

My friend Emily, an artist, says that bringing up children is all about “Love and Breast.” Not that she breastfeeds her 11 year old of course. Most of my good friends let their babies feed whenever they wanted to, but I wasn’t keen on the idea of my firstborn clinging to my breast day and night, so I followed a book called *The Contented Little Baby* by Gina Ford. It advocates strict timetables and routines for feeding babies, and even suggests that babies should be allowed to cry and not picked up when they are put down to sleep. It’s contentious, but I found that by following the routine, they were tired enough to sleep and didn’t cry.

My friends and my sister were aghast at my decision but I thought it best for my baby and me to know what we were doing. At times it was hard to face obvious disapproval. but I cherished his two and a half hour nap which was when I worked, slept, ate, showered. The routine kept me sane, but I was lonely, and my sister and I drifted apart as there never seemed to be a convenient time to meet. It’s all very different now that my children are older. I have lots of “mother” friends and we meet once a week, to laugh and occasionally cry, I depend on their support.

When a parent decides to go off piste, it can potentially be hard and

lonely, as I discovered when my son was a baby. When my friend, Madaeralane mother of two young boys decided to move to Miami, I wondered she would fare. She went two years ago, taking her children from an academic private school to a big American State School and it hasn't all been easy. "The children show me their schoolwork" she says, "and it is a complete car crash of bad spelling and not making sense, but at least the system is not all about passing exams. Her mother was devastated that she took the children away, as she was a full on grandmother. She admits that when she arrived she had no support system and was at a loss but believes, "You have to have the courage of your convictions. We are more confident as a result of this move, and it's brought us closer together." She still feels guilty and sad when she sees her mother, but for the time being, she loves her life away and her husband is happy in his job.

Of course there are days, particularly in the long dark, grueling winter, when I am envious of her decision to break away and to experience a different kind of life in the sun. Being a parent, conforming to the pattern of school timetables and holidays, can feel restricting and unrelenting. I wish I was brave enough to take my daughter out of her state primary and send her to a Steiner School, where she could knit and sing and dance, but I worry too much about what she may think of my decision when she

is older, and am reluctant to lose touch with the more conventional way of educating children –the path that all my friends have chosen.

There are braver parents than me who rebel, and then face opposition from their parents, siblings and friends. Anne left South Africa when she was young, as she couldn't tolerate the political situation. She met her partner in the UK had a son and split up with him, but stayed, because she felt that life here, gave her son more opportunities. Her parents can't comprehend why she wants to forgoe the sun, space and support she could have in South Africa and she has no support from them, and sees them fleetingly about every four years. She says, "My parents weren't interested in my education, but giving my son the best education I can find, is very important. My sister has the "perfect life," with two children, a rich husband and swimming pool, but even though they feel sorry for me, they are learning to understand that I am different."

Emily, a vicar's wife and mother of three, also sees her parents very rarely. She grew up in a home where there were a lot of taboos: sex and drugs were never spoken about and decisions were made but no explanations given. As a direct result of this she teaches her children that it's good to have an opinion and to voice it. She says, "they know they can say anything to us. When my two year old found a junkie's needle, I

told her what it was for.” She goes further, “My husband is trying to help a junkie get back on track and we have introduced him to our children, (age 5, 7 and 10). They are aware that he will die within the year if he doesn’t stop taking drugs. My parents definitely think that I have gone too far with this and so they only visit very rarely.”

It’s hard facing disapproval from your parents and sibling and friends, but it’s even more difficult, when you face disapproval from society as a whole. Bella home educates two of her three children and says that when she takes them to the supermarket on a weekday, other shoppers look at her with contempt. Marie Louise an author who also home educates her two children, says that she has faced “blank incomprehension and outright hostility” from friends and strangers and huge opposition from her parents in law, her husband, (who had originally been in favour) and her own parents. “My parents were cautiously concerned, but as I embraced the whole way of life, my mother became more critical. She would say,’ “They will never be willing to learn from you and you can’t teach them maths.” Marie Louise stuck to her decision despite divorcing her husband and her eldest son’s is applying to Oxford next year.

These mothers are mostly happy with their decisions but of course there are downsides to not having your family or your friends approval and

support. However, It is important to go with what you believe in after weighting up the pros and cons. Falling off the conveyor belt and doing something unexpected can enliven and enrich our lives and those of our children, as long as we don't' decide to live in a tepee with a herd of goats. That to me seems to be going a step too far!