

# “ASK THE NANNY, DARLING.”

The rich used to be different, stereotyped as delegating domestic drudgery like childcare, diary planning and cooking to someone else. Now, the middle class has infringed on their territory: today, you don't need to be super wealthy to have an extensive household staff

WORDS: CHARLOTTE PHILLIPS

Unlike the stereotypically idle rich, the middle class is busy. Working and commuting alongside undertaking childcare and household chores is unmistakably time consuming. It has always been so: According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2010, the value of unpaid childcare amounted to £343bn, and in 2012, household clothing and laundry services were worth £97.2bn, the equivalent of 5.9 per cent of GDP. Last year the research body went one further by announcing that it was to begin measuring the full impact of unpaid domestic work on the UK economy, for the first time. The reports were welcomed by many.

However, behind the celebrations, lies a barely-concealed truth: the middle class is choosing to outsource these significant contributions to daily life to household staff. So much so, in fact, that

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even during the recession, “six million people in the UK were employing some form of domestic help, compared to five million a decade ago,” says Sam Martin, founder and CEO of Quintessentially People, a luxury concierge service.

One reason for this is that workers value their free time more than ever. With a renewed focus on work/life balance, we are choosing to exercise and spend time with friends and family, over undertaking household chores. And so, from a nanny picking up the children and a hairdresser mastering bi-weekly blow-dries, to an in-house chef preparing gourmet meals and a PA keeping the schedule organised; every service has a price, and the middle class is paying out.

According to sociologists, the fact that the concept of middle class has evolved in recent decades, is another contributing factor: the social divide between the middle and upper classes is not as clear-cut as it used to be. In 2013, the BBC divided society into seven groups, from ‘elite’ to ‘precariat’. The in-betweeners, all technically middle-class, spanned categories such as the ‘established middle class’ and ‘new affluent workers’. From Catherine Middleton marrying into the Royal Family to Eton-educated David Cameron calling himself middle-class, upwards social mobility is now prominent and unashamed. This, along with a combination of changing priorities and increased disposable income means that hiring domestic help has become more common.

Aside from aspiration, there is a necessity for domestic help in some cases, explains Paola Diana, the glamorous Italian founder of Nanny & Butler, an international consultancy that helps place household help with families. “Women are working more today – thank God!” Diana says, sapphire and diamond rings flashing. “It’s impossible to do everything. With a nanny you trust, you can relax and not feel guilty. It can make your marriage happier.”

Essentially, she maintains, it means parents can spend quality time with their children, rather than being stressed and in a bad mood. With perfectly coiffed hair, chandelier earrings and a mahogany tan, Diana is emphatic: “There’s definitely an increasing middle class need for a nanny. All kinds of people come to us. From the super rich to lawyers, managers and professionals,” she says. Diana herself works full-time, has two children and employs a nanny and a chef.

Of course, it’s socially contagious: the more ►

► middle-class families that have domestic help, the more their friends and neighbours believe it to be the norm and decide to do the same. Similarly Samuel Martin says of the middle-class families Quintessentially work with, “the majority... will most likely tell you that professional help is not a luxury to them but a necessity”—especially as a third of these families have two working parents.

He agrees that childcare is the main request from these ‘normal’ families, but says clients are also seeking “housekeepers, part-time private chefs and nutritionists to ensure they are eating healthily, personal trainers, make-up artists and stylists to ensure they look presentable, and chauffeurs to take them to and from business meetings, work and private events.”

And then there’s private tuition, says Tavistock Tutors co-founder Marcus Ereira. While ultra-high-net-worth clients request that tutors board boats in Monaco or ski in Switzerland, their

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middle-class clients make concessions. “Some clients skip their family holiday so that they can afford extra tuition for their children,” Ereira says. He goes on, “Several clients have moved their children to state schools so that they can pay for private tutoring, which they feel is more beneficial than being in a private school.”

Costs for employing domestic staff vary (“depending on experience, duties involved, whether travel is required and the type of person they are going to be working for,” Martin says,) but extra help doesn’t come cheap. A PA can earn between £30,000 and £150,000, and a housekeeper between £30,000 and £40,000. Hourly wages are particularly high – tutoring is around £40-£100 per hour, and good personal trainers ask for around £100-£150 per hour. Nannies command upwards of £400 a week and the highly educated or bilingual ones are known to earn a lot more.

Diana knows families make cuts elsewhere to afford a nanny. But, she reiterates, “it is so worth it. It’s better to have less products and material things but good service.”

Sam\* is a 32-year-old British chef who worked privately for a middle-aged oil company executive and his wife. “They used to have very important

dinner with high profile guests,” he explains. “They were also careful in following a balanced diet and only wanted the best quality of food.” He is adamant such a service is a luxury.

While some might suggest that hiring a nanny distances children from their parents, Emma\*, 35, is one self-described middle-class client who insists that staff help to create a more ‘homely’ environment. She explains that having a nanny protects the family unit by giving her girls the stability she wanted for them. In fact, she’s had a nanny for her twins ever since she returned to work. “I didn’t want them to go to nursery and be away from home for such a long day when they were little,” she says. “Our nanny also used to be a pre-school teacher so she is great at keeping them stimulated and learning.”

“Without a doubt”, she would make sacrifices to keep the childcare in place. It is expensive – “especially with employers’ insurance and tax” – but, says Emma\*, “I consider the money we pay to be an investment in our children’s safety and wellbeing.”

From saving time to improving home life, many people are becoming convinced of the importance of household staff for the middle classes. However, it must be remembered that the middle class is a highly stratified sector, Dr Jon Lawrence of Cambridge University says. “A lot of the stereotypes are in fact only for that small ten per cent at most.” Those to whom it does apply, insist that domestic help is vital. It would appear the trend is only set to continue. ☞

*\*Names have been changed to protect interviewees’ anonymity.  
nannybutler.com; tavistocktutors.com  
quintessentiallypeople.com*