

The Importance of the Presence of the Mother During the First Three Years

Organized by Sheila Kippley (February 28, 2005)

Purpose

Mothers have told me that they have been influenced by those experts and writers who state that the presence of the mother during the early years is extremely important to their child's optimal development. This knowledge has helped them to make decisions that enable them to remain with their children or at least cut back on their hours away from their little ones.

There are many different views on how to raise children, but this is not the place to have a discussion on parenting issues. Many experts and ordinary persons agree that the mother plays an important role in the development of her child, emotionally, physically, and spiritually even if they disagree on practical parenting issues.

I will provide quotations to show the importance of the presence of the mother during the first three years of a child's life. I want to stress that using a quotation from a particular book or author does not endorse that expert's or writer's views on parenting.

Schools and churches need to do more to educate teenagers and young adults about the importance of mother-baby togetherness during the early years. They also need to teach them how to go through college with as little debt as possible. Many couples marry with such a high debt that it is almost impossible for the wife to remain home with the arrival of their first baby.

Granted there are some mothers who *have* to work to provide for the basic necessities of her baby or family. Maybe the mother is a single parent or maybe her husband died. Maybe the finances are such that the mother has to set a goal of being a stay-at-home mom at a much later date. These types of mothers need our support plus the support of their churches and community.

Today most agree that a major reason for crime and gang activity among juveniles is the absence of the father in the home. Yet even one "father" expert, David Blankenhorn, author of *Fatherless America*, states that the most important relationship during the early years is the mother and baby dyad and that the dad should soon become that most significant and intimate other.

I am well aware that our society assumes today that the mother will return to work after childbirth. The new mother usually assumes it as well. Hardly anyone tells her differently. I hope these quotations will encourage some serious thought on this subject.

Quotations Supporting the Importance of the Presence of the Mother During the First Three Years of Life

"A child's early years hold the clues to his future behavior as an adult. Society stands to gain or lose, depending on the soundness of mother-baby attachment. La Leche League is committed to the belief that babies and mothers need to be together in the early years. We are convinced that a baby's needs for his mother's loving presence is as basic as his need for food."

La Leche League International, *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, 7th ed., pp. 167-168.

“What is so important about the breastfeeding—especially ecological breastfeeding and prolonged lactation—is that it gives a baby both the nurturing and the best nutrition. Prolonged lactation naturally provides those two realities that make such a positive difference! And, most importantly, prolonged lactation keeps the mother available and hopefully responsive and sensitive to her baby’s needs during those crucial first three years of life.”

Sheila Kippley, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*, 4th ed., p. 106.

“As medical experts and experienced mothers agree, breastfeeding works best when baby and mother are in constant proximity to each other. The typical breastfed baby eats every two to four hours, often around the clock and sometimes for months on end. In fact, *nothing* could be more inimical to full-time, out-of-the-house employment...*It would be better for both children and adults if more American parents were with their kids more of the time.* That is to say, it would be better if more mothers with a genuine choice in the matter *did* stay home and/or work part-time rather than full-time and if more parents entertaining separation or divorce *did* stay together for the sake of the kids.”

Mary Eberstadt, *Home-Along America*, pp. 47-48, 172.

“A baby must have a mother, a mother who is mature enough to attend to its needs and provide so-called object constancy for a minimum of three years... The mothering function is one of the most important of all human events but, unfortunately, one of the least appreciated or regarded by society.”

Harold Voth, M.D., *Medical Times*, November 1980.

“Let me once again emphasize that *the natural transitions between sexual intercourse, pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and early childhood form a cohesive physiological basis for the development of maternal-infant attachment as it gradually progresses from conception to weaning in the second or third year of life. No amount of technology will improve on this biologically determined pattern that was set in place by a personal Creator, nor can anything that is artificially produced fully replace the spiritual significance and the emotional satisfaction that these experiences can produce in a woman’s life.*”

Debra Evans, *Heart & Home*, p. 133.

“In the first three years of life every human being undergoes yet a second birth, in which he is born as a psychological being possessing selfhood and separate identity. The quality of self an infant achieves in those crucial three years will profoundly affect all of his subsequent existence.”

Louise Kaplan, Ph.D., *Oneness & Separateness*, p. 15.

“Many people have suggested that day and night care centers for children are an answer for women’s need to do more than child care. They propose that we channel millions of dollars and equal number of hours into organizing such places. But this is not the answer for the demands on the mother during this early infant adjustment period. One thing we have learned about children in the past few decades is that they do best in *early infancy* if they are principally cared for *by their own mothers*. Given a reasonably stable household and a level of economic stability where the children can receive all the emotional and

physical benefits offered to the general population, mothers responding to their own children are still best.”

Dana Raphael, *The Tender Gift: Breastfeeding*, p. 168.

“When I review all the information available to us today, then I conclude that the mother is the best caretaker for the child, particularly during its infancy...As I have said, there are cases where surrogate mothers are necessary, but all things being equal, there is no substitute for a child’s own parents, especially his mother.”

Bennett Olshaker, M.D., *The Child as a Work of Art*, p. pp. 39-40.

“*First, a baby needs a mother...* Not just any kind of mother and not necessarily his natural mother, but a single, consistent, *loving* person to care for him. Babies kept in foundling homes thrive poorly. Many seem not to be babies at all. Listless and withdrawn, they frequently grow to childhood as troublesome disturbed children, unable either to accept or give *love*.”

Charles and Audrey Riker, *Understanding Parenthood*, p. 36-37.

“If we assume that the sixth leading cause of death in the U. S. and the third leading cause of death in adolescence is not an inherited affliction, suicide must have its beginning in early life experiences. In the first eight months of life, an infant puts all of its eggs into one basket, in the basket of the mother or surrogate mother, that I call “thee one,” the one no one else will do for that infant... It’s my contention that the first introduction to wish to be dead is when mother is not there and is not available.”

Edgar Draper, M.D., LLLI Convention, 1981.

“The child’s social development is always retarded if the child does not have a single main mother figure constantly about him, i.e., a person who has enough time and motherly love for the child. In this sentence, every word is equally important. *Single* does not mean two, three or four persons. *Constant* means always the same person. *Motherly* means a person, who shows all of the behavior toward the child, which we designate as ‘motherly.’ *Main mother figure* means that secondary mother figures (father, brothers, sisters, grandparents) may support the main mother figure, but not substitute for her. *Person* means that the respective adult has to support the child with his whole being and has to have time for the child.”

Theodore Hellbrügge, *Child and Family*, 1979.

“A little baby needs continuity of care; all our studies suggest that too frequent changes of the mothering person are hard on children. If a mother works full-time, it is very difficult for her to provide this continuity. A small child also needs someone who is intensely interested in him or her, who will spend endless hours, responding and initiating, repeating sounds, noting nuances of expression, reinforcing new skills, bolstering self-confidence and a sense of self.”

Margaret Mead, *Catholic World*, November 1970.

“Mother and child are inseparable... For the mother has to feed her child, and therefore she cannot leave him at home when she goes out. To this need for food is added their mutual fondness and love. In this way, the child’s need for nutrition, and the love that

unites these two beings, both combine in solving the problem of the child's adaptation to the world, and this happens in the most natural way possible. Mother and child are one. Except where civilization has broken down this custom, no mother ever entrusts her child to someone else... Another point is the custom of prolonging the period of maternal feeding. Sometimes this lasts for a year and a half; sometimes for two, or even three years. This has nothing to do with the child's nutritional needs, because for some time he has been able to assimilate other kinds of food; but prolonged lactation requires the mother to remain with her child, and this satisfies her unconscious need to give her offspring the help of a full social life on which to construct his mind."

Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, pp. 105-106.

"If the bottle is substituted for the breast, the biological necessity for the infant to experience intimacy in a close ventral clasp must be compensated for through the mother's intelligent knowing or her intuitive understanding that the baby needs both food and love in her arms. It is no longer 'built in' the program... Whereas the breast necessarily, automatically, binds the baby to a specific person, his mother, the bottle does not guarantee this union... The breast was 'intended' to bind the baby and his mother for the first year or two years of life. If we read the biological program correctly, the period of breastfeeding insured continuity of mothering as part of the program for the formation of human bonds."

Selma Fraiberg, *Every Child's Birthright*, pp. 27-28.

"Breastfeeding is a very ingenious arrangement for bringing two humans close together. You cannot breastfeed at arm's length. You simply have to hold your child close to you—there is no getting away from it. Body touches body. Warmth melds with warmth. Mother's arms have to hold her child. Her strength is the child's support. In breastfeeding, a mother is one with her child. She gives herself. She feels like a mother, and baby feels that he has a mother. Inevitably mother and child get to know each other more intimately. It simply cannot be otherwise!"

James L. Hymes, Jr., *The Child Under Six*, p. 46.

"During the first three years the child should stay with his mother. The younger a child, the more he needs his mother and the lower the danger when his father is not there. Working parents give one, two, or three hours when the child needs eight to nine hours."

Horst Schetelig, M.D., LLLI Convention 1981.

"We have given evidence that *according to the natural law breastfeeding is a duty of good mothering*. It is the optimal way to nurture the physical and emotional-relational dimensions of the human infant."

Rev. William Virtue, *Mother and Infant*, p. 269.

"By being the person who is continually there with and for her child, by being the one to whom he turns for love, attention, guidance, assurance, and reassurance, the mother becomes the most important person in her child's life. At this level of responsibility, power is at stake—not the power of managing somebody else's dollar, but the power of influencing somebody else's character, personality, and use of intellect... When a woman decides to leave her career to mother her child, she chooses *not* to leave the transmission

of beliefs and values, the perspectives on life's more elemental and crucial questions, to anyone else, but rather elects to take the ultimate responsibility herself.”

Arlene Rossen Cardozo, *Sequencing*, pp. 156-157.

“Young children need an uninterrupted, intimate, continuous connection with their mothers, especially in the very early months and years. An avalanche of recent ‘attachment studies’ has shown that although fathers are terribly important to any child’s development, attachment bonding is overwhelmingly a matter of the quality and continuance of the relationship between the *mother* and her children in the early stages of life.”

William Gairdner, *The War Against the Family*, pp. 338-339.

“Because love holds together the delicate membranes of human society and is the basis of our relationship with God, the chief need of the child is to experience love leading to a healthy self-love and to be able to love others as he has learned to love himself. Since love is taught essentially through a one-to-one relationship, nature sees to it that the vast majority of babies come one at a time, so that each child has his or her private tutor of love. For this task, nature has selected the mother. As a female, her capacity to care for the newborn is unique...Major authorities now universally agree as a result of studies of the past fifteen years that, for the optimum personal maturation of the child, the child needs the full-time attention of the mother or a full-time mother substitute during the first three years of life.”

Herbert Ratner, M.D., *Nature, the Physician, and the Family*, pp. 157, 162.

“The ongoing political debate over day care and family-leave policy—which can only be expected to intensify in the next few years—is an indirect acknowledgment of the *real* child care crisis. More and more children are being reared by someone other than their parents and outside of the home, deprived of the only environment in which they can expect to receive the personal attention, affection, and energetic devotion they require. While feminists and other day care advocates have repeatedly asserted that government must ensure access to ‘affordable, high-quality day care’ for all who want it, they assuredly are not referring to the only child care we know of that fits that description. What is needed is for someone to make the argument for the best (in fact the only workable) system of child care the world has known: mom.”

Brian Robertson, *There’s No Place Like Work*, p. 32.

“I urge you not to delegate the primary child-rearing task to anyone else during your child’s first three years of life.”

Burton White, *The Family in America*, February 1991.

“The advantages of breastfeeding during the first year of life on subsequent development and into adulthood have been demonstrated by a number of investigators. The evidence indicates that the infant should be breastfed for at least twelve months, and terminated only when the infant is ready for it, by gradual steps in which solid foods, which can begin at six months, commence to serve as substitutes for the breast. The mother will generally sense when the baby is ready for weaning... Much else could be said on the advantages of breastfeeding accruing to both mother and child; the aim is, of course, to

give the child something rather more than an adequate diet, to provide it, in sum, with an emotional environment of security and love in which the whole creature can thrive. Breastfeeding alone will not secure this. It is the mother's total relatedness to her child that makes breastfeeding significant."

Ashley Montagu, *Touching*, p. 73-74.

"Dr. Roland Summit, a psychiatrist at U.C.L.A. who has specialized in the treatment of sexually abused children for 15 years, is among those researchers who stress that no scientific data exist to support the view that there is more sexual abuse of children now than in previous decades. 'But,' he said, 'There is no question from all the research, that the risk of exploitation for a child increases directly as the child is removed further from the care of its biological mother. There is a population of child predators, who will grab any opportunity to gain access to a child.' "

Ronald Lindsey, *New York Times*, April 4, 1984, p. A21.

"Per capita disposable income in constant dollars is more than twice as high as it was in 1950, and three times as high as in 1930. Parents then sacrificed for their children and made do with what they had. Today, on the other hand, we never seem to have enough. The same materialism that leads to today's high crime rates mandates that even children are to be neglected so that the more powerful members of society, adults, may have more material luxuries (bigger houses, newer cars). All of this contributes to a crime rate among white children that, it bears repeating, is now growing at more than double the rate of growth among black juveniles... Other familial disorders have lately befallen the American family, and similarly conspire against long-term civil unity. For instance, America's estimated 3.4 million latchkey children are a bigger immediate threat to society than day care because they are not infants; the hours that they spend at home alone at the end of the day, waiting for parents to return from work, give them far more opportunities for antisocial activities than their smaller siblings have. We might place the other various familial shortcomings on a continuum of parent selfishness. They range from... day care (two parents in the evening), to divorce (weekend parenting, at best, for the man), to illegitimacy (no second parent at all), to child abuse, to abortion/infanticide. Children ... are taught, literally from the cradle, that life is looking out for number one."

Andrew Peyton Thomas, *Crime and the Sacking of America*, pp. 169-170.

"Full-time day care, particularly group care, is not an adequate substitute for time spent with parents, and can be especially harmful for children under the age of three. For two years we watched day care children in our preschool/day care center respond to the stresses of eight to ten hours a day of separation from their parents with tear, anger, withdrawal, or profound sadness, and we found, to our dismay, that nothing in our own affection and caring for these children would erase this sense of loss and abandonment. We came to realize that the amount of separation—the number of hours a day spent away from the parents—is a critical factor."

William and Wendy Dreskin, *The Day Care Decision*, p. 18.

"Fall in love with your baby, through a positive birth experience, for baby, mother and father. Strengthen that love by breastfeeding your child until he or she no longer needs it. Keep your baby with you as much as possible; separations and changing caregivers make

it hard to learn trust... The greatest cruelty is to maim a person emotionally, to screw them up inside their minds, so they can never form an affectionate relationship with another human being, so they can never trust another human being, so they don't have the capacity for empathy."

Elliott Barker M.D., video of "When You Can't Feel No Love" and "The Greatest Cruelty" by the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.