

In this book Adelaide economist Barbara Pocock studies the effects of the labour market on families and especially on children – not only existing children but the children who may never exist because of pressures on potential parents.

She first sets out the big picture, including the commodification of childhood and family life – privatised childcare, advertising aimed at children and so on, and the effects on children of working parents, fathers as well as mothers. She then turns to children of various ages, to get their angle on all this. The outcomes of her focus groups, from Sydney and Adelaide, are fascinating. As we know, kids are acutely aware of what’s going on in the family. When Mum comes home from work grumpy, they often bear the brunt and withdraw to protect themselves from being stress sponges. The insidious ‘work/spend cycle’ includes the obvious, like paying for childcare, but also ‘guilt spending’. Some kids exploit the guilt, but most would actually prefer to have more of their Dads than even the coolest presents.

This is not a polemic: Pocock doesn’t blame anyone, especially parents. But she urges those who control the labour market to pay more attention to the kids.