

THE CRUCIAL FIRST THREE YEARS

Sheila Kippley

A young mother finishing her college education was wondering if she really had to stay home when she had children. Wouldn't she be wasting the money she spent on her education and career? Wouldn't she be bored staying at home? She was asking for my advice. The day after I received her letter I met an old friend at a homeschooling event. This friend had worked full-time as a pharmacist with her first baby. Then over the years she had two more babies and went from a full-time pharmacist to part-time and eventually remained home. I told her about the letter and asked for her advice. Immediately she said, "Sheila, she has to find out for herself. Nothing you say will help." Maybe she was right, but I did try to encourage the inquiring mother to stay home once she had children. And I'm hopeful that this booklet might help more mothers and fathers to understand better the importance of the mother in the home. I include fathers because many men enjoy that extra income and a husband can be a decisive factor as to whether his wife stays home or not.

Some expert opinion

To clarify what follows in this booklet, I need to start with a definition. "Ecological" breastfeeding is the type of breastfeeding in which the mother keeps her baby with her and in which the baby suckles frequently, both for nourishment and for pacification. It excludes the use of supplements, including bottles and mother substitutes such as pacifiers (especially regular and extended use). The key elements are mother-baby togetherness and frequency of suckling. This concept is described more fully in my book, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing: How Ecological Breastfeeding Spaces Babies*. I also refer to this practice as "natural mothering."

My research over the years leads me to believe that what I'm calling natural mothering or ecological breastfeeding is at the heart of providing the best experience for the baby during the first three years of life. Why? Ecological breastfeeding keeps the mother with her baby during those important early years, and the mother learns to care for her baby using the equipment God gave her. The importance of that good start in life is emphasized by Dr. Burton White, director of the Parent Education Center in Newton, Massachusetts, who has spent over 40 years researching what causes competent people to get that way:

On the basis of years of research, I am totally convinced that the first priority with respect to helping each child to reach his maximum level of competence is to do the best possible job in structuring his experience and opportunities during the first three years of life.¹

Dr. John Bowlby, in his book on maternal deprivation, *Child Care and the Growth of Love*,² states that parents should not leave any child under three for a matter of several days unless for grave reason. If the mother must leave, someone close to the child should be chosen to care for the child.

Maria Montessori, who dedicated her later life to the study and education of young children, was one hundred percent in favor of natural mothering. In her fascinating and widely-read book, *The Absorbent Mind*, she encouraged only breastmilk for the first six months and told mothers to take their time with weaning. In fact, she recommended nursing for a year and a half to three years because "prolonged lactation requires the mother to remain with her child," and she promoted the practice of mother-baby inseparability during the early years.

But let us think, for a moment, of the many peoples of the world who live at different cultural levels from our own. In the matter of child rearing, almost all of these seem to be more enlightened than ourselves—with all our Western ultramodern ideals. . . . Mother

and child are one. Except where civilization has broken down this custom, no mother ever entrusts her child to someone else.³

Selma Fraiberg, professor of Child Psychoanalysis at the University of Michigan Medical Center, also credits lactation as part of nature's way to keep mother and baby together.

The breast was "intended" to bind the baby and his mother for the first year or two 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. . . A baby who is stored like a package with neighbors and relatives while his mother works may come to know as many indifferent caretakers as a baby in the lowest-grade institution and, at the age of one or two years, can resemble in all significant ways the emotionally deprived babies of such an institution.⁴

To stress the importance of the mother's presence during the early years, some authors and experts have made extremely impressive statements to show the effects of separation upon the child. Here are a few samples:

If we assume that the sixth leading cause of death in the United States 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 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.⁵

Edgar Draper, M.D.
Chairman of Psychiatry Department
University of Mississippi Medical Center

Full-time daycare, particularly group care, is especially harmful for children under the age of three. For two years we watched daycare children in our preschool/daycare center respond to the stresses of eight to ten hours a day of separation from their parents with tears, 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.⁶

William and Wendy Dreskin
Former daycare providers

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 may 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.⁷

Theodore Hellbrügge
Director of Kinderzentrum
Munich, Germany

There are six reactions of children to separation when the mother is not around her child. The pattern may be 1) depression, 2) agitation or distress, 3) rejection, 4) apathy, 5) regression or 6) clinging. Why would a mother do that to her child? . . . When can a child withstand separation from the mother? Up to two years of age is a high anxiety time; from two to three years of age is a lesser anxiety time. This varies with the individual.⁸

Hugh Riordan
Specialist in Human Communications
Director, The Olive W. Garvey Center of Human Functioning
Wichita, Kansas

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.⁹

Ronald Summit, M.D.
UCLA Psychiatrist

These experts are trying to show the possible effects upon the child when his mother is not there for him. It must also be noted that a stay-at-home mother can be extremely busy with other activities and ignore her baby's or other children's needs and responses. Maybe she is extremely preoccupied with cooking, cleaning house, doing volunteer work, conversing on the phone, or watching television. It is one thing to take a few brief phone calls during the day; it is another to spend hours on the phone or at the computer at the expense of little ones. I'm not criticizing the mother who has the occasional long phone call and nurses her baby in the process. I'm only pointing out that any excessive activity at home can mean neglecting one's duties as a mother. As one author appropriately said, "Busyness cancels out 'all-hereeness'." In her book, *Your Child's Self-Esteem*, Dorothy Corkville Briggs further explains:

The opposite of love is not hate, as many believe, but rather **indifference**. Nothing communicates disinterest more clearly than distancing. A child cannot feel valued by parents who are forever absorbed in their own affairs. Remember: distancing makes children feel unloved. No matter how we slice it, doses of genuine encounter pound home a vital message. Direct, personal involvement says, "It's important to me to be **with you**." On the receiving end, the child concludes, "**I must matter** because my folks take time to be involved with **my person**."¹⁰

Kathleen Parker warned working parents not to "delude themselves into thinking their day-care kids are doing fine simply because they 'seem' to be. Children don't necessarily give outward signs of distress at early ages. They don't suddenly start stammering or crying for no reason (though some do) or maiming small animals. The effects of low parental interest show up later—on the shrink's couch or the police blotter." She questions why we ignore the obvious, that kids need quantity time with their parents and ample nurturing during the first three years of life. Instead of a parent being home to nurture his child, the parent leaves home to find "solace and nurturing in the workplace."¹¹

A psychotherapist compares the effects upon a small child when a total stranger takes care of him to the lack of care of one spouse to another spouse. Isabelle Fox says, "How important would any married person feel if his or her spouse was seldom home when needed or paid a stranger to take him or her out for dinner [or] to a movie?" The child taken care of by others similarly feels he is of little value to his parents. Dr. Fox asks, "Is there a noticeable difference in the child parented by a consistent, nurturing caregiver in the crucial pre-verbal years (0-3 years of age)?" She answers

“Yes! During my 35 years as a psychotherapist, I have seen the benefits of a consistent, responsive caregiver and the disasters when this does not occur.”¹²

Brain studies

In the spring of 1997 new studies showed that “the neurological foundation for problem solving and reasoning are largely established by age 1” and that the “number of words an infant hears each day from an attentive, engaged person is the single most important predictor of later intelligence, school success and social competence.”¹³ The studies emphasized that the number of words a baby hears during the first year of life must come from an “attentive, engaged human being.” Discussion centered on the importance of the parents’ role in the intellectual development of their child during the first three years of life and especially the first year of life when the infant’s brain is growing at a tremendous rate.

As a result of the above studies, there was a renewed interest in Ohio about raising public awareness of the importance of the first three years of life. Dr. Gary Weisenberger, representing the Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, encouraged parents to “play with their young children, read and sing to them, and spend more quality interactive time” because “now, new scientific evidence focuses on the importance of the first three years of a child’s life” for his reading skills. And, he added, pediatricians know these early years are crucial to “other developmental and emotional factors that have a far-reaching effect on the child.”¹⁴

Do language skills learned during the early years influence whether we develop Alzheimer’s disease? In November of 1997, at the annual Rhode Island chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association, Dr. David Snowdon reported on a study of 678 nuns. The religious order agreed to provide information about their lives, to submit to blood and neurological testing, and to donate their brains after death for autopsy. This group was ideal for study due to similar occupation and lifestyle (no heavy drinking or smoking). Of particular interest was one nun who died at age 87, mentally sharp until her death. Yet when they looked at her brain, it was “riddled with tangles and plaques characteristic of Alzheimer’s disease.” (Those who had clumping and snarling of the brain nerve cells were more likely to have Alzheimer’s if they had a stroke. Those less likely to develop Alzheimer’s were those nuns who had Alzheimer’s lesions but no strokes or those nuns with strokes but no Alzheimer’s lesions.)

The nuns had all written biographies at the time they entered the convent, and these biographies were studied by linguistic experts. Of interest to them was the fact that those nuns who wrote with few ideas and in simple sentences were more likely to develop Alzheimer’s. According to Dr. Snowdon, “It’s more likely that the nuns’ linguistic ability indicated how well their minds had developed early in life—and that optimal brain development in childhood can protect against Alzheimer’s in old age.”¹⁵ If this is true, then nurturing that influences the growth of the brain for babies and children could also affect the brain’s functioning as it ages.

Earlier I referred to studies that have linked language development to the type of care the child under three received from his parents. Recently Dr. Burton White again stressed the importance of the first three years of life for the emotional, intellectual, and linguistic development of the child. Development in all three areas depends upon a parent being willing to invest the necessary time. In his own words with respect to the development of language, Dr. White said: “It has been known for years that by three years of age, the average child will understand two-thirds to three-fourths of all the language he’ll use for the rest of his life. It is also well known that language depends on experience.”¹⁶ Such experts and studies keep telling parents that their children will have better brain growth and language development if they, the parents, give hours of nurturing during the crucial first three years.

Other brain research has focused on the effects that breastmilk or breastfeeding has on a child's intelligence. For example, in 1992 it was reported that preemies who were fed breastmilk by tube had an 8.3 point advantage in IQ (Intelligence Quotient) at age 7½ to 8 years of age over those children of the same age who as preemies were fed no maternal milk by tube.¹⁷ In 1996 two groups of phenylketonuric children were studied: those who had been exclusively breastfed and those fed formula. After adjusting for the differences in social category and maternal education, there was an overall advantage of 12.9 IQ points for the breastfed group.¹⁸

Does breastfeeding have any effect upon the child's academics during the grade school years or the high school years? Yes. In New Zealand, babies' diets were recorded during the first year of life. Then those babies were studied later from the ages of 8 to 18 years of age with respect to their academic abilities. Over 1000 youngsters were analyzed by standardized tests, teacher ratings, and academic outcome in high school. What they learned was that breastfeeding played a significant role in the outcome and that those who were breastfed longer had the best results academically. "The particular significance of the present findings is that they show the cognitive benefits that are associated with breastfeeding are unlikely to be short-lived and appear to persist until at least young adulthood."¹⁹

Because of the new interest in the effects of nurturing and breastmilk upon the brain, *Newsweek* published, as they called it, a "special edition on the critical first three years of life." In that issue Dr. Lawrence Gartner of the American Academy of Pediatrics and head of the working group on breastfeeding said: "It's hard to come out and say, 'Your baby is going to be stupider or sicker if you don't breastfeed,' but that's what the literature says."²⁰ Dr. Michael Georgieff, a University of Minnesota professor of pediatrics and child development, wants to get more mothers to breastfeed: "If I could change one thing in society, it would be to get people to breastfeed. Breastmilk is a heck of a lot more complicated with a lot more factors that influence brain growth than cow's milk."²¹

Availability, responsiveness, and sensitivity

Mothers do need to be there with their babies and small children. William Gairdner in his book, *The War Against the Family*,²² pointed out that three separate research studies conducted at three different major universities all clearly showed that what babies and young children need is 1) mother's availability, 2) mother's responsiveness to her child's need for comfort and protection, and 3) mother's sensitivity to her child's signals. In other words, the mother has to be there, she has to read the signals of her baby, and she has to respond to her baby in a sensitive manner. Gairdner claims that there is unanimity on this important point: "*poorly attached children are sociopaths in the making.*" To avoid poorly attached children, one key is good mothering. According to Gairdner, the keys to good mothering, then, are these: availability, responsiveness, and sensitivity. Gairdner also states that "young children need an uninterrupted, intimate, and continuous connection with their mothers, especially in the very early months and years." With prolonged breastfeeding, the mother has an uninterrupted and continuous relationship with her baby and it's an intimate relationship as well.

Older children likewise need the presence of a parent in the home, and this includes teenagers, a group who are prone to get into trouble when both parents are working and not at home.

One mother wrote of her fears of staying home alone as a child because her mother worked. She also said she had no one to show an interest in her as a child and to be a champion for her when she needed one. In her eyes, mothering is "the most important job. . . that literally saves lives." As she said, "I would live in a dirt shack before I would not be there for my kids."²³

In the fall of 1997 there was another series of studies dealing with maternal deprivation. At the Society of Neuroscience meeting in New Orleans, it was reported that children need lots of hugs

and physical reassurance for proper development of the brain. Romanian children raised without this physical contact from their mother had abnormally high levels of stress hormones. This parental neglect can have lifelong consequences. “Scientists have known for decades that maternal deprivation can mark children for life with serious behavioral problems, leaving them withdrawn, apathetic, slow to learn, and prone to chronic illness. . . Moreover, new animal research reveals that without the attention of a loving caregiver early in life, some of an infant’s brain cells simply commit suicide.”²⁴ Does this apply to humans? Mark Smith, a psychologist at the DuPont Merck Research Labs in Wilmington, Delaware said: “These cells are committing suicide. Let this be a warning to us humans. The effects of maternal deprivation may be much more profound than we had imagined.”²⁵ And again, in the *Newsweek* special issue on the child, it was pointed out that what makes a child unique is his experiences during the first three years of life and that physical reassurances such as cuddling and rocking stimulate brain growth and show a baby that he is loved and valued.²⁶

How does stress affect the child’s brain? How does a mother’s presence protect or minimize the effects of stress upon her baby’s brain? What researchers have learned is that stress harms brain cells of infants. During stress the body secretes large doses of cortisol to provide strength. However, cortisol can also shrink the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for learning, and can stunt the brain cells’ ability to communicate with each other by causing the connecting dendrites to atrophy. This helps to explain why cortisol is associated with severely delayed development. That’s the bad news. The good news is that the mother’s physical contact with her baby protects the baby against these harmful effects.

Sometimes the importance of those first three years comes up unexpectedly. I happened to read an article on the “Big Bad Bully,”²⁷ behavior which is becoming quite common in schools and which is commonly ignored by teachers. The victims suffer physical or verbal abuse, continued social persecution, or rejection. What the researchers found out to their surprise was that they were studying younger and younger age groups for the cause of the bullying. First, they studied aggression in adult criminals, then adolescents, then younger children, and then two year olds! As one researcher said, “If you had told me I was going to be studying two year olds, I would have said you were crazy.” The researchers discovered that bullies are made, not born; that bullies are formed “by parental behavior or by neglect” and it “begins in the early caregiver/child interaction.”

Dr. Ken Magid, a clinical psychologist for 20 years, said that “second to killing someone, isolation is the worst thing we can do” and that babies should be nursed, rocked, swayed, and held. Nurturing is the key to a good outcome for your child, and it begins by “being wanted” as an infant, and “being wanted” starts at the breast of the mother, according to Magid. High-risk children have experienced trauma in their lives, and it usually happens during the first year and a half of life. The trauma is due to severe stress, said Magid, and these high-risk kids place little value on their lives and no value on other people’s lives.²⁸

While it is common to blame economic need for the high percentage of mothers working outside the home, reports show that many of these mothers are not working to escape poverty.²⁹ One survey was of particular interest to me. Surveyed around Mother’s Day in 1997, three out of four working mothers said they would still work even if they had a choice.³⁰ In other words, 75% of the surveyed working mothers said they would prefer to have other people raise their children for a significant portion or even the big majority of the child’s weekday waking hours. Furthermore, working mothers often do not consider all their out-of-pocket expenses. One professor, Edward J. McCaffery at the University of Southern California and California Institute of Technology, calculated that a working mother earning \$40,000 annually could end up with only \$1,000 at the end of the year after deducting all expenses, taxes, and additional costs such as eating out more due to time constraints.³¹ Another financial planner, Jonathan Pond, estimated that 20% of the second

income will be left over. One woman who earned \$500 a week said to Mr. Pond: “By your formula, I’m only earning \$100 a week. What you are telling me is that, at the end of the day I have gone absolutely nuts and am exhausted and all I have is \$20 to show for it?”³²

Are there any practical conclusions we can draw from this expert opinion and scientific evidence? It seems to me that all of this is clearly saying that couples need to respect the natural order and have the mother stay at home with their young children. Only a mother has the God-given ability to nourish and nurture at the breast.

A second conclusion is that couples who want to have a stay-at-home, full-time mother for their children need to make that choice well before the children arrive. That is, they need to make choices based on living on the husband’s income. Some women object, “I can make more money than my husband, so he will stay home while I work.” To repeat, only a mother has the God-given ability to breastfeed. I could have made three times what my husband made during the first ten years of our marriage, but we learned to live simply on his income. It wasn’t until our fifth year of marriage that we bought a small home; two years later with three children we had to rent an apartment for one year. Then we went back to home ownership with the next move. I bring this up because many couples feel they have to buy a home right away. Our lifestyle was very simple, my husband’s salary was well below average, but we never went hungry or went without anything we really needed. And my husband has always appreciated the fact that his wife does not have expensive tastes!

Andrew Payton Thomas in his book, *Crime and the Sacking of America*, says that children are neglected so that adults can have bigger homes and better cars. He continues:

The rise of daycare in modern America says some painful things about us as parents and as a nation and culture, things that are easier for adults to leave unsaid. But the truth is always worth telling, and it is this: Many American parents today simply do not wish to raise their own children. Indeed, never before in history have a people become so intensely individualistic that their love for their children can be purchased so cheaply.

And what are we teaching our children? Mr. Thomas says: “Children are taught, literally from the cradle, that life is looking out for #1.”³³

Gerald Campbell, head of The Impact Group, claims that the #1 problem in our society is alienation, an emptiness, “an aloneness that cannot be tolerated by the human heart.” What people really need, in his estimation, is “love, understanding, mercy and compassion, and commitment” from **one** person who learns to give of self “without any conditions or expectations whatsoever.” He speaks of daycare as the ill of the future and the value of a mother’s presence.³⁴ If the child lacks “an other” or the mother, Campbell says, “eventually the child will become fearful of *all* others and, driven by rejection into an egocentric existence, will succumb to a hedonistic and utilitarian self-indulgence whose emptiness can only be a lifelong burden.”³⁵

To prevent alienation in our society and to develop healthy individuals who feel loved and valued, proper care during the first three years of life is crucial. Here I have tried to show the influence of nurturing and of breast milk upon the child during the early years. What is so important about breastfeeding 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.

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