

Leah:

Hi, I'm Leah Sargent. I run otherfeminisms.substack.com, a project dedicated to defending the dignity of dependence. And I'm talking to Stephanie Murray. She's a writer on parenting, and, more broadly, what we owe to one another for The Atlantic.

Stephanie, you had a recent story you were telling about how you and other parents in your community support each other—you called it a baby swap. What is the baby swap?

Stephanie:

The basic setup as it exists now is on Tuesdays and Thursdays (there are a couple different families on each day) one family will take all of the kids.

Leah:

How many kids are we talking here?

Stephanie:

I think it's six kids on Tuesday and then seven to nine on Thursday. A couple of those kids are older, so a lot of times they just don't come. And when they do, they're almost more like babysitters.

Leah:

So you're rooting for them to come.

Stephanie:

One family will basically take all the kids from 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM so that the other parents can go out to dinner or just do laundry, whatever it is.

Leah:

It sounds really great. We do a much more limited version of Baby Swap. We just inviting other parents and kids over for dinner—no parents get a full break. But having other kids in the house is great for our kids and we get other parents to talk to.

How did you start doing Baby Swap? Did you think of this as an ongoing thing from the beginning? Was it a one-off that grew?

Stephanie:

Knowing the origin of Baby Swap is actually helpful for understanding why it has lasted so long. It started during Covid basically. I had moved to the UK at the end of 2019, a couple months before Covid broke out. The UK had a couple of pretty harsh lockdowns where you really didn't have the option legally of convening with other people. It was just really rough.

So in early 2021, it was just things were bad in our household. I was not doing well. We had two kids who were one and three, two very young kids and just so little help. We were living in a country where we hadn't had any time to meet anybody or build out systems of support. It was very isolating.

It was just sort of desperation. There was a group chat [of other expat parents working for her husband's company]. So I didn't know any of these people, but I just sent out this message to the whole group of

people that I didn't know basically being like, Hey, in the guidelines of the lockdown rules, technically you are allowed to create a childcare bubble with one other family.

Does anybody want to be in my bubble?

One other family who just happened to live right around the corner from us sent me a message and they were like, yeah, we would love to do this. They were in a very similar situation. They had two very young kids, slightly younger than ours. And so that's how it started.

Leah:

But you've added another family to your rotation.

Stephanie:

So it's grown since then, even though we need it less. It's weird, and I've been reflecting on this a lot lately. I don't know that I predicted that this would outlast the pandemic, and I definitely didn't predict that it would actually grow to expand to other families.

So I've been sort of thinking about, what allowed this to turn into this really cool thing? And I think it comes down to the mutual desperation that underpinned it. It meant that we were going in with very low standards, if that makes sense. We were both like, Hey, keep my kids alive for three hours so that I can go. We couldn't even go to restaurants. Everything was locked down. Me and my husband were literally just, we need to go on a walk together without our children.

I think those terms of very low stakes—make room for my kids in your household for a couple of hours so I can get some space—was integral to keeping it going because it felt very natural. It felt very easy. It didn't feel like this big thing to invite these kids into my house, and I think that was mutual.

Leah:

I'm curious about how big a contrast this is with high intensity parenting. What you're describing, "I want you to keep my kids alive," is very different than when I try and book a babysitter on care dot com. In a professional context, I'm looking at babysitter profiles where it's like, "I have the following early childhood certifications", or "I can teach Spanish."

I'm like, I want you to watch my child for two hours during dinner and then put them down to bed. I just want you to be nice to my kid. I understand in a market situation, people are advertising what sets them apart from another sitter, but it's very wacky for me. I want you to read them a bedtime story and tell them they have to stay in bed. You're not even on the hook for whether they eat dinner. I tell sitters, I ask you to put dinner in front of them, and that's all I can really ask.

So has this changed what you see as the standard you're trying to meet with caregivers or for yourself as a caregiver?

Stephanie:

Interesting. Certainly I've observed kind of the contrast when these families let me watch their kids. I would not pass muster... they would not hire me as their daycare. You know what I'm saying? Just for a bunch of reasons.

Leah:

When I saw you telling this story initially on Twitter, it was in response to a post by a woman with the wacky named blog Cartoons Hate Her, which was about the cost of raising your children with the support

of a village. It's something that sounds like a good idea in theory, as long as you picture the village is populated by clones of yourself, or maybe even slightly augmented better clones of yourself.

But if you're actually having people watch your kids, letting neighbors have some level of authority over them, it's very low odds that everyone in your neighborhood has the same parenting standards as you do. They might feed your kids different food, they might use a sharper or gentler voice than you think is merited.

So what have you had to give up as a parent or as an imagined author of your child to depend so much on other families?

Stephanie:

There are definitely differences between how I parent the rules in my household and the rules in somebody else's household. And my kids are totally fine, and they have a great time. But I would say that the thing that I struggle to kind of relinquish control over is screens. I am kind of a nut about screens and that honestly preexists even having kids, I'm weird about having TVs in my household. I can't handle the stimulation of having a TV on just in the background.

Leah:

We have a TV in the basement, so it has to be a deliberate choice that you're going to go watch something.

Stephanie:

That's very similar to how we have it set up. And that was intentional on my part. My husband wasn't crazy about that. He came from a family where the TV's just always on, and he liked that. I hated that growing up. So we don't do that.

Tablets kind of make me nervous. It's always felt like a Pandora's box situation where it's like once you start with the tablet, it's just going to get away from you.

But there are kids in this baby swap that have tablets and there are families where watching little TV in the evening is part of their routine. And so that is something where I have to sort of trust, okay, you have a system for regulating the use of screens in your household. And I don't think it's possible me to say, well, no, no, no, no. You need to adopt my system in order for me to send my kid over there.

When you reached out about this, I was trying to think about why can't it work that way? And I think that it's not that there isn't something transactional going on here.

It's not like with a daycare or hiring a babysitter. You're giving money for a service. There's something transactional happening with Baby Swap. But the nature of the transaction is very different.

I'm not going to turn my house into a daycare for three hours every Tuesday and do exactly what it is that you want. I think the transaction is more like, I'm going to make room for your child in my household for the evening, and you are going to do that for me. You're going to make room for my child in your household next week.

That is a much more manageable transaction, and it's a much more trusting one. It's not like when I started this baby swap, I was thinking, how do I build a village? But that's what it's turned into. It really has turned into a village, I think.

Leah:

It's more intimate and it is ongoing.

Stephanie:

When you pay somebody to do something, there's implicitly this understanding that, hey, if you walk out of my life at this point, we're already settled up. That's what the money is for.

Leah:

You're quits, everyone can walk away at the end and there's nothing left over.

Stephanie:

Exactly. And that doesn't lead to village building because village building, what you want is almost an understanding of like, Hey, I can do something for you and we don't even need to settle up because you're going to be in my life next week and the following week. That's what you want.

And I will say, that's what baby swap turned into. I watch these kids all the time, even outside of Tuesdays and Thursdays, weekends, we've done overnights. It's turned into something where we can make requests of each other without this sort of like, well, who owes what?

Leah:

That's a much bigger thing than you can pay for. I've talked to other families who say, we can go on a date, but we could never go anywhere overnight unless the grandparents are involved, right? There's not the level of trust you need to leave someone with your kids overnight or to ask for that big commitment.

We've been lucky enough, that when we were having our third, we could ask who in our neighborhood could we ask to stay in our house overnight and take our kids to school the next day? We could think of people, which was great.

One thing I'm curious about: I've heard from a lot of families who make these small recurring commitments, or even a small first ask, that they almost operate like guide wires for a bridge. Because you've done a favor for me and I've done a favor for you, suddenly I need a big favor and I feel comfortable asking because there's that habit of life together.

Have there been moments where either of you in your baby swaps have needed something much bigger than the baby swap where it felt natural to ask each other?

Stephanie:

Right now, one of the people in this baby swap, the person that I started with initially, she just had her third child and she has to go to London to get the baby's passport. And so she just asked me, can you just take my kids for the night?

I guess maybe not huge things, but that doesn't feel huge to me anymore.

Leah:

I think a lot of folks do not have someone who can take their kids for the night on medium notice even.

Stephanie:

Had we not been doing this kind of reciprocal watching of each other's kids it wouldn't have happened. And another big thing is that her kids feel very comfortable in my house. You need the trust with the kids too, if that makes sense.

Leah:

So I'm curious, just for the logistics, when you are watching kids overnight, how many beds do you have in your house?

Stephanie:

We've never had a sleepover where it was just tons of kids that needed to go down. But with a couple of kids, we have a guest room with almost a day bed and you can fit quite a few kids in there. So anytime we do have sleepovers, usually the kids, they're all pretty close friends, they kind want to sleep in the same pile.

Leah:

You got this started during the pandemic, which I think gave people a kind of permission they didn't otherwise had. Everyone knew that the rules were different. It wasn't totally clear what the new rules were, what you get away with, but because it was a crisis, you're allowed to say, will you watch my baby? Can I come to this meeting with my baby?

All these things changed and flexed, but now that the pandemic is over, it's not technically an emergency anymore. And I think it's easy for parents to think, okay, instead of me being able to trust that everyone else also has a problem, now I have a problem. It's a me problem, a personal problem about how I'm parenting.

How would you advise other parents who want what you have to make a small step in this direction without that permission structure of "everyone knows this is a catastrophe?"

Stephanie:

Somebody else told me this, and I think that it's true: if you offer to do things for other people, it's very hard to get them to actually take you up on the offer. So I do think that asking somebody for help is just a better way of resetting the terms of the relationship.

Instead of hiring a babysitter, pick somebody in your neighborhood and be like, Hey, I'd really like to go out to dinner with my husband or whatever it is, would you mind watching my children? Because even if they say no, and even if they initially think, oh, that's weird, why aren't you just getting a babysitter? It plants this idea in their head.

Leah:

"Oh, is this allowed?"

Stephanie:

Yeah, exactly. She thought that was a normal thing to ask, so why don't I think it was a normal thing to ask? If they say yes, then it is so much easier to ask for help if I've helped this person before.

Leah:

People want to operate from the position of strength as a giver, and that also feels less intimidating to do. But I also find it so much more natural to build up a relationship when you begin as the asker. Then the other person gets to be magnanimous and knows you are someone who thinks it's normal to ask for help.

I like your advice because it suggests you're doing a good service if you scandalize your neighbors, which I think is what people worry about.

Why did someone ask this of me? I'm not a babysitter. They have money.

You're helping change the expectations in your neighborhood. They might need several people to scandalize them in a row.

It's very normal in the broad scope of human history to have people in your community watch your kids for no money and who trust you to watch theirs. But I think you're right that it's not the first thing people think of. And it's probably a little surprising to say, would you watch my kids for nothing, just for me? And even especially to make the ask and not go, I promise I'll make it up to you. So how did we get to a point where just normal dependence on each other is so bizarre or shocking,

Stephanie:

That's a great question. We have other options. It is possible to hire a babysitter. We have systems for that. We have lots of other things competing for our time.

I think this is actually another area where intensive parenting gets in the way of village building. People have very overscheduled lives, and so if you are not physically around to be there for somebody in your neighborhood because you're off at soccer practice, it doesn't happen. And when it doesn't happen, then it doesn't feel normal.

I think car dominance is a big anti-community invention because it sort of isolates us.

Leah:

I write a cargo trike with my kids, and it means we're all open and exposed to the world when we're riding. So we stop and talk to people, and people can see us going by. They go, oh, it's my friend Beatrice riding by. Not a car is passing, right?

Stephanie:

Yeah. A car that could have whoever in it.

Leah:

Well, I think the last thing I'd like to ask you is who is someone you take as a model, for building communities and extending yourself a little past, what's technically normal or sane in the prevailing culture?

Stephanie:

Well, the person that I was referring to who gave me the idea of just asking for something was actually Ezra Klein. He did a podcast about the isolation of raising young kids and how weird it is that we're all doing it in a very lonesome way

My friend who I started this with, I think I take inspiration from her because I'm the one who technically threw it out there but it only works because there was another person who is like, yeah, okay.

She's a very skilled homemaker. Her house is incredibly clean and very well organized all the time. It's so unfortunate that she has to be in my village just because I feel so bad all the time. She sends her kids over to me; she sees my house all the time [with the crayon on the wall].

Leah:

I think so good for kids to see a variety of families and ways to parent. Wwhen they think about growing up and having a family, they think I have a range of options, and all these families I'm friends with hopefully are pretty happy.

I have a friend where her house is a big mess. She knows it. I'm not going to say her name, but she knows it's a big mess. Her kids are pretty wild. They all love each other, and we have a great time visiting. It doesn't bother me that it's messy. It would bother me if my house were that messy all the time. It would stress me out.

And then I have a friend where they let us stay over while we were on a road trip, and then after the kids had gone to bed, the mom brought out a tray, a little cheese tray for us, on a little laquer tray that she carried out. I was like, wow, it has never occurred to me to do something like this for a guest.

And I'll be honest, I do not do that most of the time, but I liked knowing it was option. I like, as a parent, seeing the range of successful parenting and knowing that I'm trying to pick the option that works for me and my family and the balance of kids I have, but not the best version of parenting because there's a lot of good enough parenting.

Stephanie:

100%. And I can say that specifically, if we want to go back to my weirdness about my fears about screens and stuff, one thing that has definitely become apparent over time is that the one little girl in this group who has a tablet, she's also the kid who the few times that I'll put on a movie for the kids when they come over, she's usually the one who's sort of like, I'm just kind of bored by tv. I don't want to do it. So she does not at all appear to have some kind of addiction to screens. And so that has been a learning experience for me where I'm sort of like, okay, other people do things in different ways and it doesn't seem to be a disaster.

Leah:

Well, Stephanie, thank you so much for chatting with me today. I love what you've built, and I'm going to ask readers of Other Feminisms to really consider doing what Stephanie suggested and asking someone in the next two weeks, not in the sometime-future to watch your kids or to do something that would be just up to at least the border of unreasonable.

See what happens and let us know. I hope there are a couple baby swaps or other generous, sustained things that come out of this, or even just a single moment where a neighbor knows you as a person they could ask. Stephanie, thank you for your work and for your story.

Stephanie:

Thanks so much for having me. This was great.