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Walk a Mile

When I hear others talking about what poor people *should* do, how they *should* live, how they *should* raise their children, I wonder if any of the people saying those things have ever been poor. 

I grew up in what I can only describe as a “mostly” single-parent home where my mom was the breadwinner and the “holder together of things” for her three children and a stepchild. My mom had a high school diploma, no college, a series of low-paying jobs, and four children to feed and to secure childcare for. I think about how difficult my life as a mom is, and I only have to think back to my childhood in order to not feel sorry for myself very long. 

The best way I can put this is that my mom always did what she had to do. My father left when I was small, so I don't remember life with him in the house. I just remember my mom quickly remarrying because, after all, in the south in the early 1980s, that's what women did. It was a time and a place where a woman shouldn't be without a husband, but, in this situation, having a husband didn't help much with our finances.

The reality was my stepfather had back problems and sometimes couldn't work at all. When he could work, because he also had little education and training, his jobs were very low paying. Somehow, when he was working, things were even more complicated because it meant my mom had to find daycare for us. I was in school, which helped, but my mother was forced to send my brothers to daycares and babysitters who were less than enthusiastic about caring for

children. When my stepfather was working, after school, I would join my brothers in these daycares, and in my Kindergartner mind, some of these situations were downright awful.

There was one babysitter who wouldn't let me eat after school, and I remember being so hungry. "If you keep eating so much, you'll get fat," she would say. I certainly didn't want to be fat, and I felt ashamed for asking for food. But, I was really hungry. Another reality of being a part of the working poor is you have little money for food. And, even with my mother working many long hours each week, I remember being hungry for more food all the time. It was rare to be full after a meal. There just wasn't enough to go around, even though my mom was really creative with out-of-date bread and Spam. So, I guess the babysitter really didn't have to worry about my getting fat, and neither did I. But, her words hurt me nonetheless.



Another babysitter put me to work helping to care for the other children—not just my two younger brothers but other children in the home as well. I remember being so young and being pretty awful at it. I remember getting into trouble when my youngest brother, who was really just an infant, cried too much. "Make him stop crying," the babysitter would yell at me. I didn't know how.

My mom finally moved us out of that babysitter after a big incident, which involved my mom finding out that I was helping to care for my brothers and the other children. It went something like this:

I was supposed to be "on duty," but cartoons were on as well. As you might expect, being a Kindergartner, I was drawn into the cartoons. The next thing I knew, I hear my little brother screaming followed by the babysitter yelling at me. Apparently, he had fallen out of his little rocker. There may have been other children involved.

"Why aren't you watching your brother?" she screamed.

I shrugged and pointed at the television.

“What’s wrong with you? Your brother could have been hurt!”




I cried my eyes out. I didn’t know how I could have been such a bad sister. I know now that I was way too young to care for small children, but, at the time, the shame was great—and my punishment was still coming.

When my mom heard the story from the babysitter, she was initially very angry, and somehow, that anger seemed to be directed at me. She told my stepfather, who spanked me severely for the incident. Later, my mother must have changed her mind and realized she probably shouldn’t be paying a babysitter to watch me when I was working for the babysitter, well, at least sort of working. And, I am sure my mom didn’t mean for my punishment to go that far. She found another babysitter for us.

I know my mom must have wanted to quit her job many times, but she had no choice but to work a lot, sometimes two jobs. This meant she had almost no time to be a mom. I remember seeing her driving down our road, headed to the night job, when I was walking home from the school bus stop. My heart was breaking. I’m sure hers was as well.

One time, in first grade, I peed my pants at school. I was sent to the office to be sent home. As I sat in a plastic chair in my cold, wet corduroy pants in the principal’s office, I was surprised that I received no lecture from the principal about being too old to wet my pants.

Instead, I was told my mom couldn’t get off work to come get me. The school tried my stepfather but couldn’t reach him. The school tried my father, but he couldn’t get off work to come and get me. I hadn’t seen him in months anyway. I don’t know how long I sat in that office, but my pants had nearly dried when my stepmom’s younger sister arrived at the school. I barely knew her, but I still love her for saving me from my wet pants of shame. I cried all the

way to her house, and she told me not to cry, that accidents happen. She didn't know what my home life was like. 

Of course, I was spanked severely for this incident, and I am sure my readers may be wondering why my mom didn't leave my stepfather. I can only say that, when you're poor, you have few options. She tried to leave him several times, but he would threaten and even hurt her. She would sometimes save up enough money for a restraining order, but the small town police officers did little to enforce it. She couldn't afford a divorce, and let's face it, when you're working two jobs, someone to watch your children, even when that someone might spank them too hard sometimes, is better than no one.

That's what poverty does. It gives you few options, sometimes no options, for getting out of situations and trying to make your life better. It leaves your children hungry and in less-than-ideal daycare situations. And, in many ways, it punishes you—and your children—when you work.

During my first and second grade years of school, my mom would take my brothers to a daycare on her way to work, and I would stay home, get myself ready for school, and my stepfather would take me to school on his way to work. I was late almost every day, which had a negative impact on my early education. I know my mom would have preferred a better start to my education. She always stressed to me the importance of good education, but, again, there were no options. I was doomed to be late for school. Our cycle was vicious. When you're poor, it gets you at every turn.

My experiences have impacted the way I feel about poor parents with children. Thankfully, I'm no longer poor, and, thanks to the education my mom stressed, I am working to obtain my degree with the help of a supportive husband and children. When I hear people

passing judgment on moms or dads who choose not to work and, instead, use social services to support their children, I want to tell them my story. I don't know if my story would change anyone's minds, but I think it should. Until we have quality and free or affordable daycare for working parents, we shouldn't judge parents who don't want to send their children to babysitters.



We shouldn't judge parents who want to be there for their children when they get sick at school—or pee their pants.

I certainly can't say that everyone who struggles faces the exact same situation my mom did, but before we judge poor people and tell them what they should or shouldn't be doing as parents, we had better think long and hard about their life situations, how complicated they are, and how complicated the solutions can be.

