

# Meet the MATERNAL SOCIALISTAS

They take their babies backpacking and their newborns to festivals. Antonia Hoyle meets the women who aren't letting children get in the way of having fun

I will never forget the first time I took my daughter, Rosie, to a party. She was eight weeks old and what I hoped would be a welcome return to the world of adult conversation turned into a stressful, traumatic disaster. Rosie screamed, without drawing breath, as I sat self-consciously trying to breastfeed her into submission, my glass of wine long forgotten. Since that evening, I've decided that socialising on a grown-up scale is just too daunting. I have, by and large, accepted my reclusive state with good grace. After all, babies and good times just don't go together, do they?

Except, it appears, I am wrong, because there is a growing breed of woman who are determined that motherhood will not impede their ability to have fun. Their celebrity icons include Gwyneth Paltrow, whose two children are often backstage at Coldplay concerts (modelling cute noise-cancelling headphones, of course); Victoria Beckham, whose baby Harper is glued to her hip at fashion shows; and Angelina Jolie, whose brood is taken along on every promotional tour or jaunt to a developing country. They are the 'maternal socialistas' and, rather than relegate their offspring to childminders or sacrifice going out altogether as I have, they simply take them along – be it to an all-night house party, or a festival, or even backpacking around the world.

Their endeavours make my attempts to attend a friend's drinks look positively amateur. The maternal socialistas are adamant that they are not only keeping their sense of self intact but also providing the best start in life for their children; that rather than signalling the end of their social lives, babies simply add to the joy. "It is rewarding for my son to see new environments," says my friend Laura, who strapped her five-month-old into a backpack and took him hiking in the French Alps last summer. "And – bonus – it prevents me from feeling trapped."

Like Laura, Louise Carron Harris, 33, from High Wycombe was determined not to forfeit her heady social life when she fell pregnant and so takes her daughters, Constance, five, and Arabella, two, to all of her pre-childbirth haunts. She either hosts or attends at least one all-night house party a month – her children share their nursery with her friends' offspring as their parents dance in the living room downstairs. They wear their baby monitors on

their belts and only call it a night when dawn breaks and the first child starts to stir. "It is important I am happy or my children won't be," says Louise. "This way they pick up on my zest for life and have learned that the world doesn't revolve around them."

Louise, 33, a local radio station presenter, and her husband Harry, a web company owner, 31, often spend Saturday afternoons sipping Champagne on London's South Bank (a few colouring books and a glass of squash or two keep the kids occupied) and even took Arabella to Glastonbury just two weeks after she was born by caesarean section. "My doctor told me I was stupid but I knew she'd be safe and I felt well enough to go," Louise says. "The music lulled both girls to sleep in their buggies, and Harry and I stayed out till 4am before we all slept in the tent together." She insists she'd never put her children in jeopardy. "I'd never get so drunk I'd do something reckless. After a couple of rum and cokes I'm merry enough!"

Gone are the days when we should feel guilty about having a good time, says parenting expert and author of *The Parent's Toolkit* (Vermilion, £12.99), Naomi Richards: "Why should you stop doing the things that you love? We generally get our children interested in the things we are interested in, so we can do them ourselves. It ►

*Gwyneth Paltrow is regularly spotted at Coldplay gigs with her children, while Kate Moss's daughter Lila has accompanied her to festivals*



sounds selfish but children can benefit and add to the joy of an occasion or adventure.”

The original maternal socialista is a phenomenon of the 1970s, as Professor Rachel Thomson, a sociologist at the University of Sussex, explains: “Back then, an elite minority of women took their children to festivals. They set a trend and, nowadays, it has been democratised. More women are working and a much bigger group of mothers have access to that lifestyle.”

Certainly, my generation, brought up before stricter rules on child-rearing created a child-centred society in which adult needs were relegated, was expected to join in with our parents’ pursuits. But although I have hazy memories of falling asleep under my dad’s coat in the boot on the way home from dinner parties, it has never occurred to me to do the same with my own daughter. Yet it is perhaps time I learned, according to psychologist Oliver James, author of parenting manual *How Not to F\*\*\* Them Up* (Vermilion, £17.99). “Children under three don’t need the company of other children whatsoever,” he says. “Motherhood can be a relentless grind and it’s more important for the mothers of children that age to spend time in the company of people they can share their life with.”

**C**hild-friendly extras – soft play, clowns, juice bars – are the norm at festivals these days and many of them now have specially-catered kids’ areas, which are a magnet for the maternal socialista movement. The increasing cost of childcare plays a part in encouraging women to take their children with them rather than pay for someone else to look after them. And then there is the changing dynamic of the British family; grandparents live further away and are no longer on tap to assume babysitting duties. “There is no way I’d be able to afford to go out if I didn’t take my sons with me,” says my friend Claire, who takes it for granted that a dinner invitation for her and her husband extends to their children as well.

Perhaps most telling is that, in an uncertain age in which our offspring’s future often seems bleak, having them with us provides a comforting sense of unity. “It is an opportunity for families to spend increasingly squeezed time together,” says Professor Thomson. This was certainly an incentive for Vanessa Boz, 39, from London, who sold her company organising trade shows to backpack around the world with her family while her daughter was still in nappies. “Travelling is a part

of my identity,” she says. “I feel more accepted and able to be myself when I am abroad. It felt natural to continue as a mother.” She and her husband Ceki, 38, a financial services worker, booked their five-month trip last year, when their son, Marcelo, was five and daughter, Amalya, just 18 months old. Their trip encompassed South America, Australia and Southeast Asia. “We relaxed our routine, ate out together and slept in the same hotel rooms,” says Vanessa. “The children adapted so well and it enriched their vision of the world.” They continue to travel extensively in Marcelo’s school holidays. Vanessa admits there have been setbacks – not least when Marcelo had an asthma attack in Jamaica and Amalya a crying fit during a snowstorm on a flight back from Brazil. “I felt people were looking at Ceki and me critically at those moments, but, you know, so what?” she says. “Women are so often hung up on the idea that they must live as society dictates. Enjoying your own life is beneficial not just to you but your children as well.”

Even older children gain from being brought along by mum and dad. Caroline Gladstone, 49, and her husband Charlie, 48, have six children aged between 11 and 22 and frequently take the whole family to T In The Park and V Festival. They travel in their camper van and pitch tents. “The shared experience makes it more memorable than if Charlie and I were to go on our own,” says Caroline, who runs homeware store Pedlars with her husband. “Their enthusiasm makes us enjoy it more.” Of course, not everyone agrees with the maternal socialista’s lifestyle, as Louise has discovered. “Some people think I’m being selfish,” she says. “But I love my children and would never put them in danger.”

It occurs to me that the only thing stopping me from becoming a maternal socialista is fear, which is not a trait I want to teach my 18-month-old daughter. So I’m going to take a deep breath and take Rosie on an adventure of our own. And this time, I’m determined that both of us will enjoy it. ●

**“Enjoying life is beneficial to not just you but your children as well”**

*From far left: Jo Whitley and her son Cassius at Glastonbury; Gwen Stefani with her son Kingston on the catwalk for L.A.M.B.; Katie Holmes with her daughter Suri at an LA Galaxy game*

