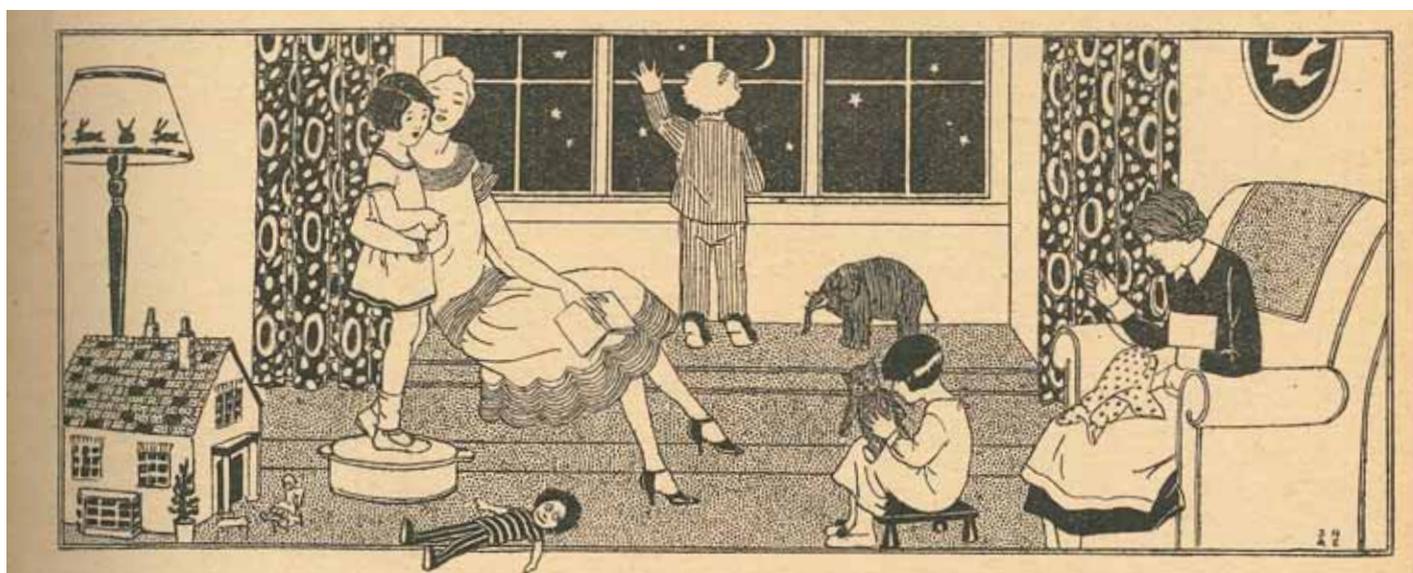




The lady and the pram

While many nannies and mothers had happy relationships in the 1920s, correspondence in *Nursery World* shows how class, values and beliefs on how to raise children would often collide, says **Dr Katherine Holden** in a new book



23 JUNE 1926

Nursery World first appeared in 1925 and quickly became an important source of information on childcare. With a mainly middle-class readership, it was targeted not just at mothers but also at nannies, who often came from middle-class backgrounds.

One of the magazine's aims was to help nannies keep in touch with one another, both through its correspondence pages and through 'The Nursery World Friendship League'. This was a column where nannies advertised for others to keep them company, to go for walks together in the afternoons or socialise in their time off. That this was recognised as a problem is indicative of the isolation many nannies experienced and the limitations of their time off, as it was harder to meet people than if they had been in jobs with regular hours.

The correspondence pages were entitled 'Over the Teacups', a name associated with femininity and previously used in the Victorian magazine *Woman at Home*. Yet while the column's purpose was to foster a sense

of community among its readers, many letters were far from cosy in tone. As well as affirmations of the value of the work nannies did and the support they gave mothers, it became a forum for heated debates about the frustrations mothers and nannies felt

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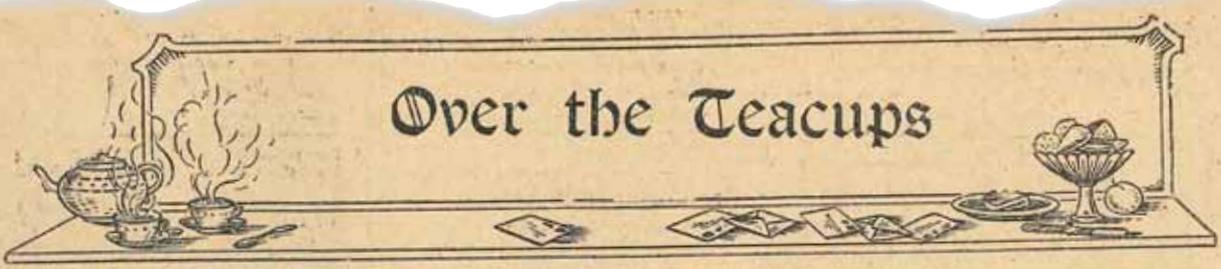
in their relationships with one another and their feelings about the children.

The letters page became one of the most popular features [of magazines] during the twentieth century, with the average reader turning to it before reading anything else. Doubts have been cast on correspondence pages' authenticity, with letters selected for entertainment value rather than being in any way representative, and sometimes

having been made up by editors. But they also offered versions of women's life stories for readers to match or contest, whatever the level of their sophistication as readers.

This was particularly important for nannies, who usually gave their versions of life stories anonymously and expressed feelings that if openly voiced to an employer might have cost them their job. There is a striking difference between nannies' often quite dull and formulaic letters in private collections that tell their employers how good and happy the children are and the much more vibrant ones they wrote to *Nursery World* complaining about difficulties in their jobs.

Mothers were equally frank. While they might have been afraid to express annoyance directly to a nanny who could easily leave them without notice, they spoke their mind in no uncertain terms in letters to *Nursery World*. Debates were often long-running, with readers answering one another's letters and taking issue with experts' views as well as those of other mothers and nannies. ▶



Advice to Fathers : Nannies v. College Nurses : Laundry Hints
 Advice for Un- Fathers—Nurse M. P. I enjoy The Nursery W- am wh-

The correspondence pages (above), saw many long-running debates; an illustration of a nanny's trials (20 December 1956), below

The content of letters and advice columns in *Nursery World* reflects changes in child-care theories over the period. Until World War II, training manuals were dominated by the ideas of the New Zealand-born writer Truby King and the American behaviourist psychologist John Watson who advocated strict routines, fresh air and keeping a physical and emotional distance between mother or nanny and child. Children's nurses were taught to let children cry, with one text in the 1920s going as far as to advocate complete separation of a newborn baby for 24 hours from its mother, leaving it alone in a quiet room and in the worst cases sedating it in order to solve feeding problems.

These views suited many nannies as they found it easier to keep discipline if children did not have too much maternal contact and often labelled mothers as interfering, as this letter from a nanny shows: 'With a baby, an experienced nurse, once she is used to that baby, knows exactly what to do for him and why he is crying. Were it her own baby her task would be lessened, but so often mother worries when baby cries and thinks there is something wrong with him. If a mother has a really good competent nurse, would it not be better if she left the baby entirely to nurse?'

Other nannies wrote to *Nursery World* complaining that it hurt them to see children being spoiled by their mothers, which made the nanny's task so much harder. They were also actively debating the roots of this problem and ways it could be prevented.

Mothers who objected to being described as difficult and interfering were equally forthright in expressing their concerns about being excluded from the nursery and having their authority threatened. One 'harassed mother' believed her nurse was not inculcating the right values in her children, which she saw as 'courage, honesty and self-control': 'Every mother worth her salt has ideas on the upbringing of her children; when every suggestion is presumed to be an aspersion on the nurse's efficiency, how is she to put these ideas into force? I am faced with the choice of letting things slide or losing my nurse.'

Keeping hold of nannies could be difficult in such circumstances, particularly in a period when the old hierarchies of domestic service relationships no longer seemed so stable. Yet their interdependent positions also gave mothers and nannies a strong investment in coming to terms with differences. Another nanny explained: 'When taking a new post, I make it clear that I want the Mother to share in the nursery life and uphold my authority as I uphold hers. I can go for a holiday, knowing that the nursery routine will go smoothly... as the mother knows their whims as well as Nanny does.'

This letter suggests middle-class mothers' increasing involvement in their children's care in the interwar years. As mothers became more involved, the issue of a nanny's class background became more difficult to manage. From the late 19th century, some mothers had become so concerned that their children might adopt the behaviour and manners of the lower classes that they began to recruit women from a 'respectable' background, usually known as 'lady nurses'.

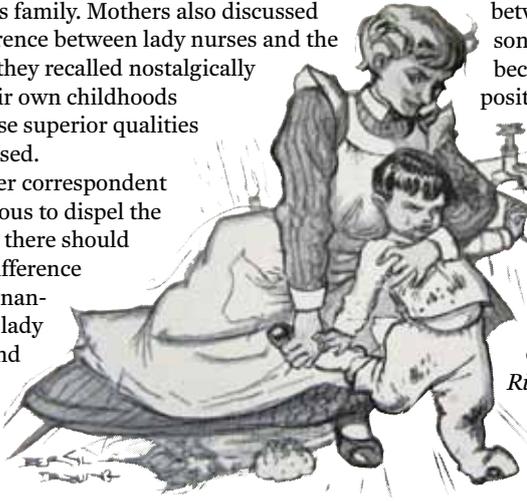
This was not, however, always viewed as a better option and other mothers preferred having a nanny who could be treated more like a servant. In *Nursery World* in the 1920s, mothers debated lady nurses' need to be waited on and whether they should be treated as family. Mothers also discussed the difference between lady nurses and the nannies they recalled nostalgically from their own childhoods and whose superior qualities they praised.

Another correspondent was anxious to dispel the idea that there should be any difference between nannies and lady nurses and thought that they should be treated the same socially

since they did the same work. In response, the editor pointed out the class differences of the positions, assuming that a nanny would make her own friends and socialise with servants, while a lady nurse would be utterly lonely without the companionship of her employer and should not be forced into too much contact with servants.

The article entitled 'Those Interfering Mothers' by Joan Bateson pointed out how important it was that readers recognised they lived in a changed world. She posed the problem in relation to her own self-sacrificing old-fashioned nanny who had dedicated her life to children and 'never took one minute off day or night'. This was the regime under which she believed most employers had been brought up. There were now opportunities for them to develop friendships with the new younger lady nurses, which would never have happened in the past. However, she also recognised the difficulties of negotiating a relationship in which class divisions were much less clear: 'What should we call her... Where ought she to feed? Will she hate your friends, or want to know them? If you are smoking, do you offer her a cigarette? Is she in fact like ourselves inside, or has she some relationship to the starched miracle of our own childhood?'

These examples illustrate the clash between professional and personal relationships as boundaries became blurred between a nanny's position as servant, professional worker, family member and family friend. *NW*



Nannie has the trouble

This is an edited extract from a chapter by Dr Katherine Holden in *Women in Magazines: research, representation, production and consumption*, edited by Rachel Ritchie, Sue Hawkins, Nicola Phillips and S Jay Kleinberg, due out in March 2016. Dr Holden is the author of *Nanny Knows Best: the history of the British nanny* (The History Press, 2013)