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Being a Parent Will Never be Cool

By Glosswitch

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My children call me various things. Mummy. Mum. Poo-Head. One thing they have never called me is mama. This is only to be expected, for I am not cool.

Last year Elisa Strauss reported on the rise of white, middle-class mothers in the US using the term “mama” as “an identity marker, a phrase of distinction, and a way to label the self and designate the group.” Mamas aren’t like mummies or mums (or indeed poo-heads). They’re hip. They’re modern. They’re out there “widen[ing] the horizons of ‘mother,’ without giving up on a mother identity altogether.” And now it’s the turn of the dads.

According to *The Daily Beast*, the hipster fathers of Brooklyn are asking their children to refer to them as papa. According to one of those interviewed, Justin Underwood, the word “dad” is simply too “bland and drab”. Underwood describes “dad” as antiquated, whereas “papa” is an “open-minded, liberal term.

I am dubious about the potential of such words to transform parenting relationships and identities. In 1975’s *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich describes how she used to look at her own mother and think “I too shall marry, have children – but not like her. I shall find a way of doing it all differently.” It is, I think, a common sentiment. Rejecting mummy or daddy as an identity, if not as an individual, can feel much the same as rejecting the politics that surrounds gender and parenting. The papas interviewed by *The Daily Beast* are self-styled feminists, whose hands-on parenting style they wish to differentiate from that of their own fathers. But does a change of title really do that? And even if it does, isn’t this a rather individualistic approach to social change?

There is a part of me that can’t help wondering whether the growing popularity of mama and papa amongst privileged social groups reflects a current preference for changing titles rather than social realities, especially as far as gendered labour is concerned. When I am changing a nappy, it does not matter at all whether I am known as Mummy, Mama or God Almighty.

The desire to be known as Papa or Mama lays bare the delusions of new parents. It does not even matter if these titles are cool now. They won’t be soon enough because they’ll be associated with people who do parenting. Because like it or not, parenting is not an identity. It is not something you are, but a position you occupy and a job you do.

I once considered not being called mummy. My partner and I did, briefly, look at the “just get your children to call you by your actual name” approach. On paper it seemed to make sense. If to my sons I am Victoria rather than mummy, then surely they will see me as an individual, right? Ha. In practice it felt cold, as though I was trying to set some kind of arbitrary distance between us.

It is not that I do not think we need to change the way in which we parent, but this cannot be achieved by hipster trendsetting alone. Ultimately, any attempt to remarket parenting as a cool identity smacks of that desperate craving for reinvention that having children instils in a person. The moment you have children you have bumped yourself up the generational ladder. You are no longer the end of your family line. You are – God forbid – at risk of turning into your own parents.

Parenting will never be cool. Indeed, humanity will never be cool. We are all going to get older, and more decrepit. This is true regardless of whether you do or do not have kids – but if you do you will always have younger people on hand to remind you of this miserable fact.

Your children might, if you are lucky, grow to respect you, but as far as they are concerned you are the past. No amount of rebranding is going to solve that. This does not mean we cannot change the way we parent. But as with so much else where gender is concerned, it’s a matter for boring old deeds, not fashionable words.

Glosswitch is a feminist mother of three who works in publishing.