this one, and the girls I met through coffee group say 'Don't you feel you should be back home?'. I reply 'Well why? What's the point?'"

Waikato management consultant Angela McDonald got the same reaction from stay-at-home mums when she returned to work after her two children, Kendall, 3, and Cullen, 11 months, were born. Cullen was just 11 weeks when she began working part-time, leaving her baby son with a friend one day a week. By the time he was 4 months he had joined his sister at ABC Te Rapa in Hamilton four days a week.

McDonald has no qualms about leaving her children in daycare. Kendall, she says, is thriving.

"She loves it. She's such a social butterfly and she's getting an education at the same time."

And adding McDonald's salary to husband Karn's technician wage means the family can afford "life's little luxuries."

"If I didn't work we couldn't renovate, have our nice house, or holidays with the kids."

People parrot neuroscientific studies warning that consistent, stable and stimulating relationships with a dedicated caregiver in the early months are critical to healthy brain and emotional development. Preferably, they say, babies should form a close bond with mum in their first 12 months (some studies suggest the first three years), and childcare damages that bond.

Staying at home was never in the stars for National party matriarch Michelle Boag (now an Auckland PR recruitment specialist) after son Matthew's 1987 birth. Working as Jim Bolger's press secretary at the time, her waters broke 10 days early.

Boag says she "went to work for a few hours in the early morning and dropped off notes for everybody, then drove myself to the hospital". Hospitalised for a week after a caesarean, she made some work phonecalls from her hospital bed, then worked from home before returning to the office.

From 12 weeks to 3-years-old, Matthew was looked after in the home of a carer who had children herself, sometimes for 16-hour stretches.

"If I'd been able to take maternity leave I would've still gone straight back to work," says Boag. "Women know themselves whether they'd be better off at work or home."

On the other hand, TV maven Julie Christie says she went back to work the day after having her first child, "but it was a mistake and I would not advise anyone else to do so".

Michelle Taylor, an Auckland writer who stayed home with her two children, agrees: "You're so important to your children and their development that if you can possibly stay at home with them you should. For us it was a real struggle financially, but I think people forget children aren't commodities that can be left alone to appreciate in value. They're more like vege gardens that need lots of attention every day."

Despite the studies and strong opinions, between 1990 and 2005 the number of Kiwi kids in childcare under the age of 3 doubled. The list of babies starting daycare before their first birthday - some at just a few weeks old - has increased by nearly 30 per cent over the past decade, to about 11,000.

A Unicef report states that childcare rates for New Zealand's pre-schoolers are among the highest in the world. Ninety two per cent of 3-to-6 year olds, and a third of children under 3, enrolled in early childhood education (ECE), well ahead of OECD averages.

New Zealand babies are the first generation spending long periods of their childhoods cared for outside the home. "Many see nothing wrong with out-of-home childcare beginning at three months," the study says. While it's generally accepted that quality ECE advantages 3 and 4-year-olds academically and socially, not every mum will wait until her child is 3, 2 or even 1 before returning to work.

Statistics New Zealand figures show 35 per cent of mothers with children aged under 1 year also hold down a job. "This report rings alarm bells and it's a real wake-up call for us in New Zealand," says Unicef New Zealand domestic advocacy manager Barbara Lambourn. Given the neuroscientific evidence, she's worried childcare's starting too early: "Earlier and earlier childcare has been described as a massive uncontrolled experiment with our children as the subjects."

Facing bad press and social pressure for not being with their babies 24/7, many working mums are feeling judged and guilty.

"The guilt never stops," says Felicity Christie, who feels lucky that on-and-off contract work lets her spend chunks of time with her kids in between jobs.

Not swallowing the theory that childcare damages the mother-child relationship, her take is that quality time throughout childhood, including school-age years, is the bastion of a strong relationship.

She spends many hours with her kids in the mornings, late afternoons, evenings and weekends. But on weekdays, with none of her children's grandparents around to help out, she relies on childcare.

While some might imagine childcare as a tribe of kids running riot with a few school-leavers or crones keeping half-an-eye on them, small interactive centres with qualified carers are the norm.

Whether they're standard daycare centres (55 per cent of enrolments), shorter-hour kindergartens (23 per cent), parent-participating playcentres (eight per cent), Maori-language kohanga reo (five per cent) or the quickest-growing sector, home-based care (seven per cent), all implement a national ECE curriculum and are strictly licensed, regulated, monitored and reviewed.

Expert opinion is that childcare's role is expanding from a practical to a social support as it replaces traditional help from grandparents and extended family.

"Opinions are heated on this but it's just whatever works for you and your child," says Christie, who thrives at work while a friend loves being a stay-at-home mum.

And while job commitment is one reason new mums return to work, don't go assuming they're all rushing to jump back on the corporate ladder.

A government-commissioned study, Decisions about caring and working, finds key factors in why parents return to paid work are beliefs about parental-and-family care of children, attitudes towards formal ECE services and informal childcare; intellectual stimulation, personal satisfaction, feeling valued and money.

Because, while actor Angelina Jolie can afford oodles of time off and a nanny for each child on her paycheques alone, for most people the average working wage isn't enough to support a couple, a new addition and all the associated costs.

Although childcare costs eats up much of the extra income, the surplus often makes all the difference. For West, it's the difference between getting by and scraping by.

If they had only one income, from builder-partner Graham, "we'd be living payday to payday".

With the rising cost of living, a recession, job-cut fears and our relatively-scanty 14 weeks of paid parental leave, is it any wonder that new mums are returning to paid work quicksmart?

ECE researcher Dr Sarah Farquhar, the recently-appointed chief executive of the Early Childhood Council, isn't just looking at the issue from afar. A mother-of-five, Farquhar put her first child into childcare at 3 months and followed suit with the others, the youngest of whom is now 2 years.

She's critical of how the government dangles "financial carrots" (including the 20-free-hours policy for 3-and-4-year-olds).

Farquhar says government is "moving too fast" towards a getting-mums-back-into-the-workforce ideology.

When it comes down to this mother-of-all decision there are no hard-and-fast rules.

Says Felicity Christie: "It boils down to people's choices: choices you have the right to make for you and your child. And whoever the mum is, Rachida Dati or your neighbour, you can't make comparisons or even start to understand or judge them. You're not in their world."