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WOMEN'S HISTORY
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Anna Jarvis around 1909. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

MOTHER'S DAY CONVERSATION TOOL KIT

Are you celebrating Mother's Day this year? For many, it's a delightful moment to honor a key member of their family or to feel recognized and appreciated for the important role they play. For others, it's a day full of nostalgia or feelings too complex for flowers and brunch. In any case, the day offers us an opportunity to reflect on the act of mothering, its relationship to women's lives, and how motherhood has and has not changed over time in American history.

Below are some conversation starters you might consider on Mother's Day. You can talk about them with your mother, your children, or your friends, or just reflect on them yourself. It's a great moment to think about the larger implications of the holiday's origins and what it means to us today.

BACKGROUND:

Ann Maria Reeves Jarvis (1832–1905) bore more than a dozen children but lost most of them to disease. Jarvis worked hard in her West Virginia community to try to help other mothers and families avoid the tragedies she had suffered. Part of a national public health movement, Jarvis organized “Mothers’ Work Clubs” and promoted special days when they would collaboratively collect trash and undertake other projects to improve local environmental conditions and their neighbors’ understanding of hygiene. After the Civil War broke out, Jarvis insisted that local groups help both Confederate and Union troops who were sick or wounded, and she worked to promote peace and unity following the war, including by organizing a “Mother’s Friendship Day.”

After Ann Jarvis’ death, her daughter, Anna Jarvis (1864–1948), set out to honor her mother’s legacy by establishing a national Mothers’ Day on the second Sunday in May. She chose white carnations as an appropriate emblem and urged people to write heartfelt letters to their mothers. Although gratified by the official declaration by President Wilson of the first national Mother’s Day just before the start of WWI in 1914, Anna soon grew discontented with the increasing focus on commercialization. What she had wanted to be an earnest “holy day,” had become, in Anna Jarvis’ eyes, a crass holiday benefitting florists and greeting card companies more than honoring the mothering work done by women.

QUESTIONS TO CONTEMPLATE:

- ◆ Anna Jarvis wanted everyone to write a heartfelt letter to their mother on Mother’s Day (just signing a greeting card didn’t count in her eyes). Consider writing that letter or talking about what you would say or wish you could have said.
- ◆ Talk about how mothering has changed in your family’s experience over time. What differences or similarities do you see between how you and your older family members have understood the decision to become a parent and the role of mothers? How might any changes have been shaped by economic, political, or social trends?
- ◆ The fear and reality of maternal and infant deaths profoundly shaped the world in which Ann Jarvis lived. While the rates of both have declined sharply since the 1800s, and current risks for either are low, anxiety and worry about pregnancy, childbirth, and infants’ health remain a part of mothering. In the United States, Black women are three times more likely to die due to problems during pregnancy than white women.¹ How have you seen the medical system, family histories and personal experiences shape the emotional aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing?
- ◆ Ann Jarvis wanted to improve the health and lives of other mothers and children in her Appalachian community and saw public health campaigns as the best way to do so. What issues do you see facing mothers, children, and families in your community today? What do you think are the best avenues for making change?

¹ Njoku A, Evans M, Nimo-Sefah L, and Bailey J. “Listen to the Whispers before They Become Screams: Addressing Black Maternal Morbidity and Mortality in the United States.” *Healthcare*, (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11030438>.