THINKING ABOUT INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Martha Harris

KARNAC

The Harris Meltzer Trust
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About the author

Martha Harris (1919-1987) read English at University College London, and then Psychology at Oxford. She worked for some years as a schoolteacher, and taught in a Froebel Teacher Training College. She trained as a psychologist at Guy’s Hospital, then as a psychoanalyst at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis, where she was a training analyst; her own supervisors were Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion. For many years she was responsible for the Child Psychotherapy training in the Department of Children and Families at the Tavistock Clinic, developing a course initiated by Esther Bick in which infant observation played a vital role. She wrote many papers on psychoanalytic training, on clinical work, and on child development (Collected Papers, 1987; The Tavistock Model, 2011); her books for parents of older children were recently republished in one volume as Your Teenager (2007).

Thinking about Infants and Young Children is her most popular book and has become a classic text whose deep wisdom outlives social and cultural changes. Written for parents, it was first published (excluding the final chapter) in 1969 as Understanding Infants. It has since been translated into Italian, French and Portuguese, and become influential in the development of child psychotherapy trainings in many countries, owing to its unobtrusive clarification of Kleinian concepts within the context of everyday family life. A detailed account of Harris’s supervision of the formal observation of an infant from birth to three years can be found in The Story of Infant Development by Romana Negri (2007).
Preface

This short book written primarily for young parents, especially mothers, was a source of delight, of inspiration, and of deepened understanding when it was first published. A book about the insights of child psychotherapists at last, was what we felt when it appeared. The simplicity of the writing style conceals the subtlety and complexity of what is being described, and this combination of straightforward, lucid and accessible prose with a profound and imaginative appreciation of the inner world of children and their parents is at the heart of Martha Harris’ unusual gifts as a psychoanalytic thinker and writer.

Rereading it now brings freshly alive many of the qualities she brought to her clinical and teaching work. I will mention some which struck me particularly. First there is her so evidently true but so challenging and wise statement that children have to be recognized as individuals quite other than ourselves with their own talents, failings and sense of direction: they cannot be moulded to suit the desires of parents or indeed teachers, psychotherapists, politicians or others. Both time and thought have to be devoted to getting to know any individual child. The book’s structure, which moves from babyhood into the world of the primary school years – from the child living primarily within the confines of his or her family to the child also independently exploring relationships of learning and friendship at school – enables us to grasp that this provision of attention is the essence of the parental task. It is an ongoing process, as both child and parents develop through time, in
so far as they are able to digest and profit from their experience. This respect for the individual natures, difficulties and capacities of each person is what Martha Harris clearly believed to be the bedrock of a psychoanalytically informed approach to family relationships and the development of children. As she put it: “Relationships grow through the ability of both parties to experience and to adjust to each other’s natures” (p. 15).

This statement comes at the start of the chapter on the new baby’s point of view, and leads on to a wonderfully vivid account of the baby’s world in the early weeks, couched in ways which support the mother’s inevitable anxiety and uncertainty through demonstrating the meaningfulness of babies’ communications and their hope and expectation of being understood. She writes of the importance of allowing ourselves to make and learn from mistakes and challenges us to acknowledge the damaging impact of setting impossibly high standards of “ideal” motherhood. The reader then feels ready to learn more about the baby’s anxieties, his need for protection, his potential for disintegration and a sense of chaos which can overwhelm the early and still fragile development of the ordering of experience. There is a generosity of spirit in the exploration of different ways in which mothers and babies can come to understand and appreciate each other. The examples range from the physical closeness of holding the baby, and breast-feeding to the pleasures of bath-time. The description of the gradual coming-together of the mother-baby couple then opens out into discussion of the many things the baby needs help to struggle with – the distinguishing of need from greed, recognition of separateness, complex mixed feelings of love and hostility, curiosity and jealousy. Here is a brief quotation to convey the tone of voice which makes space for the lives of both mother and baby:

Some infants find it much harder than others ... to love and let go – to mentally allow with a good grace the mother who is so important to them to be absent and occupying herself elsewhere... If they are not inwardly reconciled to allowing her to retain her freedom, their independence has a brittle quality, in so far as it is achieved against, or in spite of a mother who is secretly resented because she is accused of neglect, or denigrated as not good enough. (p. 28)

In the chapter on weaning, another characteristic quality of the book emerges: Martha Harris can describe guiding principles which can serve as creative advice for each of us to think about our own personal situation. Such principles include the reminder that each baby’s development will go at its own pace, that changes need to be introduced slowly, providing time to take in the new experience, that flexibility is needed (to see how things work out) and most centrally that sorting out the needs
and anxieties of the baby from those of oneself as mother are the pre-requisite of successful weaning.

In the later chapters, there is a splendid discussion of the child’s growing need to do things for himself, a brilliant description of the dynamics of the bully and his victim, and a particularly enjoyable depiction of sibling relationships. A sense of the real-life complexities of families comes across in the detailed observations and analysis of a variety of brother/sister relationships, which emphasize the fascinating ongoing development of character.

The chapters are studded with statements which sound extremely simple but in fact communicate essential truths about human development which have emerged from long study. A good example of this is the almost throwaway remark that babies learn to talk when they have hopes of being understood (p. 53). This relational lens on the child’s gradually expanding capacities opens one’s mind to fresh perspectives.

The last forty years have brought many social changes in the lives of children and parents. Many mothers of young children now pursue careers outside the home, and the majority have to find a way to contribute to family income as well as take care of children and home. Fathers are often much more actively involved in the care of babies and young children, but there are also many families where fathers are absent altogether, and others where separated parents share the care of their children in complex ways. Child-minders and nurseries are a much more frequent element in children’s lives. Step-fathers, mothers and siblings are more prevalent than they were, children’s Homes have been largely replaced by foster-care, same-sex couples are no longer so exceptional, the rich cultural and ethnic mix of our cities has changed the face of our public spaces, and we live in the age of virtual worlds and electronic communication. All these factors and more mean that the world from which Martha Harris drew her examples is not ours. Because she writes with the aim of articulating a conception of the complex interaction of the inner worlds of the individuals that make up a family unit, the enormous changes in the world we inhabit do not greatly alter the fundamental picture. How we can understand the experience of being a child, growing up, becoming oneself, taking on adult responsibilities - these are the elements of this book. The kindness, truthfulness, wisdom, and imagination of the writer in describing human lives is what makes it such a pleasure to read.

Margaret Rustin
Consultant child and adolescent psychotherapist
Introduction

From the moment of birth, and perhaps before, a baby’s development is influenced by the quality of his mother’s response to his presence and communications. Each infant is potentially a unique little person from whom his mother and his father have to learn anew, however many children they may have had before.

This book tries to describe some of the important aspects of the development of infants and young children from birth to school age, illustrated by vignettes of scenes between parents and children. The points selected for discussion do not give a comprehensive coverage of all aspects of personality development in the early years, and do not aim to present parents with norms. They do touch upon many of the questions and feelings evoked in the intense emotional relationship between parents and children at this time. It is therefore a move away from the tendency to think of child development in terms of “normality” towards thinking of children as individuals.

For coming to realise how much one may learn from the observation of infants growing up in their families I am indebted to my training in Kleinian psychoanalysis, and especially to Esther Bick, who instituted weekly infant observation as a basic
post-graduate study at The Tavistock Clinic. For an abundance of rich material with which to think about infants – to which this book does no justice at all – I am indebted to many students over the years.

The pages that follow are about relationships: some expressed in generalisations, but some as instances of how individual parents and children are facing their particular situation. Those instances are drawn from actual observations but are disguised and anonymous to preserve confidentiality.

The value in having a closer look at how other people live their lives lies not so much in giving us something to copy, or at the other extreme, to avoid at all costs; but in offering us the opportunity to put ourselves in someone else’s circumstances for a little, before returning to our own with an experience that hopefully may enrich and enable us to see them a little more clearly.

Martha Harris, 1975

From the introduction to the 1969 edition

The publications of Susan Isaacs over thirty years ago on the social and intellectual development of young children did much to encourage a more sympathetic and imaginative approach to their education and rearing, to highlight the importance of the nursery years.

During the last twenty to thirty years, the work of John Bowlby and his colleagues has done a great deal to make professional people who deal with young children, especially with sick ones, very much more aware of the importance of the child’s relationship to his mother and has changed the whole frame of reference within which they attempt to prescribe for childhood illnesses.

D.W. Winnicott’s talks and writings for mothers - but also for fathers - have been, and continue to be for many a parent, an encouragement to her own intuition and developing commonsense in feeling free to relate to her child without being bedevilled by conflicting expert advice.

I hope this book may be just such an encouragement. It is written by one who has had the privilege of a psychoanalytic training, and of working with Melanie Klein and her colleagues, as an aid to sharpen observation of relationships.

It is not a handbook of information on how to bring up infants, although there are from time to time suggestions that may be of immediate practical use. It is certainly not meant to be a substitute for consulting your family doctor, your local
maternity and child welfare clinic, or for seeking psychological advice in situations where you are worried about your infant and in need of expert help - for experts have their place and are sometimes able to help when one is really in trouble!

The points selected for discussion do not by any means give a comprehensive coverage or even summary of the many aspects of personality development in the early years. They do not provide you with norms of development; but they do discuss some things which parents may commonly note in their infants, some of the questions and feelings which may be evoked in us by the close relationship, the responsibility for the small dependent person who is growing so rapidly in these years.

Martha Harris, 1969 (extract)
Chapter 1: Parenthood

Becoming a parent

Becoming a parent in one sense happens overnight, but in another it is a role which one has to grow into through experience and through making many mistakes. Our childhood experience with our own parents provides the basic reservoir from which we draw unconsciously; our own children can also be of the greatest help in letting us know when we are helping them to thrive. But children differ enormously in this respect, in their capacity to love and to enjoy life and to appreciate the parents who gave them life.

Because of his individual quality, we have to be prepared to learn with every new child how to understand him, and to interpret his needs aright. This is one of the great pleasures in bringing up children and in working with children; to enjoy it we must, however busy we may be, allow a little time, a little space, to be attentive to and to communicate with the individual child.

A closer look at the way in which any child grows up within his family makes one realise that none does this without conflicts with parents, and brothers and sisters, but that these struggles with the outer world can help him to face the conflicts
within himself. From being able to struggle with the problems posed at every stage in life comes the confidence that enables us to enjoy it.

Conflict can, however, be too sharp, too stressful at times. We would be greatly lacking in our duty as parents did we not worry and try to understand a little better when we felt that a child of ours was unduly unhappy and failing to thrive in important respects. Examination of our own attitudes, of the effect that they seem to have on him, and of the attitudes and emotions that are aroused in us by that particular child, can sometimes help us to see a little more clearly.

But it seems to me important to bear in mind - and this can save us from overweening pride and also from unrealistic and unhelpful guilt - that in trying to bring up our children as best we can, we are dealing from the beginning with separate human beings with a potential we may cherish and gradually help them to realise, but never with creations of our own who can be moulded as we will. The help we can give them is contingent upon our own resources: upon the limits of our circumstances and personalities, and can be best employed if we take some stock of these.

Motherhood

There is no more responsible task than that of being a mother, of having charge of a new life which depends so much upon one for its physical and mental well-being.

The weight of responsibility for the baby, for the way he feels, can be so heavy that it will make some mothers quite insensitive in many ways in the early days. They may concentrate excessively on the physical care and deny that the baby has any feelings, is other than a bundle of reflexes, who when he cries is “just exercising his lungs”.

It takes an effort of imagination and love which is the special, if not the unique, prerogative of mothers to experience that feeling. So it guides us in learning how to protect the baby’s sensitivity and to provide the conditions for his strong potential for life to unfold.

For in order to understand a baby one has to feel like a baby. We have all been babies and theoretically this understanding should be within the emotional grasp of us all. But the vulnerability and acute sensibility of the baby and of the young child is something which most of us use our adult experience and competence to avoid feeling any more.

It’s not so hard, perhaps, to make oneself acquainted with the physical necessities
of food, warmth, sleep and cleanliness, and in theory, not so hard to provide these. But in practice we have to find what is the most necessary thing for him at a given moment. We may make the wrong approach and it can be disconcerting when the baby is not ready to accept what we are giving him. He needs understanding.

The quality of devotion and understanding which he can get potentially from his mother is better than he is likely to get from anyone else; but sometimes she does need to be encouraged and shown that this is so. When a mother begins to feel more certain of herself, when she finds that her baby thrives and responds - for babies are on the whole surprisingly resilient - she can often then allow herself to become more open to him, closer and more responsive to his moods and needs.

Reactions to birth

Your first baby may very likely be born in hospital and the physical care and attention which you receive there is likely to be good.

It’s more difficult for the hospital to meet the varying psychological needs of every mother with her new baby. Hospital staff vary enormously in their capacity to do this, although it is becoming increasingly recognised that this is an especially vulnerable time in a woman’s life, and that the beginning of her relationship with her newly born baby is important for both of them.

Some mothers do enjoy the care and attention of the hospital, knowing that somebody else has charge of the baby, fitting in with the hospital framework, being told what to do. They can call Sister if the baby, for instance, doesn’t seem to know how to feed and she will show them what to do. They can enjoy for a while being babied or organised themselves. They may enjoy learning from the nurse how to feed or how to bath the baby.

Others, however, can hardly wait until they can go home and have the baby to themselves; they find the framework of the hospital and the attention of the nurses and doctors an interference in what is, for them, an intensely involving and novel experience which evokes emotions which they need privacy to allow themselves to feel.

Giving birth is a remarkable, unique experience. Holding her baby for the first time can be an extraordinary moving experience for the mother and there is often a great need to share this. She may not want to know how to put it in words in any direct way, but it’s usually most important to her to feel that her husband does
understand something of what she is feeling, that he takes an interest in her feelings as well as in the baby.

Close friends can be very important to her at this time, especially if they are ready to be interested in what is preoccupying her most. Sometimes it’s a help if they want to talk about their own comparable experience; to talk, but also to listen. We all know the kind of person who can take the shine out of one’s most cherished experience by going one better, who proffers advice without first bothering to take the trouble to become acquainted with the details of what they are advising upon!

Sharing with one’s husband, comparing notes with friends, these are ways of easing the load of terrible responsibility which accompanies the pleasure and achievement of having given birth to a baby.

If the mother feels reassured in her uncertainties, supported in her more helpless and childish feelings, she is like to become increasingly confident in her role as a mother, and more available emotionally to her baby.

Fatherhood

The period of the mother’s confinement and the early days, and maybe even months, of the baby’s life, is one during which the husband can feel inessential and left out. It has sometimes evoked stresses in married life, which have led to the partner who feels left out seeking solace for his injured feelings with another woman. On the other hand, the emotional stress may bring the two together more closely.

The father needs to feel necessary right from the start, as indeed he is in any marriage which is a partnership - at first for the mother and only indirectly for the baby, then increasingly so for the baby in a quite direct way.

If he can recognise how much in the early days his wife needs to be mothered herself, how tired she can get, how uncertain at times she can feel about whether she is doing the right thing for the baby, he can greatly satisfy his own maternal aspirations - which, however hidden or denied, are there to some degree in every father.

These aspirations become unhelpful only when they are too exclusively directed towards the baby, in competition with and in resentment against his wife. It’s confusing to a baby to have two mothers in rivalry with each other, vying with each other for his attention and love - whether these be father and mother, mother and grandmother, or what have you. If two people are going to take care of him, they need to be in harmony; to share.
In the early days, in almost all cases, the mother must be the most important person, the one who is in charge of the baby. In order to undertake this responsibility and to be able to enjoy it, she most often absolutely requires her husband's support, to make her feel confident that it really is within her power to be a mother to her baby.

It can be a great extra burden to the mother to have a husband who feels all his own unsatisfied or unresolved infantile wants so activated by the baby's arrival that he becomes jealous of the baby, regresses to childish behaviour and competes for his wife's attention, as if she were his mother. Most husbands probably slip unconsciously into behaving childishly in this way at times: “What about my supper? I'm fed up with coming home to nappies drying everywhere and bottles sterilising on the stove”.

It asks a little extra of the wife to register with some tolerance her husband's occasional jealousy, his vulnerability to feeling that his nose is pushed out of joint by the baby. He is much less likely to be driven into this position if he can feel that he is really some use as a father and as a partner to her.

For this reason, it is better for them both, for the strength of the little family they have become, if she turns mainly for support to her own husband, rather than back to her own parents or her own mother. Of course, grandparents often like to be, and often are, indispensably useful, but it's most important to ensure as far as you can that this is not at the expense of your husband, of yourselves as new parents, relying on each other as a couple. If the new father is treated by you, his wife, and by the grandparents as a little boy, then you are just asking for him to behave like a little boy. New fathers, like new mothers, have to learn to be parents, and it can be difficult to do justice to the role if they are not allowed to assume it.

They also want to go on being valued sexually as husbands, and are apt to have fears, sometimes well-founded, that they have become redundant in that role. So, as a wife, you owe it to your husband, to try to organise things so that you don't get too tired and are able to have some privacy together, with the baby for the time being tucked out of the way.

*Mrs B's first baby*

Here is an account of a young mother in hospital with her first baby, eagerly longed for and born after six years of marriage:
Her baby is born two or three weeks early, but he’s nearly seven pounds in weight. She has had quite an easy labour and is sitting up in bed to welcome her visitor some thirty hours after the baby’s birth.

When their greetings are over, Mrs B asks her visitor eagerly if she’d like to see the baby, picks him up, seems a little disconcerted and shamefaced that he is so comatose. Some of the other mothers in the ward are feeding their babies, so she wonders if her Anthony might like to suck too, saying that he hasn’t taken any food yet, but perhaps he will be ready to start today. He’s a little bit wobbly in her arms and she says, rather uncertainly, “How much easier it would be if they could sit up and talk to you right from the beginning”.

She begins to unfasten her pyjama top, squeezes a little drop of moisture out on to the tip of her nipple and puts it into the baby’s mouth, which is slightly open. His lips don’t respond to the contact; his mouth remains slack and he doesn’t suck—milk dribbles out of his mouth and down his chin.

Mrs B tries again a couple of times, chatting to her visitor and making excuses for the baby, saying, “He’s not really awake yet. He’s hardly wakened since he was born”.

She talks to him affectionately and worriedly: “Come on, be a good boy and show how clever you’re going to be... oh dear, dear, I can see you’re going to be a trouble after all ... you’re going to cause us some problems... Oh, dear, it looks as if we must have got the wrong baby here”.

She tries to wake him up, pushing her fingers under his chin; he cries very slightly and then relapses into his comatose state. She tries again. He does it again. She says, “Oh dear, it’s always the same, he just cries a little and then he goes back to sleep”. She goes on talking to her visitor from time to time.

The baby suddenly makes one or two rhythmical sucking movements with his mouth, which his mother notices. “There, he’s done that several times. You’d think he’d be ready to feed, but he doesn’t do it when the nipple’s there”. Then baby’s eyes open and roll upwards in the direction of her face; he screws up his nose and upper lip slightly... “Oh, I don’t think he likes what he sees”, says his mother a little ruefully.

A nurse then comes in with a cup of warm milk for Mrs B. And then she starts to settle her a little more comfortably to try the baby at the breast. She chats a little to the visitor, and says of the baby, “Doesn’t he look like his mum?”, which makes his mum flush with pleasure. She wraps him up more firmly and encourages the mother to bring forward with one hand the whole nipple part of
the breast, while the nurse uses the other hand to reinforce the support which the mother is giving to the baby’s head with the crook of her left arm, to bring the baby’s mouth to the proffered right breast. The nurse gently helps the mother’s right hand to move the nipple around between the baby’s slackly open lips.

He suddenly begins to make the same movement with his mouth that he had done a few minutes ago, when he was not at the breast. He sucks five or six times, holding on to the nipple. Mrs B says with enormous satisfaction and with bated breath, “He’s doing it now”. “Yes”, agrees the nurse, “he’s doing it now”. He repeats this sucking rhythm again, then lets his mouth fall slackly open again and seems to sink back into torpor. Mrs B strokes his feet gently; the nurse, with the palm of her hand, gently moves his head so that his lips come close to the nipple again. He starts up the same sucking rhythm again.

This whole process is repeated two or three times at a gentle unhurried pace, the nurse telling Mrs B to relax and take it easy. ‘He’s going to be all right now.’ After a couple of minutes the nurse suggests she tries the other breast. So Anthony is moved to the other side and the whole procedure starts all over again, but this time it is less successful; his efforts to suck are much feebler, he lets the milk dribble out of his mouth. The nurse says, “My, you’re a lazy boy”, and then a little hastily, as if not to hurt the mother’s feelings, “but he was a little premature and when babies arrive early it takes them a little longer to get used to the world and the fact that they have to work for their living. We’ll see if he’ll take a little water”.

She then picks him up firmly in the crook of her arm and puts the teat of a bottle of water in his mouth. This time he sucks quite vigorously and continues to do so with rhythmical pauses, much more decidedly than he had done at all hitherto.

Mrs B says, a little downcast, “He seems to like water much better than milk”. The nurse says comforting, “It’s just that it’s easier to get at. You’ll see soon when he gets a proper taste of milk he won’t want water any more. Here, you want to give him this”, and she hand the baby and the bottle over to his mother. She holds him, a little uncertainly, further away from herself than the nurse had done and tilted flatter on his back. He stops sucking and drifts off to sleep.

The nurse helps her to hold him a little more firmly and more upright and he starts sucking again, more slowly and persistently, and gradually proceeds to take all the water in the bottle - quite a small amount, about an ounce.
As he does this, Mrs B chats away to her friend, saying how much she and her husband had wanted this baby but now he’s arrived they’re both scared stiff of him. But she supposes they’ll be much more used to each other soon. “It’s quite different from what I thought it would be, but I do recognise some of his movements, especially a funny shaking little movement when he’s lying all slack in my lap. It’s like something I felt when he was inside me. I didn’t know what it was then, but now I do”.

Just before he finishes the bottle, Anthony works his hands out of the blanket in which they have been securely bound. He wraps them both round the nipple as he sucks the bottle. His mother says, “Now you shouldn’t be doing that, you must keep your hands down. The nurse wrapped them that way and you should keep them that way”, and so she tucks his hands in again securely.

A moment of two later, he finishes his bottle and she lets him lie back on the pillow on which he was propped when she was feeding him. He cries a little weakly. She sits him up against the pillow and he lets out a little wind. She says, pleased, “That’s better now, isn’t it?”, but then he spits up a little milk and water and he seems to hold his breath a little and makes a face. His mother gets frightened and so does the friend. His face goes dark red and he spits out a lot then he whimper. She changes his position on to his front, lying across her knees. She says, “The first time he did that I was scared stiff and called for the nurse. I’d been trying to feed him yesterday, but he hadn’t had anything so it couldn’t have been the milk”. This time she doesn’t call the nurse and, though scared, seems to feel she can cope.

From this observation of Mrs B and Anthony, we have some fairly clear hints of the not unusual anxieties and uncertainties with which a young mother is struggling in trying to learn to feed and care for her first baby.

She had waited quite a while for this baby, who was a little premature, but in good condition. Maybe because he was early, he was one of those babies who have to learn to suck. That called for a little extra patience and persistence on the part of his mother. Fortunately, she was in a hospital where the nurses were helpful. This nurse was clearly in touch with her need to be reassured, to be made to feel that the feeding would come all right in the end and that the baby was really her baby.

She flushed with pleasure when the nurse said that the baby looked like her. When she was becoming downcast because the baby seemed to prefer the nurse feeding him water to feeding from her breast, the nurse handed him over to her and
implied that when he really got used to the milk, that is, to his mother, he would prefer that to someone else giving him water.

These uncertainties make her a little clumsy with the baby at first. She holds him somewhat uncertainly and rather far away at times. The nurse helps to bring them together more definitely, so that the baby feels safer, and the mother too, and the sucking relationship can start. She’s still worried about whether she’s giving the baby the right thing, doing the right thing by him, and is alarmed by his choking, but this time can cope with that without the help of the nurse.

Not all nurses are able to give the new mother and baby this kind of support. Sometimes a mother can get it from her own mother if their relationship is not complicated by too much rivalry. Sometimes, and best of all, she can get it from her own husband.
Chapter 2: The new baby’s point of view

Uniqueness of your new-born baby

Your baby will be unique, different from anyone else’s baby and different from any other baby you have had, or will have; just as, whatever is essential and constant in your own personality, you are bound to be a slightly different mother to each of your children.

Relationships grow through the ability of both parties to experience and to adjust to each other’s natures. Just as your baby needs to have food and comfort and space to grow, he needs to have the security of a loving relationship within which he can express himself, be known and learn to know himself and the whole range of his own feelings. Through your response to his physical and emotional needs he learns to know you, to build up some trust in a caring, helping person, and through your appropriate interpretation of his messages he learns to know himself also.

For instance, if he has a pain in his tummy, he won’t have the faintest idea of what this is, he won’t know how or what to ask for to put it right. And as his mother, in the beginning, you sometimes won’t have the faintest idea either. You may interpret his cries, his writhings, as expressions of hunger, and you may then feed him. You
may be right and the baby will have his pain taken away, his need satisfied and also an experience of being understood.

Another time, it may be that he has wind or a tummy upset and accepts the breast, expecting from it the comfort and relief which it has given him in a more appropriate situation before, only to find that his pain is made worse. And then he has an experience of being misunderstood.

Of course, you cannot avoid this happening at times because you cannot always correctly interpret him. You too are learning to be a mother to him, and that means learning to understand him even if you have had ten babies already.

Your experience of other babies, of yourself as a mother, is likely to be a great help. Even as a mother to your first baby, and with no experience of observing or taking care of anyone else’s baby, or of your own little brothers or sisters, you do have some experience to go on. That is the primary and most importance experience of all: of yourself as your own mother’s baby, which, although you won’t remember it consciously at all, nevertheless deeply affects your capacity to respond and be in touch with your own baby’s needs at an intuitive level.

I’ll say more about this later. But the point I’m pursuing here is that, as a mother, you always have some experience to draw on, but that experience needs to be used, not just to provide ready-made answers, formulae to apply to various situations with your baby, but rather to make you readier to have a new experience with him.

An inevitable part of learning by experience is the making of mistakes - trial and error. But you are likely to be more open to recognising those mistakes and to learning from them if you don’t set for yourself too impossibly high standards of ideal motherhood. As the baby grows, and later on through childhood and adolescence, it becomes a most important part of his experience to have parents who acknowledge making their own mistakes in understanding, who don’t have to be right, but who go on trying to do better next time.

_The baby’s world_

The first need of the newborn baby is to be wrapped, held and protected against the too harsh intrusion of stimuli from the outer world, to be given again in fact something of a womb-like situation from which he can reach out from time to time to make contact with the world.

His mother’s body warmth and shielding care give him the necessary containment and security to enable him to become gradually more adventurous in reaching forth to new experiences. She fulfils two main needs for him: to take away the
unpleasant feelings, the pain, the discomfort expressed also in physical terms by his urine, his faeces, his vomit and his wind; and to give him the necessary food for life, together with the love and understanding for his feelings that is expressed in her voice, her hands, and the whole feel of her body.

In the beginning the mother is the world to the baby. (We’ll assume that his mother is the person who is taking charge of him as, in ordinarily fortunate circumstances, this would be the case.) Not that he knows her as his mother, or as a whole person in the beginning. She is rather a series of experiences he has with his different senses and with different parts of him which can give him either comfort or frustration, pleasure or pain, and which arouse in him both physical and emotional responses.

She is the hands that pick him up, that dress and undress him, wash his face, soothe his bottom with ointment; she is the arms, the body, the lap, the warmth that cradles him; she is the nipple, the breast that warms and fills his mouth and soothes the pain of his hunger with repletion. She is at other times all these things failing to fulfil the comforting function that he needs.

To begin with he doesn’t seem to know whether these things, these experiences, are coming from outside or from inside, from an object outside or from his own body. Yet many babies in the very beginning show a clear tendency to reach out instinctively towards an object to satisfy their need, to have a sort of expectation which can be satisfied in quite a specific way: the rooting for the breast, for the nipple, for instance.

Babies who reach out for life, and make their wants clearly known, are on the whole the easiest for the mother to deal with. Every experience she has of satisfying the baby, of doing what makes him more comfortable, confirms her in her growing confidence in herself as a mother, in her ability to give appropriately and to enable him to have an increasing trust in a presence which understands and meets his needs.

The baby’s need to feel held

As already mentioned, the baby first develops his relationship with the world through getting to know his mother as she presents herself to interpret and meet his needs, which are emotional and mental as well as physical.

In the beginning they are very few, but terrifying to him if they are not soon assuaged. The degree of frustration that the newborn baby can tolerate without disintegrating, going back to what seems a state of chaos and distress, is minimal.
Ability to tolerate frustration of needs and wishes grows very gradually. It does so through an accumulation of experiences of understanding and of needs being realised, which can be internalised and drawn upon in times of hardship. But the newborn baby has not yet had these experiences.

Perhaps one could say that he has had the experience of being held inside his mother in the womb and his requirements for survival there supplied without any conscious striving on his part.

One might see the twitching and restlessness of many a new baby, the mechanical restless little cries, as a shaking-off reaction to the situation of being suddenly unprotected, out of the womb. He may need not only firm wrapping in the cot, but fairly frequent cradling and carrying in mother’s arms to cushion him from the threatening incursions of an unkind world and to create or to strengthen at least some confidence from which he can reach out a little to grasp life more firmly.

This holding in the womb, then the holding in the mother’s arms, is the first boundary out of chaos within which his personality can develop. It’s a boundary, a protection, which his mother’s sensitivity to his growth helps him to extend, to expand, and within which he can include more and more experience of the world.

To begin with, he does not know what he wants at all. Some babies at first only want peace, a return to the womb, and to shake off the disturbances of life. Some do seem to “know”, through their seeking, searching mouth, that there is something to be had from it, that satisfaction has to be looked for, when it isn’t there. Sometimes the mother has to reach out gently to stimulate or encourage a need that doesn’t seem to be felt. In Mrs B’s case the maternity nurse had to help her have the confidence to do so, recognising that time and patience were necessary before mother and baby were ready to meet one another.

Expressing his needs

When the baby has a little experience inside him, when he begins to be a little more of a person through having his particular needs interpreted and met correctly, and therefore to have more of an idea of them, he can begin to communicate them more actively and more clearly.

Very soon his mother may learn to distinguish in their context different kinds of crying, as she and her baby feel more at home with each other. The crying that in the very beginning may sometimes seem to be hardly more than a reflex action, a mechanical unburdening of stress, takes on a more human quality of distress that speaks eloquently to the mother’s feelings. A cry of pain or disappointment is different from the hunger cry that has a peremptory note which the mother may interpret
as “I want my feed right now”. The cry of hunger may assume a more definite quality of rage and, if that goes on too long, a mother may sometimes be surprised to find, and later on may expect to find, that what the baby wanted has gone bad on him when it at last arrives. He cannot recognise the desired event till he has been all soothed and prepared and the bad experience wiped away.

The quality of grief and sadness in the baby’s cry is yet another development and is an important one, to be spoken of a little later.

How mother becomes a person for him

The baby, from all these experiences of his needs being met, gradually organises them to form a more and more complete picture of a person, his mother whom he can trust, to whom he can call for solace, for understanding, for company, for fun.

But what of the bad experiences, of failures to understand, to comfort, and maybe worst of all, at first, the experience of finding no mother at hand when in discomfort and in terror? The infant tries to organise these too, to give them recognisable form as a nasty object that he doesn’t want anything to do with, which he tries to push away, out of himself, and to keep quite separate from his picture of the mother who comforts and fulfils his need and whom he holds to as a part of himself, the very centre of his being.

To achieve this feeling of oneness with an ideal mother, this state of utter happiness and bliss, is very important for the future development of the baby, a prototype of heaven once known, lost, but still worth striving for; an experience that can renew hope in time of despair.

The most complete way of achieving this state of oneness, of complete harmony for both mother and baby, is through a happy breast-feeding situation where the mother feels confident and able to enjoy giving herself in this close physical way. It isn’t possible for every mother to do this. Each one has to sort this out for herself, although her success or failure to establish a breast-feeding situation may be influenced greatly by the help, she gets in the beginning from midwife, doctor, nurse and often her husband.

The pattern of the baby’s contacts with his mother in the first few weeks, the meetings of mouth and nipple, hand and breast, hand and mother’s jersey and so on, is reproduced by the baby when he is on his own in his cot, with, for instance, thumb and mouth, hand and hand, fingers and blanket. This is the way he not only reminds himself, but recreates in his imagination his mother’s presence. He seems omnipotently to make her appear for him when she is not there.
Of course, omnipotence fails, his illusions of creating “mother” disappear, when his need is too great, when he is maybe too hungry or uncomfortable, when his feelings are too strong to be spuriously appeased. Thumb-sucking fails when physical or emotional hunger is too great.

**Breastfeeding**

For the mother and the baby in the weeks following his birth the establishing of a thriving feeding relationship is more important than anything else, but this often takes a little time and patience and cannot be forced. You are lucky if your baby is ready to start sucking at once, “knows what to do”. Some do and it’s a great reassurance to a mother, but many babies need a little holding and coaxing and can only make a tentative approach to feeding in the beginning. (Like Mrs B’s Anthony.)

Such an intimate, close relationship is greatly affected and determined by the mother’s unconscious feelings about what she contains inside her own body; what is the nature of this watery fluid which so many women are doubtful about at first, bearing as it does a slight resemblance to the real stuff that comes out of the bottle, for that can be measured and scientifically treated to be germ-free. The best help in allaying these anxieties is a baby who sucks firmly, becomes contented and is seen to thrive. But not many babies are able to reach this happy state without a little help.

When this can be managed, it is probably the closest and most complete way in which the mother and baby can get together and re-establish something of that union lost when the baby is born and outside. For this is a loss, a shock, for both of them. To have the baby at the breast for a little shortly after birth, even though he may get nothing much in the way of material nourishment, can do much to sweeten the loss of this closeness and start off an intimate relationship of a different kind.

**Comforters**

There are times when a baby is not hungry, when he won’t sleep and cries fretfully or inconsolably. It’s best then if his mother can pick him up, maybe change his nappy, hold him a little until his mood changes and he is soothed and ready to be laid down again.

But his mother may be too busy or too agitated at the time to be able to soothe him, so what about a comforter then? Few people would now frown seriously upon a dummy or comforter as “bad for the baby”. Much better a baby contented with a dummy in his mouth than one who is yelling his head off in the pram, with an
anxious and exasperated mother feeling in no state to deal with him. But a dummy is no substitute for the real comforting which is that understanding presence, and of which the baby has to have a sufficient experience before he can learn to do without it externally, to let his mother go while retaining an active image of her in his mind.

A reliance on things can later be fostered as a substitute for relationships if we are feeling too harassed, too jumpy and depressed to give of ourselves emotionally. We can use ourselves as a kind of sweet or toy or comforter, as a body to which the child clings, which he expects always to be there at his demand, to clear up after him, to make things always easy for him.

If we do unconsciously fall into this way of behaving towards him, it doesn’t in fact make things any easier for him in the long run. He comes to depend too much on what he has not the experience of relinquishing, and to resent that dependence.

We can, by fobbing him off with presents, steer him in the direction of becoming the child who is always wanting but is never satisfied, where the hunger for things is an unsatisfactory way of trying to fill an emotional lack.

So one can buy an apparent contentment at too high a price if the dummy is offered instead of a relationship. If we can take time to hold the baby a little, soothe him and maybe talk to him for a little after he has had his feed, we give him a better chance to part from us carrying the experience of an understanding presence that comforts him when we have left him. He may need a comforter to remind him sometimes, or he may not.

Perhaps the comforter is most usefully seen as a help to a busy or fraught mother who needs a little time to herself to recoup her resources, so that she is able to give more of herself to the baby when she does attend to him.

Mrs R’s relationship with her baby

There are various ways of gradually establishing a comforting (and mutually enjoyable) relationship with your baby. Here is an instance of one mother and baby who first began to come close to each other through bath time.

Robert was born at home, the first child of a young couple who kept a small sweetshop and café, and who lived above the shop. When visited on the days after his birth, his mother Mrs R, was sitting up in bed, pink-cheeked, excited and euphoric. She pointed to the baby barely visible in his wrappings, in the beautiful blue-ribboned cot—for they had confidently expected a boy. When
she picked him up, he hunched limply against her arm that had not yet learned how to support him comfortably; a fine plump baby with a slightly yellowish, jaundiced look.

She went on talking excitedly about her plans for him. He seemed already in trousers, running around the room and on the point of being taken to school by his father. Amid these dreams of the future cropped up from time to time her worries about how she was going to manage in the next few weeks and months. These worries seemed to centre mainly on whether she was going to be able to feed the baby herself, as she said she would like to do (believing that breast-fed babies were so much finer and stronger, with less flabby fat) and how she was going to manage with the cleaning of the house and help keep their business going.

A week later her euphoria had quite disappeared and her underlying depression and discouragement were painfully evident. She was trying to breastfeed the baby, still convinced that this would be the best thing, but very uncertain whether her milk was right for him, worrying that it was too watery and wondering whether it gave him enough nourishment.

She was now talking of how wild and vicious he became when he was hungry and was offered the breast, how he went for it, then strained away from the ‘black part’ and cried as if it were hurting him. She veered between feeling obliged to pick him up every time he cried and thinking that she was spoiling him and getting him used to bad habits. She recalled cynically the preparation classes in hospital where they taught you how to bath the baby, using a doll as a model, “But he’s no doll. He wriggles and screams”.

Yet, in spite of his wriggling and screaming at bath time, it was clear that she began to obtain more satisfaction from this than from the feeding situation. She would linger over washing and cleaning out all his little crevices, drying him meticulously, and admiring his fine solid body and clear skin. Although the baby cried and howled often during this process, she turned a deaf ear, during the early weeks. At the end of the cleaning she would wrap him in a warm fleecy towel and cuddle him close to her when he was sweet-smelling and powdered.

This cuddle in the towel after his stressful bath seemed to be the first close relationship the baby positively enjoyed. After five or six weeks, he was enjoying the whole bathing situation. It became a time of great pleasure for both mother and baby, who were sometimes joined by father when he was able to pop in from the shop.
As Robert grew older, a fleecy nappy became his favourite comfort, derived from this first cuddling in the towel. He would hold it to him when out of sorts and reluctant to eat, or when he was put to bed, and months later, when he was taking his first steps and exploring unknown territory he held it in one hand as a kind of talisman.

It was fairly clear that Mrs R, although really believing it was best for babies to be breast-fed, had had the greatest doubts about her own breasts (the “black part” that seemed to make the baby wild and vicious) but that she was much more confident of her competence to clean him. She could bring herself to come closer and to accept him more completely when she had cleaned him.

From the bath situation their relationship began to grow, and in time she began to enjoy giving him food. This was after she gave up breastfeeding, which was never really satisfactorily established, and when she began to cook him special nourishing little broths to supplement his bottle feeds.

Some clues as to Mrs R’s uncertainty about her watery milk, her need to be reassured that he was fine and firm, not flabby, may be suggested by the fact that she had had very bad diarrhoea throughout her pregnancy. She later confessed that she had been very worried at that time and remembered how, when she was a girl at school, her friends were all talking about getting married and she had said to herself mentally, “Married maybe, but never a baby. I’m sure I should let it die”.

This schoolgirl worry about having a baby seemed in its turn to be connected with a severe illness, lasting for months, which Mrs R had had at the age of nine when her younger brother was born, which made her mother give up breastfeeding the baby in order to nurse her for several months.

One might wonder what led to her having such a prolonged illness at the time her only brother was born, and what this meant to her, and assume that this incident, together with the factors that were involved in it, had some bearing on her attitude to her own baby.

It took a little time before she was able to live through these reactivated infantile anxieties about the perniciousness of messiness, and her fears of producing nothing but mess. During this time the tolerance of her husband was of inestimable help. He not only cleaned the house for her but even occasionally handled the dirty nappies and helped her growing realisation that she really did have a baby there who was clean enough to cuddle.
Chapter 3: Coming up to six months

Discovering the world and himself

By the middle of the first year or earlier many babies, who may have started off rather fretful and colicky, have settled into a more comfortable routine. Mothers of first babies have learned a good deal about being mothers and have usually recovered from the tendency to feel depressed and oppressed by the responsibility that motherhood brings.

The baby has now become more alive to and interested in the world outside him. His horizon is expanding. His increasingly varied social responses, his welcoming, his recognition, his interest – all his forward movements and changes reassure the mother that he is thriving and that she is really able to look after him.

This interest, this wondering about the world, bringing things together, can initiate for us, as mothers, a fascinating period of re-discovering the world through the baby’s eyes, if we can only make the time and the necessary mental space available from our other commitments.

Of course, the baby’s hopefulness about the world, his readiness to explore, to take in new things at this stage, depend on what has gone before. They depend upon
the success with which he has managed during the first six months to internalize, through repeated experiences of being comforted and understood, a trustworthy mother-presence that he can rely upon within himself.

The bringing together of two and two in terms of emotions and impressions, the recognition of different aspects of the people and the things that he cares about, takes place in the infant as he begins also to be aware of the nature of different parts of his body and of their relationship to each other. He begins, for instance, to co-ordinate hand and eye, to pass from hand to hand, to notice his toes at the end of his feet.

At the same time the baby begins to get more of an idea of the difference between himself and his mother. He begins to find out his own boundaries, what is a part of himself and how it joins up with the rest; that his toes are on his feet and these are connected to his legs. He notices what belongs to his mother, notices his hand, her hand, feels his cheek, her cheek. He gets more interested in where she is going when she disappears, and watches for her return.

As he matures, he acquires a greater store of observations of his little world and his involvement with his mother is with an increasingly complex and integrated person, rather than a series of fragmentary appearances and impressions.

Each baby has his own characteristic ways of assembling himself mentally, of becoming more integrated and of learning, or refusing to learn at times, the ways in which he is separate and different from his mother, his father, his brothers and sisters and those who appear in his little social circle.

Discovering his parents

For just as the baby begins to be aware of his mother as a separate and more complete person, he begins to be aware of father also as separate and different. He becomes aware, too, that father and mother have a relationship with each other quite apart from him. They quite evidently have ways of communicating with each other that he just doesn’t understand yet.

Just watch a six or seven month old baby watching and listening intently to what his mother and father are saying to each other and then, not to be outdone, lean forward to try to reproduce the rhythm and a generally garbled version of the sound of their conversation, long before he can understand much, if any, of the sense of it.
This is a time when many a father who has felt a little ineffectual and out of contact with his baby begins to realise that for his child he really does exist! He may find that, for occasional spells at any rate, he is an object of greater interest than mother. There are moments when a mother and baby get rather tired of each other and the arrival of father relieves the situation for both of them.

When father becomes an important person in his own right, the baby is likely to notice and to distinguish between other people too. He begins to have quite particular relationships with the other children in the family, or with any other children or adults whom he is seeing regularly.

His world is beginning to expand enormously. Yet if he is safe enough in his primary relationship with his mother, he is able to return to this for strength and relaxation. It supports him in the external world and in the calm of his own mind. Through this he can cope with the intense excitement and emotional turmoil that added interests and stimuli bring.

Each baby discovers the world at his own pace. There is no special advantage in his being forward in noticing and it’s quite unnecessary, if not harmful, to try to stimulate a baby to take in more or to do more at this, or any later stage, than he is ready to do.

If you are worried about what seems to be a singular apathy and lack of interest in people after the age of six or seven months, then it is as well to consult your doctor. He may be able to help you evaluate how your child is developing.

*The ability to be separate*¹

In order to value experience with people in the outside world, the child has gradually to make some distinction between what comes from outside himself and what he has the “illusion of belonging” to him because he desires it to be so.

The first stage in the baby’s learning about life is possibly reached when he is cradled inside his mother, and certainly when he is cradled and held in her arms. Then there comes the time when he realises that he is not the same as the mother who is holding and comforting and making him feel happy. He has no absolute power or control over this comforting presence. This realization is hard for him to accept. He tries to reproduce the comforting experience in all kinds of ways; from his toys, from his own body, in his memory and imagination. In this way he keeps

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¹ In the 1969 edition this section (here expanded) was entitled “The ability to distinguish”.
helpful contact with the world outside himself, with mother and father and other liked or trusted presences.

Some infants find it much harder than others to make this distinction — to love and let go — to mentally allow with a good grace the mother who is so important to them to be absent and occupying herself elsewhere. They may be overtly clinging and upset when she disappears. They may become apparently independent, even prematurely able to do without her. But if they are not inwardly reconciled to allowing her to retain her freedom, their independence has a brittle quality, in so far as it is achieved against, or in spite of a mother who is secretly resented because she is accused of neglect, or denigrated as not good enough.

The preference for daddy which is sometimes shown after the first six months is often made on this basis. This is fine if it’s a recurrent phase in the working through of resentments about mother’s non-availability; and conversely when the infant turns to mother again as a bulwark against the fickle daddy who leaves him and has a horrid habit of commanding mummy’s attention. Parents who are on good terms with each other and who don’t need to fight for the attentions of the infant, can cope with these fluctuations in preferences without making capital out of them. The infant is helped to struggle with his possessiveness by the ability of his parents to struggle with theirs.

Sometimes the infant who has difficulty in being separate while retaining a good experience internally may be identified in later life as the kind of person who finds no value or enjoyment in what he cannot himself possess; who may find it hard to praise or think well of another’s achievements; or he may covet the other person’s possessions or achievements, but feel passionately that these by rights should have been his. He may appear as an insecure and envious person, or he may appear as someone who seems unable to avoid trying to evoke envy in others by flaunting or subtly hinting at his own achievements, possessions or good fortune.

This envy is already there in the infant and is usually very much bound up with his feelings of dependence on a person — first his mother, then his parents, so much more powerful and rich than he in everything he needs to make him happy and secure — who hold domain in fact over his little world. And so he tried to avoid the painfulness of feeling so dependent by putting himself into the shoes of the rulers of his kingdom, by pretending that he is mummy, that he is daddy, that the whole household revolves around him: he becomes an omnipotent “baby king”.

Now there may be a time, and perhaps rightly so, when the household does revolve around him, but it is not helpful either to him or to either of the parents or
to any of the other children if this has to continue for long. As his mother gets to know him and his needs better, she can tell when it won’t hurt him to wait a little for his meal or his bath. Even though he may be clamouring, she can tell when his cry is a desperate summons for help and when he is mainly being bossy.

You have to have learned to distinguish within yourself real need from greed before you can spot the distinction in your infant. Only then are you able to decide that this is a moment when baby is really upset and in need of mothering, or one when he could really manage on his own were he not so determined to prove that he has you at his beck and call.

Setting limits is an aspect of discipline, but also something much wider and more important. It is one of the ways in which you help your infant on the way through childhood and adolescence to really find himself as an adult, with some confidence in his real qualities and some idea of what it is possible for him to do and to attempt.

*Complex emotions – love, hostility, guilt and sadness*

The baby when he realises that mother comes and goes and has a life of her own, becomes increasingly interested in how she is feeling, watches her expression, looks for liking, approval, reassurance. As he gets more involved with her as a separate person, he can’t take her quite so much for granted. If he is developing well, he may now begin to value her in the way that we do when we are truly beginning to be able to love, instead of simply requiring someone.

Then, putting two and two together, he comes to realise that the mother he values and loves, on whom he depends for comfort and life, is one and the same person as the one who doesn’t come when he wants her, who frustrates him, to whom he feels hostility and whom he fears as a bad presence, a pain, an unwelcome intruder into his peace of mind.

This is a terribly painful realisation; it is likely to recur many times during the course of our lives if we are lucky enough to be given a sufficient potential for love, and circumstances which enable love to develop.

With love and concern come guilt and sadness because of our bad feelings – our envy, our jealousy and our possessiveness towards the object of our love and the too great demands we make of it. But sadness also comes with dawning awareness that we are not omnipotent and cannot protect the person we love from dangers that do not emanate from us and are not within our control.
The baby has the rest of his life to extend the boundaries of the love which is born of his relationship with his mother, and a lifetime to learn the dangers that beset love, dangers emanating from himself and also from the world outside.

Curiosity and jealousy

When he begins to sit up or watch mother’s comings and goings, he wonders what is going on between mother and father. What of the other children in the room next door and things he can hear but cannot see? His curiosity is aroused, but is also many, many times frustrated. So, sometimes he has to bang his spoon or his teething ring or some wooden blocks on the tray of his chair and shout at the top of his lungs. You can often see him just longing to walk, so that he can go and see.

I recall one little boy, around five or six months, who for a while seemed obsessed with shoes. When his father or mother or a visitor came into the room, his eyes would go straight to their feet. Then he seemed to lose interest, but when he learned to crawl at about the age of ten months, one of the first things he did was crawl into his mother’s wardrobe cupboard, pull out his mother’s shoes and, fitting his hands into them like feet, try to push himself along the floor inside the shoes.

This same baby, at the age of five months, suddenly began to object strongly if his parents had their meals together and left him in his carry cot. Until then he had always been fed first and his parents would eat their meal together in peace while he lay peacefully in a corner of the room. But now he would not be pacified until his mother sat him on her knee at the table and gave him a little of what she was eating, and he could make little sounds to join in the conversation. So mother and father decided to get him a high chair, although till then they had been firmly for low chairs as less dangerous.

About the time that he begins to get interested in mother and father and other persons in the family, it’s a good thing for the baby to be included occasionally in things that you are doing together, so that he really begins to feel one of the family. This may, for instance, make him feel less jealous and tantalized when interesting activities are going on within earshot but outside his range of vision.

Greediness

Greediness means wanting more than you can actually use and more than your fair share, in food as in other less tangible things, such as love and attention. We all
have our quota of greed, as do our children, and some of us seem to have more than others. For those who struggle to control it, it’s a problem for them – whereas those who do not see it and who do not struggle with it create a problem for others.

How can we help our children to recognise greed in themselves and to learn to limit it? We must be able to recognise it in them, and to distinguish it from real need. If we can do this, we can help them to stop.

Anxiety may increase greed, but going on taking more after you have had enough increases anxiety rather than lessens it. The increased anxiety heightens the feeling of wanting more, and hence a vicious spiral tends to ensue. This is obvious in the basic matter of over-eating – the tendency to stuff oneself for example, with food to make up for some feeling of emptiness within or in relationships with the rest of the world.

An infant who grabs without enjoyment more than he can digest can feel encumbered with too much, but also builds internally the experience of a mother who has been robbed and exploited, and who does not therefore add to his security. This was so in the case of Jimmy who will be described in the next chapter.

Meantime here are two vignettes of younger babies in complex emotional relationships with their mothers.

Mrs J’s relationship with Olivia (6 months)

This is the account of an observation of a baby of six months by a friend of the mother’s, a regular visitor to the family:

Olivia is six months old now. Last time I saw her was a month ago, when her mother had told me what a good and easy baby she was and hoped that things would go on in this way, and that as she grew older she wouldn’t turn into one of those troublesome infants who always tried to get into their parent’s bed during the night. She said emphatically that she and her husband were fond of their privacy. I didn’t see any sign on that visit of Olivia promising to be troublesome and wondered what her mother was bothering about.

Today when I called, Olivia was sitting in her chair, not due to be fed for another hour. I went into the room where she was, waiting for J (the mother) to come in from the kitchen. She was looking down at her left hand lying in her lap most intently. Several times she stretched out her right arm in a circular movement, brought it back to clasp the finger of her left hand in her lap and repeated this twice. The right arm was circling in the direction of the kitchen.
Suddenly she became aware of my presence, stretched the right arm out to me and bent her body towards me in welcome, answering my smile and hello with a great big smile. We exchanged little chatty noises until J came.

Olivia welcomed her mother with a great big beam, dribbling all over her face. Her mother wiped her mouth tenderly, chatting to her and saying what a real little person she had become in these last weeks: “She knows how to say no and spits all over the place”. As her mother made a spitting mouth at her, Olivia’s dribble changed into spits and bubbles and they had a playful little conversation with each other. J said that the baby was gaining so much weight and eating so much solid food that she had now cut down to just three breast-feeds per day. She thought she might go on feeding her for another six or eight weeks perhaps and if she got Olivia used to the idea of a cup, which she hadn’t yet taken to, there wouldn’t be any need to give her a bottle of milk.

Olivia’s eyes meantime had been moving from her mother’s face to mine and back again. Her mother handed me a cup of coffee and the baby leaned forward a little to watch us closely as we drank, her lips slightly apart and her tongue poking out and in again several times. “Put your tongue in, you cheeky girl”, said her mother and the baby with a gurgle leaned forward with delight to her mother as if she expected to be picked up. When she wasn’t, she stuffed the hand of her right arm that she’d stretched out to her mother into her mouth and began to whimper with a piteous, disappointed air. This at once touched her mother’s heart. She picked up the baby with soothing words. The baby brought her slobbery little face right against her mother’s cheek, leaned back a little and with both hands felt and pulled at the mother’s mouth, then felt and pulled at her own mouth. “You think you ought to have something to eat like us”, said her mother, “just you wait – your turn will come”.

After a little, she put the baby in the basket with a rusk. The baby held the rusk in her right hand, circled this arm away from her and back to her mouth again several times, following the rusk with her eyes and talking to it in an absorbed and what seemed to be an admonishing tone. In between whiles, when the rusk wasn’t in her mouth, she was pursing her lips and protruding her tongue between them. At one point she raised her left hand to her mouth and seemed to be trying to grasp the tongue.

In this little observation of Olivia, I think one can get some idea of the complicated thoughts and relationships with which a six months old baby struggles. A weaning
COMING UP TO SIX MONTHS

The process has already begun. The mother envisages it as a gradual one and the baby seems to be working hard to grapple with it in the context of a sensitive, understanding relationship with her mother.

When the visitor arrives, the baby seems to be absorbed in thinking of mother absent in the kitchen, in the direction of the arm outstretched, then brought back to be clasped in the other hand in her lap, as later on she stretches the rusk at arm’s length away from her and then brings it back into her mouth. This is the way the baby dramatises and learns to live with, rehearse or control in her imagination, the comings and goings of the mother. She is coping with momentary separation, with loss, a basic recurrence of human existence which is dramatised with increasing richness and variety in play as children grow older.

One can see that at this time the experience of loss that she is faced with is well within her capacity to contain and to think about, that she can be confident in her mother’s sensitivity to her needs. Mrs J leaves the baby to work things out for herself until she gets obviously distressed, then seems to know just when she can put her down to get on with the rusk, so that she can go on chatting a little longer to her friend. Her mother seems to have confidence in her as a little person, with a will of her own and able to spit out, not be overwhelmed by, an experience which proves too nasty for her.

Alan’s emotional development (4 months)

Alan is just four months old, the younger of two children. His elder brother is barely two years. He has had a quietly happy, orderly life, with a mother who has been well able to cope with her two little children and has enjoyed feeding both of them. He is still being breast-fed, to the enjoyment both of himself and of his mother, but has had small additions of solid foods since he was two months old.

Today two relatives have arrived and while his mother has been preparing late breakfast Alan, who is unusually wakeful for this time of day, has been sitting in the lap of one and then of the other, his brother bustling about and chatting to them both.

With all the interruptions, bathtime is later than usual, and Alan, who started quite cheerful and attentive, watching everything that has been going on, starts to suck his thumb now and then, his eyes turning to follow his mother in particular. But he still doesn’t cry. He has stopped looking at the two
grown-up visitors and even seems to be averting his gaze from them studiously.

When his mother takes him to undress him for his bath, he is delighted, laughs and kicks a great deal and enjoys it as she talks to him and rubs her cheek against his. When she leaves him alone on the bed for a moment after his bath, he turns his face away from the two women, who are left looking at him, and sucks his thumb again and then the back of his other hand.

When his mother starts dressing him again, he begins to lose his equanimity, especially when his jumper is pulled over his head, but his crying stops as soon as she picks him up to settle down to feed him. He starts to feed at once but after a few strong sucks he stops abruptly and stares into space. His mother gently turns his face back to the breast, and then he resumes his feed in a half-hearted manner. After a moment or two he stops again and breaks into violent, heartbroken sobs for no apparent reason. His mother is puzzled and very distressed by this, saying this is quite unusual. She responds to his heartfelt sadness by soothing, concerned little noises and, after a while, when his sobs have subsided, comments, “Well, let’s try the other one”, and offers him the other breast. He accepts this half-heartedly and gradually settles into a steady sucking rhythm, finishing his feed at this breast rather half-heartedly.

He sits on his mother’s knee afterwards to have his cereal, which he takes in an abstracted, faraway fashion. His mother says he usually likes it and opens his mouth eagerly, but today his mouth is rather slack and half of it dribbles down his front. He sits quietly, with a thoughtful air in his baby chair, afterwards watching his mother clear the dishes and tidy the room. She comments that he’s been disturbed by all the extra comings and goings.

I think from this description one can see him pass from being interested and able to take the strangers in his stride to a state in which he becomes a little worried and sucks his thumb for reassurance. He watches his mother, tries to cut out the presence of the strangers by not seeing them. When his mother picks him up, he is delighted, enjoys the sociability with her, but left alone again for a moment with strangers, he becomes worried again, cuts them out, tries to bring his mother closer by sucking his thumb and the back of his hand – thereby creating for himself the feel of the nipple and the surface of the breast.

This time when his mother returns he is easier to upset, by the pulling of the clothes over the head, as babies often are. Then, to her surprise, the breastfeed that usually comforts, upsets him. It’s as if now he is really close, he can let himself feel what is the matter, and let himself go. His mother feels his grief, gives him a little
time to come to terms with it, offers him another try with another breast, another part of herself.

He accepts it thoughtfully, as if a little disillusioned, and after the feed there is none of the delightful dialogue he had with her earlier and that she would often have with him during or after the breast feed. Feelings half-friendly, half-hostile, tinged with sadness, are complicating his relationship of closeness to her and he is quite evidently pondering and experiencing deeply.

Some mothers will no doubt recognise this kind of observation from experiences with their own babies in similar situations and at a parallel stage of development. It is a time when the baby is adjusting to a world that contains more people, to his own feelings about these rivals for his mother’s attention, and to new thoughts about a mother who is less exclusively his property than he had supposed.
For babies who are being breast-fed, the weaning period usually comes sometime in the second half of the first year, as the mother’s milk grows a little less, and as the baby, who has become used to eating and enjoying a variety of other foods, is ready to give up a major dependence on the food that he gets from his mother.

The child who has not been breast-fed goes through something similar in connection with the bottle, although there may sometimes be a tendency to cling longer to the bottle, which is not attached to the mother and is more within his control. But weaning is a psychological as well as a physical process.

For the mother who has been breastfeeding her baby, weaning is a change that affects her intimately. Breastfeeding has usually been an enjoyable experience for her, giving her the opportunity to satisfy and promote the growth of her baby in a uniquely intimate way and to identify with the baby’s satisfaction. Weaning, therefore, is very much a giving-up process, a facing of separation for her too however much she may consciously wish to initiate it. It involves a little mourning, for her as
well as for the baby, but one that is easier if the experience has been satisfying and has not excluded other relationships.

Weaning for the baby, is the prototype of many situations that the child or adult encounters in later life which involve separation, giving up, changing and developing or branching out in new directions. It isn’t, of course, the very first example – birth itself is the first separation, the first giving up of the comfort and security of the womb for an unknown world in the service of unknown potentials of growth. Weaning involves a giving up, but in the service of going forward, an essential for consolidating and developing resources that have already been acquired.

Taking it slowly

As weaning, like all other major progressions and changes in a child’s life (for example, like going to school) is attended by anxiety and fear of loss: it is important to do it gradually if possible, to give the child a chance to think about it, to get used to each step and to have time to experience the feelings that he does have about it. If children are going to grow up confident of themselves and their capacity, they can’t be rushed. They need time to get to know themselves, to understand how they react, to digest the experience they are having.

If an experience is too sudden, too overwhelming, they cannot cope and will tend to react by cutting it off; at the same time cutting off the capacity to see and to feel it. We all tend to do this temporarily with events that cause overmuch anxiety. If children have to do this too much, it can greatly impoverish the potential richness and sensitivity of their personality and may contribute to learning difficulties which become evident later on in their school career.

Every stage in the development of our infants tends, if we are living in close harmony with them, to reactivate in us the “memories in feeling” (as Melanie Klein termed them) to our own infancy. We tend to react in the way that we reacted at that age. We expect our child to react just as we did, or we may sometimes go to the opposite extreme and demand a totally different response.

It is important to allow the child to express feelings of anger and upset at changes and separations. It helps to let him know that you register what he feels, and sympathise, but are not necessarily blackmailed by his use of your sympathy to manipulate you. It is a delicate matter to do this without pushing him too far – one which every mother and every father has to find in their own way with each child.

It might be worth talking about some general principles. For instance, one would
not want to make too many changes or innovations all at once. There may often be times when one has to give the child the opportunity of refusing innovations a number of times before he feels familiar enough with an idea and therefore safe enough to accept it. This, of course, applies to new foods; to the introduction to solid foods and later on to the cutting down of breast-feed or bottle. The latter one would try ideally to bring about very gradually. For instance, you cut out one feed at a certain time of day. If the baby gets very upset – which may not show just at the time, but a little later on – you may find it better for a while to give him a token breast-feed at that time, and maybe extra cuddling to give him a chance to realise that the loss of the breast is not the end of his world.

The giving up of the breast or of the bottle is compensated for by the increasing enjoyment of a variety of new foods. It is also a compensation for the baby to realise more fully that the breast and its food is not all that there is to his mother. He learns that he can go on having an equally intimate but more varied and expanding relationship with her, although no longer so totally dependent.

His fear is, of course, that the loss of the breast does mean the loss of the mother, and so she does need to be prepared possibly for extra whining and clinging. Sometimes this is difficult to take; sometimes a mother mistakenly thinks, “Oh well, better get the agony over quickly so that he has less time to think about it”. Maybe she even goes off for a few days’ holiday with her husband to recover her own strength when the breast-feeding is over, leaving the baby perhaps with her mother or a help, if she has one.

This could be unwise so soon after weaning. She is almost certainly reacting by running away from her own infantile weaning depression and sense of loss. This, for the time being, obscures her perception of the baby’s needs, and in so doing, may tend to perpetuate in him a similar over-abrupt denial, a pattern of dealing with loss which prevents learning and growing through it.

Or perhaps she feels that if she does not clamp down firmly, he’ll get the better of her and she’ll never get him to stop, but will be tied to him for life, as it were. Then she really is seeing in him something perhaps dimly apprehended, but not truly recognised in herself, which she is having to cut off lest it get the upper hand.

Mrs L – reluctance to wean

I’ll give an instance of a mother who found it difficult to give up breast-feeding and did prolong it unduly, in a way that was not really to the benefit of her child.
Mrs L is a young woman, not yet thirty. She came from a rather chaotic, loveless home and married before she was nineteen a young man a few years older than herself who was still very much at the beginning of his professional training. She then had two babies, a boy and a girl, one after the other before she and her husband had any kind of settled home and before they as a couple had had much chance to get to know each other. However, in the years following the birth of their first children the couple lived through many emotional upheavals and came to a much better understanding of themselves and decided to have another child. The first two had hardly been thought about in advance and were rather the by-product of sexual intercourse than of any great desire to have a baby.

This time Mrs L looked forward eagerly to the arrival of the baby. The two elder children were now eight and nine years old and she felt a great deal freer, being established in a more ordered way of life. When her little boy, Tommy, was born, she breast-fed him as she had not done with the other children and, while the other two had been left a great deal alone in their pram and to their own devices in infancy, Tommy accompanied her everywhere and was greatly indulged. It was as if she wanted to compensate, through him, for her previous rather harsh, neglectful treatment of her other children in infancy and for her own neglected childhood.

This was especially noticeable when it came to the question of weaning Tommy from the breast. He had always been demand-fed and had never settled down to a regular pattern of feeding. If ever he were upset, his mother would give him “a little snack”, as she called it, much as another might hand out sweets, and he was continuing to demand his “little snack” well into the middle of his second year, long after his mother had any milk worth mentioning in her breasts. Her husband and even the elder children remonstrated with her from time to time. The children pointed out how so-and-so’s little brother or sister had stopped feeding from their mummy long ago. They were obviously having their infantile jealousies stimulated, but did also seem to perceive that it wasn’t in the best interests of the baby’s attempts to grow up to still be attached to feeding from the breast.

The difficulty in weaning Tommy seemed to be connected with Mrs L’s own difficulty in separating herself from him, as if she saw in him, not only some deprived infantile part of herself, but also an unforgiving infant who would harbour a permanent grudge were she to say no, to deprive him in any way. As her elder son remarked to her one day, “I think you’re afraid of Tommy,
mummy”. In his second year, Tommy became more and more demanding. The mother’s life became increasingly constricted, because if she took him out to tea with her to friends he was quite likely to throw a temper tantrum and demand his “milkie”. As he grew older, she grew somehow more guilty about continuing to breast-feed him, as if she were aware unconsciously that it was increasing his omnipotent demands and his guilty feelings about getting away with them. She was very touchy about friends’ criticism, or what she felt was implied criticism.

Her husband, who was bothered about the situation but uncertain himself what was the right thing to do, eventually persuaded her to talk to their doctor. The doctor was a sympathetic and wise person, fortunately. He did not attack her with outright criticism, which could have provoked defiance, but saw her difficulty in being firm with Tommy, her fear that he would turn against her if she deprived him of the breast. He acknowledged her real concern for the baby – little toddler, of course, as he was by this time – and pointed out what she already know – that you can’t bring up children without some frustration. He encouraged her to wean herself from the child. This she managed to do in a few weeks after her talk with the doctor, at the expense of one or two temper tantrums from Tommy over the immediate deprivations. She gained a much calmer relationship with him in the ensuing weeks, finding that he was less clinging and more sociable with other little children of his age when she took him out to visit friends.

It is perhaps not so common in our society for mothers to have such difficulty in actually weaning a child from the breast, but the difficulty of helping to wean the baby, in general ways, from too great a dependence upon us is one which, as mothers, we nearly all feel at some time or another.

This is most often related to our own unassimilated and unrealised baby demands. These may stem from real deprivation of baby needs in our own past, as was the case to some extent with Mrs L.

Mrs L, in going on breast-feeding her baby from time to time until he was nearly two years old, may have been satisfying the peremptory demands of that omnipotent, infantile part of him that did not want to change, that wanted to perpetuate the belief that he could be taken care of forever by a mother at his beck and call.

She was, in fact, hindering the development of that more realistic part of himself that really needed support in making the right choice. He needed to give up the use of the breast as a kind of dummy, gather his strength together and turn outwards to find other interests in contacts, as for instance with other children.
In hanging on to his mother unduly, beyond the time when he really needs her, the infant feels somewhere that he is harming her, that she must be resenting it. This, together with his lack of patience in trying out what resources he has within him, tends then to make him scared that she'll leave him through resentment or exhaustion. Motivated by that fear he clings still more tightly. This can become a vicious circle which the mother needs a little help to break, as in the case of Mrs L.
Chapter 5: The toddler stage

Teaching obedience

Before your baby is a toddler, there will already have been many a time when he has said “no” to you in actions, if not in words. The first word that some babies utter is “no”. They do need to be able to say it and to have it respected sometimes. It is first of all an expression of their need to protect themselves from what they feel at that moment to be an alien force, a hostile incursion.

You may feel otherwise; that it’s all in the best interest of your baby for instance, that he should eat up his spinach, or what have you, without any further fuss. If you don’t take his “no” into account sometimes, you’re likely to force him to be either an over-conformer (who may break out violently some day when he has gathered up the strength) or unduly obstinate and not to be relied upon when it is really important that he should do as he is told.

In order to obey us willingly, a child must learn to trust us. He must come to learn gradually that although he may not understand sometimes why he is told to do this, or forbidden to do that, there is likely to be some rationale behind our
commands. Later on, he may want to argue about the reason and sometimes he may even be right. Should we not be hoping to bring our infant up to be an adolescent who thinks and questions and then becomes an adult with a mind of his own rather than a replica of ourselves, however fine we may feel ourselves to be?

There are so many things that we have to tell little children to do or not to do, for their safety or for their necessary instruction... “Come to dinner now... pack up your toys now, and come to bed... give Johnny back his ball... take my hand now while we cross the road”... that we need to be careful that we aren’t adding to them unnecessarily, that we don’t just become a long playing record of ourselves and one therefore that tends not to be heeded.

Prohibitions

When we are prohibiting a child or calling him naughty, it is sometimes useful to stop and think whether he is really doing something naughty or harmful either to himself or to anyone else.

Does it really make sense to stop a child from thumb-sucking or playing with his genitals? Neither of these activities is in itself naughty or harmful, but, when it becomes too persistent, may be a sign of anxiety, and evocative of anxiety in ourselves. So what we’re doing, if we try to stop him, is trying to stop him from worrying us. We may not actually say to him, “Don’t do that because it worries Mummy” or “If you do that, you’ll make Mummy angry” but the meaning can get over as an insidious threat or blackmail.

It’s aiming for a standard of unattainable perfection to imagine that we can manage never to behave in this way. Parents, by virtue of living so very close to young children, are bound to have their own childhood and unresolved childhood emotions strongly reactivated. It’s easier for someone who is outside the circle to see the irrationality of parents’ responses at times. But if we’re not too hard on ourselves as parents, recognising our unfairness, hastiness and irrationality, sometimes even after the event, we may learn to do a little better next time. Sharing inadequacies with your marital partner can be quite a solace and support in this way.

It is often when we are plagued too strongly by our own demands for an unattainable perfection that we tend to pass these on to our children. We expect them to behave in the way that we feel we ought to, but cannot.
Allowing him to do things for himself

We may need a little extra patience to bear with the infant’s desires and struggles to do things for himself at this stage, but it’s most important that he should be given the chance to try. If we can manage to do so, it’s important not to get involved in a clash of wills.

This can tend to happen over his food for instance, if he’s insisting upon feeding himself and then instead of finding the way to his mouth he plays with the food and plasters it everywhere. He needs a little time to do this before we take it away and clean him up. An irritated response to this kind of messing has a kind of rationale, as food is intimately associated with mother, and rejecting or messing about with food is experienced as a kind of attack and a rejection of oneself. But it is a means of expressing ambivalent feelings which he needs a chance to express before he can control them better. Forcing him to stop playing and to eat up at once causes resentment or obstinacy and doesn’t help him to come to terms with his feelings.

Getting around by crawling and then by walking are landmarks in his history of growing independence. He can follow to see where we go, he can satisfy curiosity by going to touch the object he might have had to content himself with merely looking at before. And, obviously, arranging our home to protect him from the dangers of his mobile curiosity is something that we should try to do in order to avoid frustrating his independent explorations by having to cut them short too often.

Toilet training

Good behaviour in the toddler stages if often equated, either consciously or unconsciously, with being clean, knowing how to hold in your messes and then put them in the right place.

Toilet training is something which nowadays most of us would agree is best left until your infant is in the toddler stage, if you can manage to contain your impatience till then. It is very hard for some mothers to do this – the reason often given, if the baby is potted early on in his first months, is the desire to save nappies and cut down on work. But even if you do manage to catch your baby’s stool at the right time for a month or two, you haven’t “trained” him in any way; you’ve just managed to anticipate him when he is for the time being operating in a particular kind of rhythm which is certain to change sooner or later as his feeding habits alter.
Anxiety about the baby’s dirty nappies, about his stools, about what comes out of him after his feeds is most often intimately connected with unconscious anxieties about what we are putting into him. If, at depth, we are too worried about that, then we tend to want to do away with the outcome, the “guilty evidence”, very quickly. As a mother becomes a little more certain of what she is putting into her baby, the worry about the baby’s messes tends to decrease, and she can treat them in a more matter-of-fact way.

The mother of Robert was potting him on her lap at the age of three weeks while she was feeding him, but two or three months later she gave up bothering about it and didn’t re-introduce the pot until he was nearly fifteen months old. By the time he was eighteen months old, he was sometimes dry and clean during the day and six months or so later he was mostly dry by night and day.

But making a baby clean and dry is not something you can hurry up as a rule. If you do manage to enforce it before your baby is really ready, before, that is, he is, willing to co-operate and feels in command of the process, the expense in worry to him is just not worth it.

He won’t usually be ready to take really active steps to co-operate until at least the middle of his second year, and some babies take a while, with a great deal of to-ing and fro-ing, and lapses, accidental or on purpose. Some go through stages of feeling that they just don’t want to conform and put their waste products in the pot. It’s their secret way of defying mother’s injunctions. They can feel, as it were, “This belongs to me and I’ll do what I like with it. I’ll hang on to it as long as I want to”.

If you start forcing them, it can become a battle of wills, such as you can easily get into with a child who is refusing his food or insisting upon feeding himself all in his own good time. He needs a chance to feel that he can control what comes out of him, to withhold it if he wants to, and now and then make a big mess on purpose, without disaster happening. But it is true and good for him to know that you are pleased when he manages to hold his urine and faeces till he can put them in the right place.

*Feelings about the products of his body*

For the infant, his bodily products are invested with all kinds of omnipotent powers, both terrible and highly idealised. They are one of the main physical means whereby he tries to rid his body and his psyche of painful accretions of stimuli. A real physical
pain in his tummy is accompanied by a nasty feeling. He can try, and sometimes succeeds in, getting rid of both by expelling wind, flatus, stool and urine. The relief, the good feeling, that is produced in this way (underlined by mother's empathy and approval, “Clever boy!”) contributes to the feeling of omnipotence he has, which is one of the defences against a feeling of helplessness in the world.

In the beginning he is helpless, but he is not aware of his dependence. His first “thinking” or interpretation of experience is magical. He feels he makes a comforting mother presence come by wishing it, and equally makes pains and bad feeling go by expelling them from his bottom and his mouth.

It is only very gradually that reality forces him to perceive that he is not in control of his world, that he is dependent on a mother who has a quite separate existence and a mind of her own. It is less frightening to recognise this dependence when the mother upon whom he depends is reliable, understanding and loving, when, as an infant and a small child, he can feel secure in trusting her.

But each realization of dependence is a great wound to omnipotence and self-importance. We have that experience many a time in our adult life, but it begins already in infancy. A great part of the mother’s and the father’s job in helping the infant to grow is to protect him from too painful a realization of that dependence. Their goodwill and reliability protect and provide the right conditions for him to learn, instead of relying on fantasies, of dreaming up what he wants. Trust in them help him gradually to gain more mastery of himself and his share of the world; in co-operation with them rather than through submission to enforcement.

He needs time at every stage to manage his feelings about his bodily processes. In due course he will want to gain control over his sphincters, and it will contribute to his enjoyment of his body and its growing skills to be able to do so, but it is something he should feel that he achieves himself, with your co-operation in producing the pot and so forth. Otherwise he will feel that you have taken away from him the liberty of messing and urinating when and where he decides without giving him the responsibility for controlling his messes himself.

There are children of course who do continue wetting and soiling well beyond their fourth and fifth years, and if this does continue, you need to have some help in trying to find out what is the matter. Unless there is some specific physical cause, which is rare, there is something which needs sorting out in the child’s relationship with you and with his world. This may be best achieved by his having psychotherapy, or it may be possible for you to handle it satisfactorily after you have been helped to see the situation more clearly yourself.
Breakdowns in cleanliness do occur, of course, with many children in times of upset and crisis — the birth of a new baby is a time when this happens not infrequently. They are a sign that the child is overcome with more anxiety or hostility that he is able to contain or express in a more appropriate form for the time being. You will find it annoying to have two sets of nappies to wash again just at the time when you could do with less work. It’s much less trouble in the end, however, to take it easy and encourage the child’s more grown-up self, rather than come down upon him with strictures which may, or may not, force him into conformity again, but certainly underline his grudge against being deprived of baby privileges, instead of being asked for the co-operation which it is the privilege of his more grown-up status to give.

But this last statement does need qualifying. It certainly is no help to your child if he feels that you are not interested in whether he learns to be continent or not. In this, as in other things, he needs a little firmness and encouragement at the right time.

Sleeping troubles

If we consider the times when we have trouble in sleeping ourselves, we may notice that it’s when we’ve got something on our mind, some barely noticed worry or unsolved problem that has cropped up during the day. Some of these unassimilated experiences are the material from which bad dreams and nightmares are made.

Many of us have our bedtime rituals to settle us into a comfortable frame of mind, to banish the unsolved worries of the day, though we may be hardly aware of them.

If we’re not too rushed, we probably for the most part fall instinctively into the habit of establishing just such peacemaking, anxiety-soothing rituals for our infants, so that when they close their eyes they do so upon memories of comfort and protection.

For the little baby, the petting and carrying after his feed and before he is put down helps him to assimilate and be at ease with that experience. When he gets to the toddler stage, he may have his story to listen to. Little children love to have their mother make up some little tale about them which recapitulates the events of the day and gives them something to look forward to tomorrow.

Many young children have spells of being afraid of sleep and of nightmares. Hamlet expresses this *pavor nocturnus* in the adult who is disturbed in mind, haunted
by a guilty conscience in his speech:

“All That’s, perchance to dream - aye there’s the rub...”

One could, indeed, look at most bad dreams as the product of a guilty conscience of a very unrealistic, punitive and retributory kind.

The fear of sleep, of the night, of the dark, is a form of separation anxiety. The child is afraid of being separated from the familiar everyday world that he knows, from his parents and more especially from the mother with whom he feels safe. He is afraid of being caught in an unfamiliar, uncharted, strange dark world, peopled by objects apprehended but glimpsed in fearful imagination – objects that are out to “get him”.

Sometimes the toddler can tell you what he’s dreaming about. Sometimes he doesn’t remember or doesn’t know how to formulate it as clearly as an older child can.

An example of an older child’s bad dream follows.

*Marion’s nightmares*

Marion, a five year old, an opinionated, forward little girl who was being taught to read at school and was very ambitious to be able to read by herself, was demanding home help from her mother. At school she was being taught by the phonetic method. When rehearsing her primer with her mother, they came to the word “cargo”. She kept insisting, despite all her mother’s patient explanations, that the word was pronounced “K-cargo”.

She went to bed in high and obstinate dudgeon, then woke in the night screaming. To her father, who went in to comfort her, she said that she dreamed that her mummy had gone away and a great big animal with horns like a reindeer had come to the window. It said in a deep voice, “I’m a K-cargo and I’ve come to get you”.

So in her dream the familiar mummy had gone away and had been replaced by a nightmarish presence, the product of her hostile feelings to the mother from whom she was resenting receiving instruction. The child’s bad dreams are peopled by monstrous retributory presences that embody unworked-through hostilities, distorted versions of vengeful parents. These presences have their artistic expression in myth and in fairytale, for example, Saturn who eats his children; the ogre in Jack the Giant-Killer, the witch in Hansel and Gretel.
Sometimes, if a child tells you the content of his dream, it doesn’t seem so very frightening. When she was four years old, Marion came into her parents’ room one night saying she was frightened, she’d had a nasty dream: when she was in the kitchen a little bird came in and looked at her and she was scared it wouldn’t let her get out; she started to tell it that she had been a very good girl that day and had been helping her mummy peel the potatoes, but she didn’t think the little bird was listening to her, so she screamed and screamed till she woke up.

That does not sound a very frightening sort of dream, and one would have to know more about its context in her life to have some idea why this little bird was such a terrifying creature to her, why in her dreams she chooses a little bird to symbolise what she is afraid of. It seems to be some kind of terrifying conscience figure that is threatening to shut her in, and which she attempts to placate by retailing her helpfulness to mother.

Marion’s mother had at that time a habit of saying to her daughter, when tracking down some misdemeanour she had committed, some complaint, for instance, from the daily woman about her activities during the mother’s absence ... “A little bird told me you did so and so”. That observation begins to tell us something about the origin of the little bird. But to understand more precisely, one would have to know more about the particular unconscious associations and connections it had for Marion at that time. These are not likely to be fully available to ordinary enquiry and scrutiny. But one doesn’t need to analyse or fully understand the details of one’s children’s dreams to be in touch when they are worried and in need of a little extra comfort and reassurance.

_Prolonged sleeping troubles_

Both sleeping and eating troubles are very common in little children, and sometimes go together. When they are prolonged, you should obviously consult your doctor in case of doubt as to whether there is any physical cause.

It may, however, be useful to take a little time to consider whether you are perpetuating the troubles by getting too harassed and worked up about them, and whether you can take steps to ease the situation for you and your child. There is nothing more wearing than a long period of interrupted sleep, and if it goes on long enough, you can begin to feel that a pattern is set that can never change.

An example follows of just such a state of affairs between a mother and her little
boy, which altered surprisingly when the family doctor sent both the parents to consult a psychotherapist for children.

Jimmy – a poor sleeper and over-eater

Jimmy was 22 months old when his mother felt that she was really at the end of her tether. Unlike her first child, a girl, he had always been restless, even before his birth. As a little baby he ate voraciously but cried after his feeds. He never slept for more than an hour or two at a time during the day or at night. Paediatricians whom she consulted in the early weeks told her that he was the worst case of three months’ colic they had met. Unfortunately, troubles didn’t clear up after the first three months were over.

He was a healthy baby, continued to eat well and to be hyperactive. He learned to crawl and to walk early on. This made him more of a problem than ever, because he was always wanting to get out and his mother couldn’t trust him out of her sight. She could not, as with her first child, get help from her own mother who no longer felt nimble enough to run after him. Several times she tried turning a deaf ear to his cries in the night but he would bang his head against his cot till she worried that he was doing himself an injury, and had to get up to give him a bottle to pacify him. Since the day he was born she had not had an evening out or a night of unbroken sleep. It was clear that she resented this greatly, but felt extremely guilty about her resentment.

As she told her story to the psychotherapist, Jimmy was running around the room in a hyperactive way, paying no attention to what was going on, talking to nobody. His mother looked at him sadly and said he was always in too much of a hurry to be interested in people, or even to mind if he tripped up and hurt himself, which he was apt to do quite frequently. She mourned the fact that he wasn’t a cuddly child, and never had been since his birth. She also mentioned that she thought a good deal of the trouble with him by this time was that he couldn’t talk and got frustrated because he couldn’t express himself. She found it terribly difficult to “get through to him”.

Mr J listened to his wife’s story, her recapitulation of different stages in Jimmy’s short history. He helped out her recollection and was plainly in sympathy with her. It seemed to dawn upon him afresh what a difficult time she had been through, and how worn out she was. He spoke apologetically about being unable to relieve her
with Jimmy more than he had done, but he was doing an evening job, as well as his regular one during the day, in order to save up enough money for a deposit to buy a house with a garden which could give the family greater freedom. The only time he felt that his wife had a real break was when they all went to the cricket field together at weekends, when she could chat to the other wives, and where there were plenty of people to bring Jimmy back if he wandered away too far.

They went away from their fairly leisurely interview with the child psychotherapist without any easy solutions, but encouraged to think it could prove helpful to study Jimmy a little and see whether there was anything special that comforted him, that could help settle him before he was put down to sleep. They were urged to think of any practical measures they could take to give Mrs J more breaks, like the visits to the cricket field.

When they came back three weeks later to report how matters were going, they presented a very different picture. Mrs J said she was enormously relieved and encouraged, and Jimmy himself looked a totally different child; much calmer, more friendly, and he was actually talking.

The parents had apparently talked over things together at length after their visit to the clinic, tried to consider carefully Jimmy’s likes and dislikes. They remembered how when a baby cousin had visited them recently, Jimmy had been fascinated with her cradle. Then his father’s intuition led to the notion of making a swing for Jimmy in the kitchen. His mother put him in it after every meal and swung him gently to and fro. He then learned very quickly to swing himself and would stay quietly occupying himself this way after every meal for some three quarters of an hour.

According to his mother, this seemed to soothe him greatly. It gave her a little break to sit down and rest during the day. Then his little swing in the evening seemed to make him feel more ready for bed. He would let her lie down beside him and then drop off to sleep after fifteen minutes or so. He still tended to waken during the night, but returned to sleep more easily. On two occasions he had actually slept through the night: “Not perfect yet, by any means”, said the mother with a smile, “but somehow you can put up with it when you realise it isn’t going to be forever. The difference is that I can get through to him now”.

Given hope and encouragement, there may often be some slight adjustment we can make to ease matters, once we are able to step away from the immediate harassment of the situation.

In this case it seemed as if the parents felt that they had “got through” with their distress to the child psychotherapist and could think afresh.
It is worth noting that the fresh attention given to Jimmy seemed to have stimulated him, to talk and to express himself better. This exemplifies many observations that suggest that a child finds it worth his while to learn to talk to express his wishes and his thoughts when he has the hope of having them understood.
Chapter 6: Encouraging growth

Letting the child become himself

Already in the first year of our child’s life, we begin to ask the question which we shall face in different circumstances over and over again throughout his childhood and adolescent days: to what extent can we ask and expect our child to cope with frustration and anxiety himself, and when do we need to step in, to cradle him and take over responsibility?

We need to give the growing infant a chance to test his resources and his capacities. Trying these out on his own, within a secure framework with mother, father, or a caring person to help when really necessary, gives him a chance to feel that he is learning, getting bigger and stronger.

We do not always have the time to let him try his experiments, and often we do not have the patience to let him make mistakes when it would be much quicker for us to do things for him. It may be quicker, for instance, to shovel food into the mouth of your one-year-old than to let him feed himself; to undo your three-year-old’s tight buttons when he wants to struggle with them himself. No doubt there are times when it’s so urgent to get a move on that you have to do these things for him, even when he’s wanting to try.
Nevertheless, one does need to avoid hurrying children along more than is necessary. Each child has a pace beyond which you can't hurry him without causing undue anxiety. And what is undue anxiety? I'd suggest when it is so strong that he seeks to avoid it by turning away from tackling the obstacles and frustrations which are causing it. It is anxiety that makes him limit his vision and split off from his mental experience, impulses and areas of himself that cause him pain.

Under too much pressure some children tend to resort to these methods that restrict and break up contact with people, with objects, with life in general; methods that fail to integrate or that actively disintegrate his capacity to perceive and to feel. These methods can, if employed excessively, result in a child who appears to be autistic, to be defective, or dull and apathetic, or lost in daydreams that never lead anywhere. We all use such methods to some degree or other, if only momentarily, when we wish to escape from the life we find too much to cope with. They become serious only when they are impairing development.

Other children under pressure tend to press themselves beyond their real learned ability into roles that are too grown up for them. Such are sometimes the too good little girls in whose mouths butter would not melt, sometimes the little paragons of forwardness and learning who delight their parents by their prodigious performances. These children may be projecting themselves into grown-up parental role into which their acute observation enables them to fit. Thus they attempt to by-pass some of the more painful stages of learning to be themselves, at the limited stage of skills and experience of life which their actual age has allowed them to learn.

Sometimes they are driven to become prematurely grown-up in this way through their own excessive ambition and competitiveness. They envy the greater enjoyment and privileges which they believe the grown-ups or older children have. Thus they miss out on the enjoyment of being a child. But we can pressure them into this situation by not allowing them the time to experience and work through the stage of development which is actually theirs at the time.

A child begins to sense very early on when we are comparing his skills with, say, those of Mrs Robinson's Annie, next door. He feels the expression of triumph from his mother or father when he can be seen to go one better.

He also feels it when mother or father is anxious and uncertain about assuming responsibility for him and wants him to grow up quickly and take care of himself. If he can, he will often try to oblige, but it may be at some expense to the fundamental security of his development; a plant that is forced to grow too rapidly tends to be spindly and feeble.
One of the events that challenges a small child to make an effort to grow up more rapidly, if he can manage it, is the expectation and arrival of a new baby (see Chapter 7).

**Setting limits**

It is important to adjust our standards and expectations to our perception of the stage at which any particular child is, at any given time, and to refrain from putting pressure on him to do more than he is able to manage without getting too worried.

We tend to be over-severe when we are reminded in our children of aspects of ourselves we cannot tolerate, which we have not considered enough and have not learned to modify and integrate within our own personalities. Our tendency then with our children is to stamp on these aspects, either with overt severity or more implicitly. We may assume, for example, a “we don’t do that kind of thing” attitude, which can be even more difficult for a child to withstand.

The child cannot learn to control his undesirable, aggressive emotions unless he has had a chance to experience them, to know them at first hand. This is the only way he can gauge their strength, the only way he can find resources within himself to harness them and, if possible, utilise them to good purpose.

The too good little boy, whose mummy is always cleaning him up and expecting him to be obedient and well-behaved, can be at quite a disadvantage when he goes to school - too scared of little bullies to stand up to them, or too scared of his own unrealised or unpractised aggressive impulses to use them appropriately. Indeed, he can become one of those professional victims who seem to lay themselves open to being bullied. This can be a way of satisfying vicariously in the bully the realised, uncontained sadistic part of themselves.

It is important at every stage in the life of a young child to value what little he can do towards trying to make up for damage done. A child can sometimes just go on smashing up things or smashing up his relationships, as it were, from sheer despair about being able to do anything good. If you have no hope of improving, then better not want to do so, throw away your better impulses - this is the rationale he employs.

There are occasions, however, when a child’s unchecked impulses get the better of him and lead him to do things that end up with his feeling frightened or overwhelmingly guilty. On such occasions it is important that there be a parent or an adult person around who firmly takes over control, puts a stop to it, or if things have gone too far on one particular occasion, takes steps to prevent this arising next time. The
The onus is on us, as adults, to stop the child if we see that it is too much for him to control himself.

**Strictness and spoiling**

Parents can never behave in exactly the same way as each other towards each child. Furthermore, we all have our inconsistencies, because we aren’t machines. When the differences are not serious, they are part of the adventure of relationships.

At one end of the scale there are the parents who, according to the caricatures of headmasters, believe in bringing the child up in the way that he should go. They would teach him to be tough, polite and self-controlled almost before he can walk. At the other end there are the parents whose life revolves around the child, who believe that total indulgence - or satisfaction, as they would call it, and the opportunity to express freely in all directions, will produce the perfect human being.

The most harrowing combination for a child is probably to have a parent at each end of the scale, because he tends to become thoroughly confused, doesn’t know what he is expected to do. On the other hand he may then learn to turn the situation to his advantage in a delinquent kind of way and play his parents off against one another.

It can be fun for a child to try to see whether he can get away with a little more than he did yesterday - maybe if he hides himself behind a tree in the garden, mummy won’t notice that it’s time he went to bed for a while; maybe if he runs and asks daddy for a sweet as soon as he comes in the door, daddy will oblige before he has time to find out that mummy said, “No more today he’s had quite enough already”. These tricks are infant politics, studies in how to manage people, how to steal a march on them. It’s also fun for you as a parent sometimes to be outwitted by the clever little politician.

But it is terribly important to get clear when these things are just a game, and when they do become really serious. You have to ask yourself whether you’re not laying yourself open to being manipulated in a way that is harmful to the child’s character and security.

This is more likely to happen when the differences between parents are deep and cannot be crossed by discussion. It is, of course, possible sometimes that parents who don’t get on together and are disillusioned in their marriage, manage nevertheless to have enough care and perception of the children’s needs to reach some kind of agreement as to how to bring them up.
Margaretta – spoiled by too much attention

Margaretta was the very lovely three year old only child of professional parents, who started to have their family rather later in life than most, after they were well established in their respective careers and had no money worries. Her birth was awaited eagerly and her mother gave up work in order to “put everything into” Margaretta, as she expressed it.

It was an easy birth and she was a fine baby. Her mother was not encouraged to feed her, but she took well to a bottle from the start and thrived apace. From the very beginning, so her parents said, she was restless and over-active, slept poorly by night and very little during the day. Her mother had a very good help and so, except during the night when she was often helped by her husband, Margaretta’s demands didn’t get her down too much. She progressed from being a very forward, observant baby and became an exceptionally charming, outgoing and responsive toddler, who was the focus of attention in the household, and also in the somewhat childless circles in which her parents moved.

But her sleeping did not improve and her demands for attention increased and became exhausting, even in a household where a great deal of help was available. When she was three years old, she was fighting sleep more and more, and would often have nightmares from which it was very difficult to waken her. She would dream about animals eating her up, and about losing her mummy. Sometimes, when she wakened after one of these dreams, she did not seem able to recognise her mother or father for five or ten minutes.

Eventually their family doctor suggested that the parents should consult a child psychiatrist about her.

Margaretta’s two parents presented themselves as rather over-anxious, well-motivated and loving people, constantly reiterating how happy their little daughter was by day, how busy playing and helping her mother, doing in fact everything that her mother was doing about the house. Her mother made a special point of how she had plenty of time, having given up her job, that she and her husband put Margaretta absolutely first, that they had practically never had an evening out together since her birth. And this, she insisted, was done quite willingly. She had so much looked forward to having a child, and Margaretta was such a lovely baby and so delightful in every way that she simply could not understand why there was this terrible problem about sleeping.

Her parents began to have regular interviews at the clinic to help them to take a fresh look at their family situation. It was then arranged that Margaretta should
have treatment sessions with a child psychotherapist, during which she was allowed
to play and express herself freely. The aim was to try to understand and to help her
to understand what she was afraid of.

During her treatment she conveyed her belief that in the daytime she was a
beautiful dolly girl, a real little princess, but that in the night time she felt herself
to be a little pig, lonely and deserted. And the more she traded upon being the
little princess who attracted more than her due share of attention and admiration
by day, the more she was confirmed in being the messy, greedy little pig who feared
desertion and retribution in the night. It was a vicious spiral.

Gradually she was helped to confront and to control this greedy part of herself
that messed up things for her parents and made her so dependent on a reassurance
in which she could not believe. Her parents became more capable of helping her to
do this as they came to have a better grasp of the motives that were leading them to
idealise and indulge her in ways that fed her vanity and self-importance, but which
hindered her real drive to grow up, learning to take her place and sharing with
others.

**Punishment**

I define punishment as exacting payment in terms of pain, or frustration, or incon-
venience for offences committed, and discipline as measures taken to prevent them
from occurring again.

I would like to say that punishment, as opposed to discipline, has no necessary
place in our children’s upbringing, while recognising fully that punishment of some
kind or another is likely to be meted out by every parent to every child, at some time
or other. It may not be given in cold blood and rationalised as being for the child’s
own good. It may be quite inadvertent.

There can be few mothers who have not given the odd slap when driven by
exasperation for the nth time, or when hastily rescuing the cat or the youngest
toddler from the bullying of an elder child. The occasional slap is probably taken
correctly by the child as signifying that he really has gone too far this time, and
that whether he’s hurt on the skin or in his feelings, he’d better lay off for the time
being, and maybe stop and think why he provoked this unusual behaviour. If he’s
accustomed to getting slaps for all kinds of things, he’s probably too bewildered and
used to expecting to be in trouble sooner or later to have the heart to wonder and
try to puzzle out the reason why.
A child can come to understand the occasional hit back when he has gone just too far; he can come to understand and have some toleration for the occasions when he has not really been the guilty party but gets the blame instead of somebody else who has paved the way by too much provocation. It can even be salutary for him to realise that our patience is not inexhaustible: that we too, as parents, have rights. Salutary, that is, provided these spells of hitting back, physically and otherwise, occur as exceptions within the context of a relationship on our part that is predominantly loving, protective and secure.

Fears and conscience

The most primitive and terrifying form of conscience which the young child experiences is the kind represented by the powerful figures that chase him in his nightmares, in which a rettributory figure is going to do to him what he, in his most furious and vicious moments, fantasises himself doing to the object of his greatest hatred. It is basically a more primitive than human, unrecognisable parent figure, created largely by the projection of his own unapprehended and uncontained aggressive impulses. It punishes naughty deeds by a punishment crushing and out of proportion to the offence committed.

Virginia, aged two and three quarters, was a sweet, quiet little girl, unused to other children, and had spent a few mornings in a little nursery group. There she had attached herself firmly to the teacher, who took a special liking to her because of her innocent, wondering blue eyes and fair curls. She wouldn’t talk to the other four or five children for the first few days, and shunned most especially one little boy called Matthew, who was pushing and noisy. She talked to her mother piously about Matthew, who was a bad boy, “He took Cheryl’s pencil, and John’s pencil, and Judy’s pencil, and my pencil’. “And what did you do then?” said her mother. “Oh, I putted him in the fire and I put paper under him and I lit a match, and he burned up and went all black and then he wasn’t there anymore!” said the little angel with enormous ferocity. She had in fact made not the slightest protest at the nursery.

This was a little girl who at that time was still wetting her bed and was very scared of matches, but quite fascinated by them. She continued to be very shy and standoffish with children of her own age, but friendly and polite and confidential with adult mummy figures for quite some time. Her mother was affectionate, warm, but worrying and tended to expect over-high standards of behaviour.
Virginia tells her mother what she does in this fantasy to the greedy Matthew who takes everybody's pencils - she burns him up. But she is afraid of fire herself, although she has never actually been burned by matches. The fire has become so terrifying to her because its destructive properties also express and threaten her with the ferocity which she is afraid to feel in her own nature - so afraid that she cannot express it at all in self-defence, but voids it in the heat of her bed wetting.

So one can see that the fate she metes out to Matthew is one that she fears if she is naughty, and is associated with her fear of matches.

This is one of the forms assumed by the primitive conscience derived from the child's fears of the most primitive and relatively unmodified aggressive impulses of his own personality. This is the punishing conscience, the hell fire, the God of the Old Testament, the Mrs Be-done-by-as-you-would-do of Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies*. It is experienced in the many more or less irrational fears which afflict small children of dogs, cats, loud noises, bad dreams and so on.

These fears, this vengeful conscience, becomes modified as the child is able to express and to experience her own aggression within the containment of a safe and loving relationship. Telling her mother about her fury with Matthew may well have saved Virginia from having a bad dream, and it may enable her to have a little more courage, to use her aggression constructively to stop herself from being bullied so easily next time.

When a little child's fears are understood, when his fierce feelings can be tolerated and controlled a little better with the help of his parents' understanding, he stores up experiences that help to alleviate his terror of terrible punishment, and go towards the formation of a kindlier conscience, an inner advisory voice that has the character of a Mrs Do-as-you-would-be-done-by rather than Mrs Be-done-by-as-you-would-do.

Excessive harshness on our part can confirm a child in his fears and the need to placate not only external aggressors but also a crippling primitive conscience. Understanding with firmness leaves him freer to develop a more realistic conscience less prompted by fear and more influenced by care and concern for others.
Chapter 7: Brothers and sisters

Preparing your child for the arrival of a new baby

There is first of all the question of when to tell the child about the new baby, then how to tell him. Then we have to try to understand what he makes of it, and how he is thinking about it, especially if he isn’t yet at the stage of using many words himself. But, as most mothers know, infants understand a great deal before they are able to talk themselves, but they understand in their own way. So if you tell your toddler that you are going to have another baby, “Won’t that be lovely?”, he’ll go through phases of imagining and interpreting in different ways what this means as far as he is concerned.

The important thing is not necessarily that we should be able to formulate or even understand everything that goes on in his mind about it from the time that he is told till the arrival of the baby and after. What matters is that we should recognise and, to some extent, be in tune with his conflicting emotions about the whole affair. We need to make it possible, by showing our interest, for him to ask questions when he is able to formulate them, and to try to answer them as simply and as truthfully as possible.
The question of when to tell him is a tricky one. As many a mother has found out, the waiting time can seem incomprehensibly long to the little child whose first reaction may be to expect the baby, if not tomorrow, at any rate the day after. On the other hand, the very length of the waiting time gives the child plenty of time to work over the event in his mind, to try out being naughty and being reassured that he is still loved, not redundant. He has time to get used to the idea of how it might be when a baby brother or sister comes along.

Even if you don’t tell him till late on in your pregnancy, he is most likely to sense some difference in you, an inner preoccupation at times. Maybe also he picks up clues from odd conversations between you and your husband, and from actual preparations you are making for the new baby. So when the question of the baby’s arrival is really in the air, it’s almost certainly better to let him in on the preparations, have some voice himself in the arrangements.

Sometimes, as mothers, we have a tendency to identify too strongly with the elder child’s possible feelings of forlornness, or of envy for our creativity. We may then rather overdo the emphasis on the newcomer as “our” baby. Every infant at some stage probably tries to cope with his jealousy by fantasising that he is one or both of the parents producing this baby. Freedom to have these fantasies, to enact them in his play and in his make-believe relationships with his parents, is an essential part of his imaginative development. However, it’s a play, an imagining that needs to take place within a safe framework of reality if he is going to come to terms with that actual reality and his own possibilities.

So, while I would think that it’s valuable for the child, and fun for you both to join in with him in pretend games about mothers and fathers – (and you don’t have to spoil a game by didactic insertions such as, “Of course, we know this isn’t really true”) – he needs to be prepared for the fact that the baby is produced by his mummy and daddy and that he is going to be its elder sibling. He needs to be prepared for the fact that when it’s born it will sleep most of the time, and maybe cry some of the time, that it will take up a great deal of his mummy’s attention, that she’ll be feeding it as she fed him when he was so little. It’s a help to be prepared for the fact that it’s not going to be much company for him to start with, and that there won’t be a great deal he’ll be able to do for it in the very beginning, but that there are many little ways in which he can help mummy when she is getting things ready for bathing and feeding and so on.

We can over-prepare, of course, try to talk too much so that our child feels there is something fishy here, senses that we are over-anxious about him and reacts by
being overtly anxious, or by getting fed up with the whole subject and refusing to contemplate it.

Here follows a short account and an observation of a pregnant mother and her little boy age only eighteen months.

*Brian – whose mother is pregnant*

Brian is 18 months old and his mother is six months pregnant with the second child. His parents are both young people who work as freelance journalists, and his mother resumed some part-time work at home after he was a few months old. There has been a very close relationship between Brian and his mother since the first two or three months, during which she was anxious because he cried a lot, and she worried about whether she was feeding him well enough. But she persisted both with breast-feeding and a supplementary bottle and in the end did manage to breast-feed him for nine or ten months, to the great enjoyment of them both.

She’s looking forward greatly to the arrival of a new baby, but at times is rather worried lest she will have the same trouble as she had with Brian in the beginning – “and how will it be with two?”. She and her husband have tried to let Brian into the planning for the new baby right from the beginning. She says that sometimes she thinks he understands very well – that he understands much more than he can say. He has spells of trying to open her bag, of trotting after the handbags of visitors and taking them to mother to see what is inside. On the other hand, she says that the other day when she was trying to explain to him about the new baby growing in her tummy, he wouldn’t listen to her but made a long gabbling conversation as if he were trying to tell her something and pulled up his shirt, sticking out his own tummy and giggling.

She remarked on how manly he has grown in the last few weeks. Till recently he was always at her elbow trying to copy everything that she did, cleaning and cooking and washing, but now he’s much more interested in what his father is doing, and is especially obsessed with hammers. He just loves to drive a nail into a piece of wood if you take the trouble to set it up for him. His father says in a worried way that he does not really know whether Brian yet knows the difference between making and destroying things. Does he recognise that when father is sawing wood and hammering nails into shelves he is really making things? He is implying that he’s afraid that Brian is copying him in a bad way, that he’s using his hammer to destroy. His mother says he does not really know what it is to break something yet.
When he breaks a cup, he need not really know that it’s broken – he may think it’s clever when he sees two pieces instead of one. Father isn’t too sure that he does not know, says he’s a clever, ambitious little fellow - “Sometimes I think he’d like to get me by the scruff of the neck and push me round the house”. Mother laughs and says that, apart from the hammer which she keeps out of his way most of the time, his favourite toy these days is an aubergine, which he rushes around with, points downwards, making burping noises as if he were drilling holes into things. He even insists on taking it into his bath.

Now here’s an account of Brian’s behaviour when a friend calls to have tea with his mother:

The two women, after chatting together, go in to waken Brian from his afternoon sleep for tea. He looks sour when he is wakened, but winds his arms around his mother and clings to a soft duster toy that he usually takes to bed with him, and buries his face in her neck, in a cuddly, baby way. When she puts him down in the kitchen to heat his milk, he whines, scowls and pushes his way between her and the sink, reaching to try and grab the arm that is wielding the saucepan. His mother then gently passes her hand all over his face, which is scowling ferociously, as if to wipe away the pain and anger. He seems a little mollified but doesn’t finally calm down till he is put in a chair with his bottle. This cheers him up at once and he smiles at the visitor and his mother, with the bottle in his mouth, although he doesn’t seem to be too interested in drinking from it.

He sits and listens to his mother and her friend talking, and keeps joining in with long indecipherable snatches that sound like conversation, leaning forward from time to time intent on capturing the attention of both. Mother remarks how he has to be in on everything, how, at the weekend when they went to the zoo and watched the sea-lions being fed and then playing with a ball in the water, he kept pointing to the ball, protesting in a peremptory way and indicating that he wanted it, so they had to run away so that he could no longer see it.

Brian slides down from his chair in due course and runs to the kitchen, pointing to the hammer, calling “Mummy, Mummy”, but looking at the friend. His mother says, “He says ‘mummy’ not just to me, but whenever he wants anything. It’s his only word except ‘daddy’ just sometimes”. She seems bothered that he hasn’t got any more words yet. He keeps on calling, so she lets him have the hammer for a little before he goes to have his bath. She gives him a nail to
hammer into his board.

He is not very pleased to be undressed later in the evening for his bath, protests when the hammer is taken away and goes on trying to reach for it till his mother takes it away and hides it where he can no longer see it. She takes him fairly quickly out of his bath, saying that he doesn't seem to enjoy it at all these days. He quietens when he's taken out of his bath, protests again as she lays him on his back on her lap to dry him. “Too undignified for you”, she says. But sitting up on her lap he cuddles against her neck as he did before, and a little later, when she puts him down on the bed to dress him, she lays his cheek against the cuddly toy. He snuggles happily against it and looks up smiling tenderly at his mother. “I knew he’d like that”, she said.

She sits down with her friend to have supper and gives Brian a bottle. He has already eaten. As mother and her friend are talking, he grows restless, puts down his bottle and comes in between them. He takes two sausages and puts them in his mouth. “Not both at once”, says mother, and removes one. He then takes his bottle again and puts the nipple in his mouth with the one sausage, and looks at his audience with a pleased and triumphant expression. When he has finished the sausage, he reaches up to the leaf of a large plant behind his mother’s chair and grabs this firmly for a while, but doesn’t tear it off. After some minutes he begins pointing to something on the table. Mother thinks he wants a tomato, takes one and cuts it for him. He shows a perfunctory interest, but doesn’t eat it and goes on pointing. She then evidently interprets correctly, for when she gives him the plate on which the tomatoes are, he grabs it with a beam of enormous satisfaction and positively chortles as he makes off with it, circling it with his hands.

After walking around with it a little, he turns the plate upside down, looks at the trade mark on the back and says “Dada”, then beats the bottom with his hand with a very absorbed expression, oblivious of the two people in the room. He puts the plate down presently, picks up his bottle, and brings it to the visitor. His mother says, “He wants you to drink it”, but when the friend pretends to drink it, his eager face clouds over and he snatches it back from her. He holds on to it firmly with one hand, the plate in the other, until the friend leaves.

From this account one can see that Brian is intensely interested in what is going on between his mother and her friend, as he is evidently preoccupied with the relationship between his father and mother and with her pregnancy.
His parents are both a little uncertain about his feelings towards this baby and towards themselves – does he want to grow up to emulate a daddy who makes things – a baby – or does he want to use his growing manliness, his hammer, to smash, to push his father around the house? They grasp intuitively the ambivalence in his attitudes; his mother is just a little worried, but more fascinated and amused than really perturbed.

One could discuss at length and speculate upon the meaning of his play and his behaviour, and certainly his mother feels that it has a meaning that he is thinking and working away at expressing feelings and fantasies for which, as yet, he has no words. She implied, although she did not state, that he understood very well when she was talking to him about the baby growing in her body that he did not want to hear her, that he was pulling up his shirt and talking down with the announcement of his more important pregnancy.

He’s evidently struggling hard to be big – “too undignified” to be a baby on his back after his bath. But he oscillates. He does enjoy briefly a cuddly toy that seems associated with tender feelings for his mother, but he doesn’t really want to feed from his bottle as a baby. He seems to be more interested in holding and in controlling it, as he is interested in pushing into and controlling the transactions between his mother and her friend – as he wanted to have the ball with which the sea-lions were playing, the arm with which the mother wielded the saucepan. He wants to have two things in his mouth. Deprived of his sausages he triumphantly replaces one with the nipple of his bottle. He wants not just one tomato but the plate that holds them, and this he evidently connects with daddy.

But he wants things both ways – all ways. He wants to be daddy, to be mummy, but also to be baby. When he starts to feed the visitor with his bottle, as if she were to be his baby, he gets scared that she’ll drink it and deprive him. He doesn’t want to give up his baby position easily.

What to do with your small child when you are confined?

If all is going well and such an arrangement is practical, there are indisputable advantages in having your second baby at home. It becomes a real family matter right from the start, and less excluding to the older child. In some cases this may not be practical or desirable. Then, if arrangements are made for the older child to be looked after by someone he knows and can trust, and whom you can trust, this can be a manageable and even an enjoyable learning experience for him, as any challenge is which can be met without too much stress.
If you go to hospital and your elder child is under three or four, you may not have had the occasion to observe how he reacted to overnight separation from you before. If you have had that occasion, it will be no doubt an experience that has given you some clue as to how best to arrange things for him at this time. It’s likely to be best for him to stay in his own home with his daddy there at night and a chance to visit you in hospital if rules and regulations permit.

If he has to go to stay with a stranger, if you really have no familiar relatives or friend with whom he can stay, then it is wise to give him a chance to get to know and trust that stranger first. He needs to be with someone he can feel to be a real substitute for his mummy and a comfort to him when he misses her. For how your young child feels when he is separated from you, and how he feels about you when he returns, depends greatly on the quality of understanding and mothering he gets in your absence. Whatever it is, he’ll feel that that you’ve arranged it for him – which indeed you have.

When you are leaving more than one child behind if you have to be in hospital or away from them for any reason, the children will of course tend to derive some comfort and strength from each other.

For you, his mother, to be rejected by the small child whom you love and towards whom you feel guilty for your failure to protect him from pain, is a quite devastating experience (and one which may not happen only after separations). It does not help to let yourself be overwhelmed by self-reproach. We all make mistakes, and are all forced by circumstances sometimes to allow our children to have experiences that are hurtful. We may then need to be prepared to tolerate a period of unwontedly prolonged difficult behaviour or withdrawal, without reacting too strongly or withdrawing ourselves, in order to help the child work through the painful experience and regain some of his lost confidence in us.

The child who weathers separations best is likely to be the one who has recognised his separateness from mother, has learned to accept the reality of the parental relationship and to take his place in the family rather than to live in the assumption that it revolves around him. This is the child who is learning to draw upon good internalised experiences and who develops inner strength through finding that they sustain him in need.

Managing more than one small child

Several young children can pose a problem of organization and skill in judging priorities for the mother with little help in the early days. On the other hand, they
can reduce the concentration of anxiety and attention on one child, which can be oppressive if the mother is making her child her life, instead of lending the best of her experience of life in order to help him to establish his own.

Living closely with more than one small child gives us a chance to learn more about each one through comparison and contrast, and through observing our differing reaction to each little character in similar and in different circumstances. We get more criteria for sorting out what the child himself is saying and doing, as well as from what we ourselves are reading into the situation. We can become more expert at distinguishing the real needs of a child from his machinations to control and get more attention for himself.

**Melinda – playing at being grown up**

Melinda is two and a half years, and her baby sister Marilyn is six months old. Marilyn, who has been a rather quiet, undemanding baby, has recently been weaned on to a bottle. She has become more openly demanding, intensely involved with her mother and wanting to be cuddled frequently, nuzzling close to her when she is picked up.

Melinda has always observed very closely what went on between her mother and baby sister, sometimes from the security of father’s lap. She has seldom tried to interfere in a really troublesome way, but has used every chance to get a little special attention from her mother when her hands were free. She has also done her best with her mother’s friends, who call regularly at the household, to get an extra share of attention and babying. Until the past few weeks, although she is clearly a clever little girl, she has talked very little in actual words. Marilyn’s closer and more complicated involvement with her mother, however, seems to have given a great impetus to Melinda’s wish to speak in a really grown-up way, and to learn the words for everything she sees in storybooks and in real life.

Here is an observation made by a regular visitor:

Her mother comes to the door to greet me with the baby in her arms. I hear Melinda call from the top of the steps “Hello, hello!” She runs down and greets me saying “Hello, Mummy”. Her mother tells me that all her friends are “Mummy” these days, but she herself is addressed by her Christian name, or as “Darling”, the terms her husband uses.

When we are indoors, Melinda shows me carefully in baby talk where to put my hat and coat. When I sit down she says to me “Shoe, shoe”, unlacing her
own shoes and I understand that she wants me to exchange my shoes with hers. Meantime her mother is feeding the baby, who is holding the bottle in both hands and nuzzling contentedly close to her. Melinda walks away from this sight, calling me to go to the window with her, which I do. There she kindly points out to me everything passing by on the street, calling out the name as if I were a little child and she was teaching me, as I imagine her mother and father have just been teaching her.

When eventually I rejoin mother and baby, she looks longingly at them. Her mother, understanding her jealousy, tells her to fetch half an orange from the kitchen, which she does. She sits down and sucks it with relish for a few minutes. Then she turns her attention to me again, saying “Shoes,” and trying to take off my shoes. I explain that they won’t really fit her.

The baby has now finished her bottle, and is sitting up on her mother’s knee. As the mother rubs her back tenderly to wind her, she turns to her, smiles, gurgles and grabs her nose and mouth, and puts her fingers to her mother’s eyes. Her mother laughs, and talks to her tenderly.

At this point Melinda can’t bear to see, runs away and comes back with her teddy which she shows to me, and poking her finger into a little hole starts to take out the stuffing and strew it on the floor. Mother remonstrates gently, Melinda looks at her again and pulls out some more and throws it on the floor. Her mother tells her not to make such a mess. She picks up the stuffing and puts it in the waste-paper basket, and sits down with her teddy, seeming rather satisfied with herself that mother registered her anger.

Mother and I chat a little and Melinda listens in fairly contentedly until mother is talking to me with great enthusiasm about what a pleasure the baby is at this stage, how well and healthy she is, rather like Melinda when she was the same age.

Melinda then comes up to me again, wants to take off my cardigan and dress, pulls at them and digs into me. She then wants me to come to the toilet with her. She tells me to sit down and do “wee wee” in a very peremptory way. Her mother laughs and says “She always wants to see me go to the toilet. It’s not so long since she gave up wetting herself by night”.

Mother then puts the baby down on the rug, and Melinda, seeing her mother’s lap free, runs up to lean against her with her story book, getting her to name the objects in it and repeating them after her. The baby lies and watches them with interest.
In this observation we get some inkling of how Melinda is coping with her jealousy of the baby, her anxiety about being displaced in her mother’s affections. She tries to relate to her mother in a grown-up way as if she were her husband – “Darling”. She finds another mummy for herself in her mother’s friend, but she wants to step into that mummy’s shoes, to mother her in a helpful and patronising way as her baby. Her anxiety about the baby’s growth and greater expressiveness seems to have urged her on to try to communicate in a more grown-up way, and get approval for this as a little girl who learns her lesson. But ambition and impatience lead her on further, to try to be a grown-up mummy or daddy who can teach others.

This playing at being mummy, using what she has actually learned to be able to do, so enables her to contain her jealousy sufficiently not to interfere between mother and baby when they are really busy with each other. But she has not cut off her feelings of jealousy, and wants her mother to observe them. In picking the stuffing out of teddy one could say that she is playing at removing the stuffing from her mother’s just-fed contented baby, and that she is wanting her mother to register what she is doing. She seems contented to be stopped before she goes too far and thoroughly spoils the teddy and messes up the floor.

Her anger and jealousy of the tie between mother and baby, her ambition to be a mother with a baby, is not cutting her off too much from her own baby-needs which she expresses a little in sucking the orange. It does not stop her expressing her need to have a mummy who can teach her to be more grown-up – really more grown-up, not just in fantasy – for she seizes upon her mother when she is free to learn some more words.

Her mother is interested in her as well as in the baby, and allows her to express what she does feel. She realises intuitively the child’s conflicting feelings and steps in to stop her going too far in pulling her toy to pieces and messing up the floor, because at this stage and for years to come there are times when children have to be protected from the results of over-indulging their aggressive impulses.

*Bob and his younger sister*

Bob, aged three and three quarters, has a baby sister Linda who is now four months old. He was himself an extremely restless, demanding baby and is growing up to be a very tough little boy. His mother has coped with him, or failed to cope with him, by fitting her day around him and letting him do pretty much as he likes. Before the baby came, she was somewhat apprehensive as to how she would manage with two,
and so arranged for him to attend a nursery group three times a week. He continues to go to this, appears to enjoy it, and while he is out she has a much needed break.

When he is at home, however, he doesn’t ever seem to be able to let the mother and baby sister be together in peace for any length of time at all. Nearly every feed has been interrupted by him at some time or another, by his wanting to try the bottle himself, by his wanting to feed the baby himself. His mother has usually let him interrupt in this way, finding it the easiest way out, as the baby has appeared to be remarkably equable and understanding. Indeed, when she is unusually fraught with meeting Bob’s noisy demands and clearing up his mess, she seems for periods to forget the baby’s existence.

In the first month or so, if one observed rather closely, it was possible to see the baby flinch slightly and often turn away when Bob came thrusting himself rudely between her and his mother, when he’d pull her leg, push his face against hers with a very thin disguise of affection to cover hostility. Now she does not flinch; she smiles to welcome him, almost extravagantly. She is unusually observant, attentive and mobile and co-ordinated in her movements for an infant of her age. She still continues to make remarkably few demands of her mother, who continually contrasts her with Bob as “such a good baby” and continues to placate Bob by giving him all the attention he clamours for at the expense of the baby without seeming to notice what she is doing.

The baby is generally most accommodating and, if she is awake, seems to be contented and quiet if she can simply see her mother, keep her under her eye. She also watches Bob closely when he is anywhere near her. Yet there are times when she will make a repeated series of little attempts to engage her mother’s attentions by smiling almost effusively, waving her arms and straining up towards her as she passes by the pram. These are obvious but not clamant bids to be picked up, which her mother often does not notice. When these have been ignored, just occasionally she will break down into the most heart-rending and inconsolable crying. This puzzles her mother, but does finally engage her attention.

Mrs B is clearly is clearly so intimidated by Bob that she does not realise how inhibited she is about even being aware of the baby’s existence any more than absolutely necessary when Bob is around. It’s not that she is lacking in love for Linda: indeed she is immensely grateful to her for being so responsive and good, but she does idealise her as a “good baby” and underrates the degree of frustration that she endures without complaint.

On the other hand, in her conversation she sometimes gives indications that she is unconsciously aware of this. The baby has had a rash that comes and goes from
the early weeks of her life. Her mother worries about this, is very careful to keep her dry, but has several times commented on what a “porous skin she has; it doesn’t seem to keep out water, rather to absorb it”. In making this comment, she would seem to be indicating that she is potentially aware of the baby’s imperfect protection against harmful stimuli. We could think of a porous skin as somewhat analogous to a thin skin, which her mother fears she is not strengthening sufficiently by her protective situation.

In order to do justice to her perception of the baby’s needs and to her own capacity to enjoy and really respond to the baby’s affections, she needs a little support to help her to take Bob’s measure and keep him in his place. It is not going to be helpful for him in the long run to be allowed to use her as a doormat and to treat the baby in the same way. So far his ruling of the roost at home doesn’t seem to have made it difficult for him to fit in with the rest of the children in his nursery group. He may be afraid, as bullies often are, when the odds are too high, or it may be that his nursery teacher has a firmer way with her and that he is in fact relieved to be more firmly contained.

To ride roughshod over his mother and his baby sister does not encourage a little boy to develop respect for women. This is a situation where Bob’s father has an important part to play if he is able to do so, most of all of course through the example that he sets implicitly by his own attitude. But that is also conveyed explicitly in a practical manner.

At the moment it needs to be expressed by some active help to his wife to organise things better with the two children, at least when he is home at the weekends. This could mean encouraging her and backing her up to take a firmer stand with Bob. It could also mean making more of an effort to do things with Bob himself, to encourage his self-expression as a little boy in more competent and constructive ways. If Bob has help from father in finding tasks and interests as a little boy growing up to be “like daddy”, then he doesn’t have to feel that the only worthwhile roles in existence are those of mother and of baby.

_Jenny – who won’t stand up for herself_

Jenny and Jackie are aged four and two years respectively. Their parents are a young couple in their early twenties, who married a little earlier than they had intended because Jenny was conceived out of wedlock. Mr J was decidedly unready for parenthood and left his wife alone a great deal in the evenings and at the weekends after the
baby was born, to pursue his training as a keen amateur runner; something that was much more important to him than his comparatively humdrum job. Mrs J turned a good deal to her own mother for company and support in her inexperience. Jenny obliged by being a quiet, biddable baby who seemed to do more or less what was required of her at the right time.

The mother wasn’t at all enthusiastic when she became pregnant again when Jenny was sixteen months old, just when she had decided to go back to work to earn some extra money so that she and her husband could try to buy a house instead of going on living in a flat that was much too small for them. She continued to work until shortly before Jackie’s birth.

The new baby, however, was such a vigorous, responsive child that she found herself this time enjoying, in a much more positive way, the first few months of the infant’s life. “I didn’t have to be nearly so careful as I was with Jenny. Jackie never leaves me in any doubt about what she wants and she’s a lot more fun – from quite early on she would like a real old rough and tumble.”

When Jackie was about six months old, Mr J had to go abroad for several months on business with his firm. After another spell at home he had two more similar trips before Jackie was two years old. Mrs J, feeling very resentful about this and deciding that she was too young to be penned in the house, went back to work during his first absence and has carried on her job ever since. The additional money enabled them to buy a house nearer her mother, who is a widow, and only too pleased to step in to look after the children when Mrs J is at work.

The children both seem to be happy to be looked after by grandmother for part of the day and Jenny is at nursery school in the mornings. She, however, does seem to suffer most from her father’s frequent absences. She turns to him in a slightly wistful clinging way when he comes home.

Here is a brief conversation a few days after one of his trips abroad, of the way in which the children interact with their parents when father is at home after work. Mrs J has been to work this day and her mother has, as usual, been looking after the children. Jenny has been to the nursery school for part of the day, where she appears to fit in contentedly in her usual quiet way:

As her father opens the front door and her mother goes to greet him, Jackie trips over something in the kitchen and screams loudly for attention. Her mother rushes back to pick her up and comfort her, and Jackie, thus appeased, beams briefly at her father. Jenny has rushed to the dining room to bring two
small dolls which her father had given the children the day before, and she waits for the opportunity to point out to him that Jackie’s one is broken. Her father murmurs a few consoling remarks and goes on talking to his wife. Jackie meantime has got down and rushed back to the wheeled toy she was playing with before she tripped up “accidently on purpose” as it seemed.

After a little, Mrs J goes to get her husband something to drink. Jenny meantime sidles up to sit on his knee and to show him how her doll goes to sleep. Mrs J returns and is mildly irritated at Jenny, who goes on sitting on her father’s knee and quietly tugs at him to go on attending to her doll. She tells Jenny to give her father a chance to relax and suggests that she goes on colouring the picture in the book she had before he came home.

Jenny does as she is told. Jackie then engages her father’s attention to wind up the car she was playing with. Her mother then tells her to bring her book to read out to daddy all the names of the animals. Jackie starts to do this, making an appropriate noise for each animal. Jenny joins in, leaving her own pictures and father makes appropriate complimentary noises to both of them.

Jackie gets tired after a time and then runs next door to the playroom, calling her father to come and look. Her father follows her; she stands on a chair, holding out her arms, and calls “Catch”, jumping into his out-stretched arms and squealing with confident pleasure. When she has repeated this, Jenny, who has followed them again, also gets up on the chair after Jackie’s second attempt and imitates her exactly.

Mother then comes in to say that the bath is ready and undresses Jackie while Jenny undresses herself and father finishes his drink. After about fifteen minutes in the bath, during which they both enjoy themselves hugely, their mother asks them to come out. They both refuse and carry on playing.

Mrs J then gathers up Jackie summarily, wraps her in a towel and starts drying her vigorously. Jackie roars fortissimo for two or three minutes, then seizes a tin of talcum powder on the table beside her, begins to screw and unscrew the top and stops suddenly and completely, absorbed in her new activity. She is suddenly upset again and roars when the lid of the talcum tin drops on the floor, but is pacified at once when her mother picks it up and gives it to her.

Jenny meantime in the bath has been jumping up and down, watching all this with obvious enjoyment, delighted it seems that Jackie was the one who was taken out and not she. Then she seems to think, as things quieten down,
that there is not much fun left in staying there on her own and climbs out rather
wistfully to get dried.

This brief illustration may serve to start some queries about the way in which the
characters of these two children are developing in relation to each other and to their
parents. Jackie is much the more spontaneous, forthcoming child, who evokes more
definite and certain responses in her mother. Mrs J hauls her out of the bath first,
when both children rebel, and she picks her up to comfort her when she trips. After
her day’s work, mother doesn’t seem to find Jackie a trouble, or to be irritated with
her as she is with Jenny, whom she tells to get off father’s knee.

Jackie takes prompt action to get what she wants. Her “accidental fall” secured
her mother’s attention at the moment father came home, when she had but a brief
smile for father at first. Later she gets him to help her with the play, to wind her car,
to catch her as she jumps. When taken firmly out of the bath to be dried by mother,
a fait accompli, she soon cuts her losses and concentrates her attention on playing
with something she can manage – the talcum tin. She roars when she loses the lid.
This causes prompt action on the part of her mother and she is at once pacified.

Jenny is much more indirect, less openly demanding. One can see, however, the
insecurity that prevents her asking more openly, that leads her to follow behind in
Jackie’s footsteps, although she is the older one. Her demands are less specific and
probably less easy to meet. She makes a bid with father to be seen as the good girl
who looks after his dolly – the baby – while Jackie just breaks hers.

It might help matters if the parents’ attention could be directed to observe how
very readily they allow Jenny to be pushed into the background. It may be difficult
for them to alter their spontaneous behaviour, however much they consciously try
to do so.

It would seem important for Jenny’s future development to be encouraged to
find friends and interests of her own. She may be able to do this when she goes to
school, if she has the good fortune to have a teacher who is able to bring out the
talents of individual children, and thereby gives her a chance to make a place for
herself where she is not dominated by the vigorous character of her younger sister.

When to say “No”

I have in mind here a very well organised mother of four children, all under the age
of five, who had very little help but a home with plenty of space for the children
To run about in. With them not always under her feet, she managed to keep the children well looked after and entertained, to have her evenings fairly free to talk to her husband and friends, with the children all sleeping nicely upstairs.

One evening, the three and a half year old, Annie, who slept in her sister May’s room, woke up crying in her sleep about a nasty dog. She was brought downstairs to the room where her parents were talking and watching TV, was comforted, made much of and then went back again to bed quite happily after about an hour.

The next night, at about the same time, she woke up and cried, was taken downstairs and talked, this time with slightly less conviction, about a nasty dog. Again she was comforted, made much of and returned to bed. When it happened again the next night, her sister in the same room also woke up.

Her mother decided this was going to be too much of a good thing, and that it would be better to tuck them in warmly but firmly in their own room, before evening parties became a family custom. They protested somewhat but, seeing that she meant it, soon gave up and went back to sleep.

There is a time for yielding – but it is not all the time!
Chapter 8: The young child’s education

Parental instruction

Ours is the responsibility, now and for some time to come, for making most of the major decisions which will affect our children’s lives. They need to trust us to know better than they do in many matters, and often, for convenience’ sake, they have to do as they are told without going into the why and wherefores. However, that does not mean to say that, if they have any perception, we can pull the wool over their eyes to hide our imperfections and our mistakes in handling them. It’s a basically very uncertain parent who always has to be right. “Do this because I tell you to” is all right for the moment when other things are clamouring for attention, and on those occasions when it’s clear that an argument isn’t going to get anyone anywhere. But from a very early age, that varies from one child to another, children’s interest in the connections between things leads them to want to know why we tell them to do this, forbid them to do that. Sometimes it’s possible to explain, to enlist their reasoned co-operation.

For little children, their fathers and mothers are in the beginning the kings and queens in the story books, sometimes beneficent, sometimes bad and unjust. Some
day the children will find out that we are not so important in the world as they had supposed and the disillusionment is for them less of a blow, or less of a triumph, if we have not been fostering the illusion. Perhaps some readers may remember in John Hopkins’ TV series *Talking to a Stranger* the painful scene in which the cynical, disappointed grown-up daughter turns and accuses her father of having deceived her cruelly with fairy-tales when she was a little girl, deluding her into believing in a daddy who would take care of her and make all better. And she continued through life expecting to find just such a daddy and unable to forgive life and her own father for not providing her with one.

It is important that our children should gradually build up an experience of parents who do not claim to know everything, who do not cover up mistakes, who can be seen and even acknowledged to be unjust and imperceptive at times; but who go on trying to do their best, to learn from their mistakes, and who can permit their children to do the same. It is when expectations are pitched unrealistically high that parents and children find it difficult to admit errors and stupidities, gloss them over or pretend that they are committed by someone else.

If we have not set ourselves up as omniscient authorities, we won’t find it so hard when our children go to school, and – if they have not already done so – begin to hear different and conflicting grown-up opinions on the right way to behave in this or that situation.

If we have fostered in them a spirit of genuine enquiry, then there is the possibility of their differing from us without necessarily being morally wrong or beyond the pale. The consideration of different rules and mores, the experience of being with children whose parents are bringing them up in a totally different way, can be an enrichment rather than simply a perplexity or threat to established loyalties. If we have done our best to give our children the security and freedom that will help them to learn, we may find we can learn a great deal from them in our turn as they grow up.

*Sex education*

This should not be so difficult if we take our cue from the child and answer questions as he asks them, either directly or implicitly.

Yet it is a difficulty for many parents, especially perhaps the explanations of “how the seed got inside mummy’s tummy”. One’s inhibitions about explaining this easily and frankly are often connected with an uneasy apprehension of the child’s own sexuality, which at the same time we deny. We may want to keep him innocent a
little longer, “not put more ideas into his head”, not stir up unhealthy curiosity; but the “ideas” are already there.

The little child will continue to have his own theories and fantasies about how babies are made and how people have sex together, even though he is given and appears to understand the correct explanation. His fantasies are bases on his wishes and fears and his own bodily sensations. It is important that he should have the facts at his disposal though being a child he cannot assimilate the full meaning of adult sexuality and must inevitably apprehend something mysterious in the parents’ relationship with each other.

_Nursery school_

What are the advantages of nursery school or a small nursery group for your child when he’s three or four years old? There’s the obvious advantage that it can give mother a much-needed break for a few hours in the day while she gets on with her shopping, cleaning, or caring for the younger child, or maybe just has a little time to herself. Such an advantage is not negligible. Time away from each other in suitable spells can help people to appreciate each other all the more and this may go for both mother and child at nursery school age.

But there are other and very positive advantages for the child which make it worth considering a small nursery school if there is a suitable one in your area, or even considering forming some group together with other mothers who have children at a similar stage. Often at this age your child is ready to expand his interests outside his home and the immediate family circle. At home, whatever provision is made for him as a child, life centres very much around the parents. Father’s job in the background provides the money, mother’s cooking and housekeeping makes the home a going concern. She may also be busy tending the baby. And so it should be. If his parents were not reasonably efficient and dependable in their adult parental tasks, life would not be half so happy and secure for him.

The world of nursery school or group is scaled primarily for him and for others of his age: that is its raison d’être. This can be his own special niche to which he has entry just because of his age. It is his territory of work, exploration and play, from which he returns home with news as father returns home from work. This will be the case when he starts junior school at a later date anyway. But many children before that are ready for a little time away from home to extend their relationships with their peers and to try themselves out with and against others of their own age. The relatively small group of peers in the nursery school is a valuable preparation
for meeting the larger impact of life with contemporaries that comes upon him in the primary school.

In some ways, nursery school is a less charged emotional atmosphere than the family in which to express and play out conflicts that derive from the family situation. You can have your turn at being mother or father or baby or big brother or sister with little boys and girls of your own age, and there is a teacher handy to see that things don’t get out of hand when quarrels start. You learn to take your turn in the queue just because you are one of several who have the same status as yourself, not because the baby needs to be attended to first of because father is in a hurry to get out to work. You can take out on Johnny or Jenny some of the annoyance you haven’t expressed or formulated at breakfast time at home for instance, and then you can make it up a little later or on another day.

But, of course, mothers have to be prepared to find, when the child first starts nursery school, that life at home with him may from time to time be disrupted by some of the unresolved conflicts and worries that he brings back from school. There may be fears and resentments about being bullied by some bigger boy, worries that his teacher or some little girl friend doesn’t like him as well as one of his rivals. And he may at times resort to more baby ways again at home, wetting or soiling himself, wanting more attention and reassurance at bedtime, having a few bad dreams. All development and change is attended by anxiety and as long as you can feel that he is on the way to being able to enjoy more than he fears, it is worthwhile encouraging him to persevere by comforting and holding his more babyish self when he comes home.

It might be for a time that a shorter period of being with the nursery group, or less frequent attendances in the first weeks could make it that bit less stressful and give him time to get used to being away from home. It can be that a child, who has enjoyed himself when away with his teacher and the other children, acts all grumpy and upset when he comes home because he can’t stand thinking about what mother and the baby have been up to in the time he has been away, can’t stand thinking, in fact, that their life did go on quite happily without him.

But the likelihood is that in playing at his nursery group and in trying out things with other children he will learn to manage himself and his materials that much better. Playing out his fantasies can indeed give him a stronger grasp of reality and help him to be less at the mercy of infantile feelings. Finding expression for what he can do, mitigates a kind of despair that he is not able to compete with the baby on his level, or with father on a level that he can’t hope to attain as yet.
Starting primary school

This is quite an experience for mother as well as for child, more traumatic perhaps than one sometimes realises. The wrench for both is likely to be greater of course if he starts straight in at school without the preliminary breaking in that comes through attending a nursery group for part of the day.

You may feel it is a very positive relief to have more time to yourself, or you may feel at a loose end and not know what to do with yourself. If this last is your state of mind, then it is time that, for the sake of the child and yourself, you do have some time apart from each other. If you have come to depend on each other and cling to each other too closely, then you are most likely to be hindering the development of your own separate lives.

It’s probably in the case of your first child, or of your last one, that the experience of seeing him off to school is most upsetting. With the first child you tend to make acquaintance again with all your own feelings upon first going to school. If that was an unpleasant experience, there’s every likelihood, if you don’t think about it carefully and take yourself in hand, that you will be unconsciously preparing your child for sacrifice! Sometimes the child realises this and is confident enough not to be intimidated; one has even known children who, on their way to school for the first time, have said, “Don’t worry, mummy, I’ll be alright. You’ll see!”

Here is one mother on the point of sending her own first child to school and reminiscing about her own first day at school nearly thirty years before:

I started school at a little country school when I was just over five years old, together with a little girl of the same age whom I’d known and played with from time to time all my life. We were taken by our two mothers, and I knew that my mother was worked up and scared that I was going to create a fuss because I was rather a bossy little girl and at times too much for her. Mrs H wasn’t worrying at all, neither was her daughter, who was a lot more placid than I was, took things for granted and usually let herself be ordered about by me when we played together.

I was very excited. My mother had told me how interesting it would be and that I’d be taught how to read, which I was very eager to do, and that I’d get to know a lot of other children. I was looking forward to all that, even if I was scared. But I realised that somehow or other she couldn’t believe I was looking forward to it, even though she was pretending very brightly that I was.

When we got to school, all the children were going into the big classroom
where they assembled for prayers. We were the only two new girls that day, as the rest had started the week before – we had been delayed by having chickenpox. Our teacher stayed out of assembly to talk to our mothers and to us. She seemed very nice, but I did become a bit alarmed when the noise from the classroom next door changed and I heard them all chanting something together – the first time I’d heard the “Lord’s Prayer”. I asked my mother nervously what that was, and she said to me, “They’re talking to the teacher”, which left me puzzled and a little frightened as I’d never heard anyone talking like that before and I had a vague feeling of something extraordinary going on, that was going to happen to me too in a minute when my mother went. But I was still all right and felt quite friendly and confident with the teacher, who was with us still.

At last our mothers started to say goodbye to us. When my mother bent to kiss me, I could feel her shaking slightly, all upset, and that was suddenly too much for me. I burst into howls and clung to her and said I wanted to go back home. Then I saw little H take a look at me and decide to burst into tears too. I don’t think that in fact she had been upset at all. But we both clung to our mothers, howling away. There was a period of pandemonium and general “there, there-ing”, which remains somewhat obscured and hazy in my memory. Anyway, the upshot was that our mothers hung around the school most of the day. We received quite a bit of special attention, mixed with impatience. I felt rather important but also a little bit ashamed.

My mother and father must have talked about it that night because the next morning father announced that he would take us both to school that day and our mothers would come to fetch us when school was over. I looked at his face and knew better than to protest. He handed us over to our teacher without a murmur from either of us and as far as I remember the whole day seemed strangely eventful and interesting. It never seemed to occur to me to start crying for my mother. From then on I liked school a lot.

*Peter starts primary school*

If you have good reason, apart from your own anxieties, to think that your child is going to get upset starting school, then there is quite a lot you can do to prepare him. If you think about it in advance and consult with your husband, you’re in a better position than anyone else can be to know precisely how to talk about it to your own child. Here’s an account of how one mother approached the problem with
her little boy who was clearly all set to be in considerable difficulty about starting
school.

Peter was the younger of two children. His sister Kate, three years older than
him, was a very sociable, outgoing little girl who never seemed to have any problems
in relating to people. She had stayed away from home for the odd weekend with her
grandparents or aunts on a number of occasions before she started school. Peter was
a very different kind of child as became apparent from early on in his life.

He was weaned very abruptly at the age of four months for slightly obscure
reasons, and from then on tended to cling very firmly to his mother. As a toddler,
he was good at occupying himself so long as he could keep her in sight. He was shy
and even forbidding to strangers, among whom he quite clearly numbered relatives
whom he saw regularly and did in fact know quite well. With his father who was
away from home at that time on business for several quite long spells, he was a little
wary, although not unfriendly, but by the age of four or five years he had not yet
managed to establish with his father the special father-son relationship which so
many little boys have. In fact he depended on his mother in the exclusive way that
would be more usual in younger children.

For this reason his mother decided not to take him to a nursery group, which
would not in any case have been easy as they lived some distance away from a
possible one. Instead, she did her best to see that he had another child to play with
him at home whenever possible, and took him out with her friends who also had
young children. He had, for instance, a number of cousins of the same age.

He was due to go to the same primary school as his sister, one which many of
the children whom they knew locally, and among whom he had been brought up,
were currently attending. His mother took him with her every day when she went
to fetch his sister and in the year before he was due to go made a point of introduc-
ing him to most of the teachers, taking him into the classroom that would be his.
She talked about the kinds of things that he would be doing, tried to give him a
picture of what a day at school would be like and got her little daughter to join in
chatting about it. He could have delayed starting school for a term, but his mother
was anxious that he should go while his sister was still there and for that reason
sent him a little earlier than might have seemed ideal. She went to see the teacher
with whom he would be starting and explained the difficulties she anticipated. The
teacher agreed to come to tea with them one afternoon and meet him at home first.

Peter was all geared up to start school the summer before his sister left. She was
quite ready to step in and comfort him and wipe his tears in the playground and at
break for the first week.
The first week was indeed difficult. He parted from his mother and went with his sister with equanimity on the first morning, but before break time he was howling for his mummy. The teachers allowed his sister to come to his classroom and sit with him for the rest of the morning and they let her take him home after lunch.

The next day he was determined not to part from his mother and clung to her, roaring, but she bundled him up in her arms and carried him into the classroom where his teacher kept him sitting beside her all morning. For the rest of the week he broke down into sobs and tantrums from time to time and on a couple more occasions his teacher called his sister in to help her in the classroom. By the next week, however, he was fairly reconciled and even began to enjoy himself. By the end of the first term he was positively eager to go to school and now, some five or six years later, is doing very well at school. He has lost his former extreme social inhibition and, although much quieter and shyer than his sister, has in fact probably made more really intimate friends.
Chapter 9: Various questions

In this chapter I’ve selected just a few of the difficult questions one may have to face in bringing up young children.

The threesome relationship

We all know the story of Oedipus. Whether seen as history or myth, one can profit from Freud’s genius in viewing it as the realization in adult life of the unconscious wishes every little boy has towards his mother and which necessitate that he in fantasy eliminates his father. The little girl has similar wishes towards her father that necessitate doing away with mother. Then, to make it more complicated, there are the so-called “inverted” Oedipus and Electra complexes, when the boy’s attachment is to is father and the little girl’s is to her mother.

Indeed, most children fluctuate from time to time in the preschool years in manifest and overtly possessive attachment to each parent in turn; however, the little girl tends ordinarily to settle most definitely for marrying daddy and making him the model of her future husband, and the little boy similarly chooses his mother.
Eventually, in late adolescence and adult life, one is likely to find that the child who has grown up in reasonable harmony and with respect for his parents, unconsciously seeks a partner who possesses some of the admired qualities of both parents.

Freud talked of the Oedipus complex as showing itself in young children of three, four or five, before they repress it and enter into the “latency” period – so-called because at that time sexual feelings tend to be latent and children are less closely involved in a sensual and physical way with their parents. Melanie Klein observed that the difficulties of the threesome relationship – the exclusive possessiveness towards one parent to the exclusion of the other – begin already in the first year when the baby has a distinct relationship with both mother and father.

The following observation is one of many that supports this:

A little girl, just over four months old, was lying kicking her legs on a divan one afternoon, seeming to listen vaguely to her mother and a friend talking together. Her eyes, however, kept turning to the door of the room in an expectant way. In due course, her elder sister came in from school and the baby smiled briefly, but turned to gaze once more to the door. The au pair came in, to be greeted in the same way as the older sister. The baby’s eyes still turned expectantly to the door. Finally, the father came in from work and the baby’s face lit up, her arms and legs waving ecstatically – there was no doubt whom she had been looking for. “Oh, poor N”, said the mother’s friend, “two girls and both of them gone on their daddy already”.

This was a baby who was in fact very strongly and sensually attached to her mother and continued to be so. She loved to come close to her mother’s face after she was breast-fed, “eating” her nose and cheeks with open mouth. On the afternoon of this observation, it looked as if she had become slightly bored with mother and friend being too busy talking to each other and was looking for her father (who did, in fact, also cuddle her and talk to her a great deal) for more exclusive attention.

When a young child has a close relationship with each of his parents, he will often tend to turn to one of them for special comfort when he feels disappointed or slighted by the other – viz. the already mentioned turning to father that often takes place when the child is weaned. This is, of course, one of the reasons why it’s so important for the child’s security that the parents should be on fundamentally good terms, not in rivalry with each other for him. Otherwise, capital is made of these little hostilities and preferences which can increase the child’s self-importance but
also decrease his sense of security in having a stable government which can survive undue divisiveness on his part.

*Sexuality in the young child*

Freud had the genius and the courage to follow up the data that he received from adults and then, from observations of children themselves, to formulate his theory of the universality of sexual feelings in the young child.

The infant experiences intense physical sensitivity and diffuse sexual or sensual feelings. It may be important, therefore, to notice whether we are inadvertently stimulating a little too much at times in the kinds of games and romps that we, as parents, love to have with our children and that the children enjoy. We may stimulate sexual feelings that leave the child in the end frustrated and resentful and perhaps driven to masturbate.

Babies and little children are very cuddly. They like to be cuddled and it’s important for them and a pleasure for us to do so. The spontaneous physical closeness between a mother and baby, then between father and baby, between other loving grown-ups and young children is a basis for the child to feel that his body is nice, that it’s liked. It helps him to use it spontaneously and enjoyably and gives him the right kind of preparation for an intimate and feeling sexual relationship when he is an adult. So we needn’t be inhibited and ashamed of cuddling our children if we are in touch with them in a loving way and are sensitive to the way they are feeling about it.

I call to mind, for instance, one father who did not have this sensitivity. He was a genial, abrupt man who was often demonstrative with his little girl and boy, quite ready for “a little bit of slap and tickle”, so he said when he arrived home from the office. Then sometimes, if the children got over-excited and the little girl would go on clinging and crawling all over him, he’s shake them off brusquely and leave them either tearful or resentful. One could see them first stimulated and then rejected.

If one is sexually frustrated in one’s marriage, there can be quite a pull to use the children to get some shadow of the kind of satisfaction that should come from the marital relationship. Nevertheless, even in a marriage which is reasonably fulfilling, as was the case with the father whom I’ve just mentioned, there can be immature, unintegrated sexual yearnings that can be indulged with our children if the quality of tenderness and considerateness in our love for them becomes obscured. The father was devoted to both his children and thought a great deal about their welfare. He was in most respects a very good family man, but there was a subliminal, flirtatious, quasi-promiscuous aspect of his personality that found expression in badinage with
the girls at the office, and in the tantalising quality that sometimes entered into his rough and tumble games with his children, in particular his little girl. Then he would seem to get some inkling of what he was doing and cut off abruptly.

Every little girl has this tendency to indulge in a secret romance with her daddy, the prototype of Prince Charming. Encouragement by, and collusion with, the infantile aspects of her father encourage a secret, guilty, fantasy relationship that implies the exclusion of and triumph over her mother. This may lead her to feel over-responsible for her mother’s welfare as she has, psychologically speaking, deprived her of a husband. It may, for instance, make it difficult for her in later adolescence to leave home because she feels that her mother needs her. The secret guilty tie to her father may make it difficult for her to be free to forge a really adult sexual relationship with a boy friend and then a husband of her own.

Similarly, difficulties of various kinds can arise when there is just such a collusion between the little boy and his mother and when father is cut out as unimportant, or a brute, insensitive (for that is a role sometimes implicitly assigned to the father in such a situation). This tends to happen when the mother does not enjoy her sexual relationship, is maybe afraid of such a relationship with a man and so tries to get some kind of sexual satisfaction in a more infantile way with her own son, who can be regarded as her own creation and enjoyed in a narcissistic kind of way.

For the young child a happy marriage that is also sexually satisfying to his parents is the best possible model to take into oneself and then to start seeking to realise in adolescence and young adulthood. His jealousy and envy drive him at times to try to be the most important member of the family, but he doesn’t feel safe if he succeeds in being so, because he ideally needs two parents who are a source of strength to each other. This protects him as he grows and develops his own powers.

But it is not always possible to provide him with this security. Sometimes a marriage breaks up, sometimes a parent dies. We might consider one example.

*James – whose parents divorced*

John and Mary are two young people who are not yet twenty-five years old. John is a teacher and Mary is a secretary. They married in haste, after a brief, intense acquaintance as students, when they were both nineteen years old. The love affair into which they both rushed so precipitously, and from a background of relative innocence and inexperience on both sides, resulted in Mary’s pregnancy, followed by their marriage and the interruption of Mary’s university career.
From the first week of the marriage they began to have frequent and bitter quarrels, interspersed with reconciliations and hopes that they would settle down better together when the baby had arrived. The parents on both sides were helpful to them in their attitude, which was friendly and non-disapproving and practical in financial terms.

Their relationship did not improve when James was born, although both were fond of the baby and very worried about the effect that their quarrels would have on him as he grew older. John held back from becoming too involved with him in case they had to part finally, which indeed they did before he was a year old. Some months later the parents were divorced and Mary had custody of the child, but it was agreed that John should have regular access to him.

When he finished his university career, John went to work in a town a couple of hundred miles from their former home, where Mary continued to live. This was near both sets of grandparents, who continued to be helpful to her and became devoted to James.

John has visited his son for long weekends and holidays three or four times a year at first, and more often latterly. At first he was rather careful not to get too attached to him, thinking that Mary was likely to marry again, that he wouldn't like to confuse things for the baby too much by making him feel that he had two fathers. Also, there was initially still a great deal of bitterness between Mary and himself and he wasn't too sure how much she wanted him to be involved with the child.

She and John are now on much more friendly terms than they have ever been, on the basis of exchanging letters regularly about James and his upbringing and of John's regular, but not too frequent, visits. In the last couple of years, John has willy-nilly become extremely attached to his son, who loves to be with him and to spend occasional weekends with him away from home. James knows that John is his father but that his parents are no longer married because they could not get on together, and seems to have come to terms with this. As the parents have grown more mature over the years, they have managed to obtain some real fulfilment in their separate lives and work. Their friendship with each other is founded upon a degree of respect for each other and on real concern and responsibility for their child. He doesn't therefore seem to feel pulled in opposite directions by demands for affection as the children of so many separated parents may do.

James has recently started school after spending a couple of years in a small nursery group where he was happy and secure and did indeed have a chance to learn a great deal as he is a very bright little boy. His parents were both a little perturbed to find that, despite this good experience in the nursery group, he was evidently upset
in his first weeks at the bigger school, because he wet and soiled his pants on several occasions and was so shy that he wouldn’t speak to his teacher or to another child.

He has, however, an understanding teacher who talked with his mother to find ways in which they could be of mutual help in easing him into this more demanding situation in the larger class. She cleaned him up quietly, without any fuss, on the two occasions on which he soiled himself and that has now ceased. He is now beginning to talk to the other children and to enjoy school.

Mary now wants to marry again, a man whom she has known for a couple of years, whom she respects and with whom she feels confident that she could have a happy marriage. The only difficulty is that James says very firmly that he does not want her to do so. He says that he has one father already, that he and his mother are fine living together, just the two of them and he’s got his two granddads nearby so they don’t need any other man in the family.

This attitude on the part of James and his unexpectedly disturbed period on starting school made Mary feel uncertain and guilty about her plan to marry again, although she is convinced that her prospective husband would be both understanding and tolerant of her son’s feelings.

She and John have met, however, and talked things over a couple of times, as a result of which she has decided to go ahead with her plans of marriage, but a little more slowly in order to allow her son time to get used to the idea.

On reflection they both came to the conclusion that it could hardly be in the child’s interest in the long run to feel that he had stopped his mother having a husband and fulfilling herself. She was bound to feel or to have to suppress feeling some resentment about the very big sacrifice which she would be making, greatly as she loved her child.

Being able to stop mummy marrying would no doubt gratify the little Oedipus in James, which no doubt was already receiving more gratification than was good for him through his parents’ divorce. But such gratification in the long run could lead to an over-guilty attachment to his mother and to later difficulties in growing up and making a securely based marriage of his own.

John recognises, as he has done since their divorce that he too will want to get married again someday. His first experience was a terrible shock, and, although he blamed Mary almost entirely in the beginning, he came to realise how over-idealistic in an infantile way he had been. As he put it, both he and Mary had been pampered and overprotected in their different ways and had a lot of growing up to do.

They have both evidently learned a great deal from their experience and stand a good chance of making a very much better marriage next time. Their lives have been
greatly complicated by this first mistake, yet in the end it may prove to be one which has enriched them both, because they have learned to live with it and to work with the consequences, rather than simply to cut their losses.

Their maladjusted marriage undoubtedly must have provided in many ways an insecure basis for their child, and no doubt this contributes to his uncertainty or even panic in a new, stressful situation, such as going to school. On the other hand, he has had and is having the experience of living close to parents who, though apart and struggling to develop themselves, are very concerned to do their best for him and to profit from the experience of making mistakes. That can be a more fruitful model for him to follow in his life than one afforded by an over-cloistered sheltering from experience.

**Explaining death**

This is one of the most difficult tasks for many parents. We tend to shun the thought of death ourselves and to assume that the idea is even more intolerable to our young children. “They can’t possibly understand, so why try to explain?”

But we do usually find ourselves having to explain sooner or later. Indeed, it may be rather ominous if a young child who can verbalise does not ask questions when he suddenly ceases to see a relative who has hitherto been very much part of his life. “Where has grandma gone?” If we tell him grandma has gone on holiday, he will want to know when she is coming back. If we prevaricate on that question, he’ll realise there is something wrong, sense our discomfort, our grief and evasion. Perhaps he will feel obscurely, as children do, that it’s his fault and that there’s something here that’s too bad to be talked about. Then it may be perhaps that going on holiday gets connected with this unhappy secret. He may get scared when he goes or when others go on holiday.

It’s fortunately rarer in the experience of a young child that one of his parents dies, or that a brother or sister dies. Such a near loss is even more difficult to talk about, but it is correspondingly more important that it should be talked about and that a child should be helped to bear the experience.

**Willie – worries about death**

Willie was a lively, rumbustious little boy aged three and three quarters when his baby sister was nearly four months old. During the latter stages of his mother’s pregnancy, he had been excessively demanding and had sulked furiously when the
baby was born. He kept saying that he didn’t want to see her, that he was going to wrap her in a parcel and send her back where she came from. However, he gradually became reconciled to her presence and even said he was beginning to like her when the baby started to enjoy seeing him about, to smile at him and to crow with delight when he would waggle her beads to amuse her.

Then, quite suddenly, the baby acquired a severe and exceptional infection, and was rushed off to hospital early in the morning just before Willie went off to the nursery group which he was attending. The baby died that day. Mrs W was too distraught for a couple of days to face Willie. He was sent to his grandmother, who explained that his mother wasn’t very well, but would be alright soon.

When he came home at the end of the week, he asked his parents where the baby was and was told by them that she had gone away on a little holiday, but would be back soon. He didn’t enquire where she had gone, but twice in the next fortnight he asked when she would be coming back? He was answered evasively, and then asked no more. His parents, relieved, then reassured themselves that he had forgotten all about it, as they hoped he would if it were not talked about. They believed that he hardly had time to realise that the baby was ill at all, and that in any case he was himself so young and had known her for such a short time that he would soon cease to remember that she had ever existed, if there were no reminders of that fact. In any case, he hadn’t wanted her around for the first two or three months.

However, it was borne in upon them gradually that Willie was very worried about something. Two or three weeks after the baby’s death, he started to have nightmares, and kept wanting to come to their room in the middle of the night. He became much more reluctant to go to his nursery playgroup, although he never actually refused or made a great fuss. Then he started to become obsessed with ambulances, looking for them when he was out in the street and stopping to point them out to his mother or father or grandmother, whoever was taking him out for a walk. As they lived very near a large hospital, there were many ambulances. Of each ambulance he would say “Where’s it going?” and watch it till it was out of sight to see if it was going to the hospital or elsewhere. They realised then that he had seen the baby go off in the ambulance, that he hadn’t forgotten about her, that he was worried about himself and that they would have to try to help him to talk about it.

It’s entirely understandable why the W’s felt that they could not talk to Willie about the baby’s death. There can hardly be a greater grief than the loss of a child, and so suddenly. It is inevitably bound up with blame, guilt and self-reproach, however unreasonable those may be. “Did the hospital give proper care? ... Could we have noticed something sooner ... should we have called the doctor in earlier?” Grief,
self-reproach, shock; attempts to deny all these and to wipe out the terrible event; all these in ourselves make it difficult to recognise the young child’s distress, his fear, his guilt, his puzzlement. If parents can manage to talk to each other, they have a better chance of sorting out some of their reactions – and the mother especially in such a case, with the most intimate responsibility for a young baby, is liable to need the encouragement and strength of her husband. She needs the reassurance that she is not unreasonably at fault, that she still has the right to be a mother that she can still care for children. Only if she has some confidence still in her ability to be a mother, to understand her child, will she be able to act like one emotionally.

Willie must be struggling hard with a bad conscience because of his earlier hostility to the baby, feeling that he has been taken at his word. He’s still very much at the stage when the young child is enmeshed in the belief of the magical power of his thoughts, when a wish becomes a fact. Indeed, there is an infantile area that operates in all of us adults when this irrational magical thinking continues, evoked and heightened perhaps by stress. For instance, the parents’ grief and guilt about the loss of their baby will certainly be infused with infantile guilts about death and damage done in thoughts to their own mother’s babies. It’s therefore most important for the child to be able to talk to his parents so that he can be helped towards understanding the actual facts as far as he is able to do so. In this way, his parents may allay his irrational fears and feelings of omnipotent responsibility.

By not talking about the tragedy, his parents are understandably trying to protect him, and to protect themselves from unnecessary pain. In such a case, it may indeed just not be possible for them to talk about it till they have recovered from the shock and are able to struggle with the fact themselves. But it is highly doubtful whether the attempt to cut out unpleasant or tragic facts can in the long run avoid the pain that they bring... or, if so, it can only be at the expense of impairment of perception.

Willie does need to be allowed to share his parents’ grief, to be allowed to feel his own. He needs the chance of being helped to understand and to express the experience he has had of hating and wishing his baby sister out of the way, but also of coming to love her as well. He needs to be helped to realise that his anger did not kill her, as his love could not have not have saved her; the chance of learning that neither his parents nor the doctors could keep her alive even though they did everything they could.

It is a shattering experience to us adults to be faced with disasters which all our concern and knowledge could not have prevented. It reduces us to feelings of childishness and impotence, and especially so when it is a disaster that affects our own children. A four year old is still very much at the stage when his parents to him
are God, the kings and queens of the fairy stories, all-powerful and responsible for everything. He has to learn gradually the limits of his parents’ capacity to protect him, to make the world in the way that he would like it to be or that they would like it to be. His faith in us, and following upon this, in himself, as able to face up to and ensure the most painful circumstances, is strengthened if we are able to face up to those circumstances and take him with us as we do so.

_Father Christmas – for example_

One of the questions raised regularly by “advanced” parents is: “Should we tell our children about Father Christmas and encourage them to believe in something which later on they are bound to discover does not exist?” Parents can argue with all sorts of pros and cons, and each parent, or course, has to decide for himself and can’t “pretend” about something about which he may have very strong views.

To my mind, Father Christmas comes into the category of myth and fairy tale, the stories without which no child’s life is complete. It is only as he grows that he learns to sort out belief in stories from belief in external factual happenings. Myths and fairy tales exist to give form and realisation to emotions and fantasies, to the child’s interpretation of the world in the light of his hopes and fears. They are true as an embodiment of these internal realities and as such they have enormous appeal and value to the child. That is why, of course, for so many little children Christmas, once it begins to be anticipated with great hope and excitement, is so often followed by disillusionment, with a terrible after-the-party flavour, because we all know from the fairy tales what usually happens when we do get our wishes!

Here’s an adolescent girl looking back on her childhood Christmases:

We lived in the country then and Christmas was the real event of the year for us children. The best thing was always the looking forward and hanging up our stockings. I really did believe in Santa Claus and I remember lying awake in bed thinking of him travelling in his sledge from the north with a kind of awe. He got mixed up in my mind with the story of the Snow Queen, who stole away little Kay from Gerda and put the splinter in his heart.

It must have been the last Christmas before I went to school, before my little brother was born. I remember lying wishing for a very special kind of doll from Santa Claus, one that was very like the Snow Queen, I think. My mother had told me that story before going to bed, for the first time that I remember.
It made me very sad. I understood why Kay was bewitched by her. I would have gone away with her too, but I lay and cried for little Gerda. When I got my doll the next day – all three of us sisters had dolls that Christmas – I was delighted with her for a while, but I remember feeling terribly sad again in the afternoon, thinking of the Snow Queen and feeling that Santa Claus had disappointed me. Then my father came, all concerned to find out what was the matter with me. I couldn’t explain, but he kept on asking me and finally, just to stop him asking, I told him that my big cousin hit me, which wasn’t true. My father was angry with him and he felt unjustly accused. I felt mean about it; I hadn’t really meant to get him into trouble.

The next Christmas I was already at school and someone told me that there wasn’t really a Santa Claus, it was your father. I didn’t want to believe it, but I think I knew it was true. So I tried to keep awake on Christmas Eve and steal downstairs to see what happened - whether Santa Claus really did come down the chimney! But I fell asleep.

I woke early in the morning before anybody else and I remember going downstairs quietly in the dark and bumping into a tricycle by the hearth where the stockings were hanging up. This woke my father and mother. I told them I’d come downstairs to see whether Santa Claus really did exist. They laughed at each other and said, “How like her!” – then became irritated and said, “Now don’t you go and spoil it for the others – give them time to find out for themselves”.

But I couldn’t keep the secret. I took both my sisters aside that Christmas Day and whispered to them that there was no Father Christmas, it was only mother and father. My little sister, who must have been three at the time, didn’t register. I remember her sucking her thumb and looking at me stolidly as if she knew much better. My five year old sister evidently pondered on it and went to ask my mother, later in the day, if it was true. My mother was annoyed with me and I felt obscurely guilty as if I had spoiled Christmas Day for everybody. In some kind of way it was the end of my childhood, at least one period of childhood.

We can see from this adolescent girl’s recollections how Father Christmas was woven into fairy tale fantasies of her parents and unrealised, unspoken curiosities about the parents’ intercourse, their nightmare activities. Her disappointment when she got the doll she wanted was, one might surmise, because the doll was not a real baby like the baby to which, she must have realised, her mother would shortly give birth. As
the doll in her imagining before-hand was to be something like the Snow Queen, one might also surmise that it was to be a realisation of a fantasy relationship with her mother, a romantic fairy tale containing elements of enchantment and cruelty.

So different children will have different ways of apprehending the fairy tales we tell them, according to their particular situation and desires.

We need not deprive them of the fairy stories prematurely – in due course they come to sort them out from external reality.

*Play and stories: their relation to the inner and the outer world*

As a post-script to the last point and a conclusion to this little book I would like to sum up some previous implications of the child’s need to play and make-believe.

Our infants develop through learning about the external world and how to manage it, about their own feelings and resources upon encountering this world, and how to manage them. If we continue to be in touch with our child at the stage he has reached in his ability to comprehend and manage his surroundings, we can give him the opportunity and the materials he needs for the tasks that help him on to the next stage of skill and competence.

His manipulation of materials is accompanied by fantasies about what he is doing, a kind of story-telling, sometimes consciously expressed and easy to understand if we are paying attention, but also with unconscious undertones, less obvious to see.

In his play the little child can escape from the impact of a situation which is too painful for him to accept as it stands. He can escape for a little by pretending that he is someone else. Brian and Melinda for instance (Chapter 7) were coping with jealousy of father and of siblings by pretending to be the parent in charge.

Another little girl aged eighteen months, whose mother left her in the care of a friend while she went shopping, sat and wept for a little. She then picked herself up, put a piece of string over her left wrist as if it were a shopping bag handle, and began to trot in and out of the kitchen door repeatedly, waving her right hand and calling in a reassuring tone “Boo-bye, boo-bye”, as if she were mummy leaving and the babysitter were the baby left behind.

By becoming the mummy who is friendly and loving as she leaves her little girl, it’s the easier to return to reality, to recognising that she is the little girl. Play can be a bridge to the acceptance of reality, by enabling feelings to be expressed and seen from different points of view, and in a controlled way.

The child needs a person, in the first instance his mother, to whom he can express his feelings, and who will help him to understand what they are, to be less afraid
of them. He'll need other people to some extent for this throughout his life. But in his play he can re-create these relationships and different aspects of them when the person on whom he depends is absent or not meeting his requirements at the time.

Similarly, fairy stories, stories of all kinds, are ways of re-phrasing and re-enacting relationships and events in the light of the child’s feelings about them. In earlier stages, small children may take some of these stories quite literally, like the story of Father Christmas. But as they grow older, they learn to distinguish fact from fantasy, especially if we are clear about the difference ourselves.

To find in external facts the only truth is to deprive the child of a means of realizing and expressing an important feeling-ful part of his nature. The infant who is safe enough in his relationships to express his emotions in their context, and within the context of a play that is a derivative of these relationships, is likely to become the adult who retains something of the magical vividness of experience which is one of the prerogatives of infancy.
Chapter 10: Further thoughts

Further thoughts about marriage and becoming a parent

A family begins with the coming together of two people. The home into which the baby is born is determined by the nature of the bond between these two which is revealed, tested and developed by the preparation for and then by the continuing event of the baby’s presence.

Couples come together, stay together, or part for very complicated reasons. When you are in love you may feel that you know exactly why your particular partner fits you for life and forever. You may not bother to think, but drift or rush into marriage without feeling that you are making a deliberate choice. The state of being in love is not necessarily the same as that of loving. If we are lucky we may be able to combine being in love with a more secure and developing capacity to love our partner through getting to know each other, through sharing common experiences, finding similarities, tolerating and learning from differences.

Falling in love is an inexplicable given. Continuing to love and learning to accept one another despite moments of dislike, disagreement, criticism, moments of wounded vanity and betrayed trust: this involves work. It’s a help if some of this is
done before the baby comes along. More of it will be called for when he does appear and the two who perhaps hanker still after the honeymoon period of being at one and “happy ever after”, have to adjust to the interruptions of privacy, the demands made by being three.

_Difficulty in believing that you really are a mother_

Every little girl has pretended at some time or another that her dolls were babies. There are countless less obvious ways of playing at being mummy, producing and bossing and tending the babies you have made. The most primitive form of all is the pretending in which infants, both boys and girls, indulge, that their body products are valuable creations, “babies” which they have made, of which they are proud and upon which they may expect to be congratulated.

Reality soon teaches that this is not so although the infantile unconscious may cling to the illusion. Though children have to learn more and more about the real difficulties involved in nurturing and giving birth to a baby or any valuable creation, there always remains in adulthood some infantile attachment to this magic way of producing it. This is part of the content of infantile masturbation fantasies, repressed but still present to some degree in adult life and sexuality.

Playing with dolls or similar socially approved games usually contain more elements of learning how to be a mummy, emulating through love and admiration, than a child’s masturbatory activities with his own body do. Games can be shared with mummy, can be known about. Masturbation tends to be carried on secretly and even if it is not, it is essentially solitary, and the feelings and fantasies connected with it are largely secret, involving as they do some degree of hostility to the sexual and procreative functions and enjoyment of the parents.

We never entirely grow out of what we have once been, and when our childhood rivalry with mother and her functions has been strong (and most especially if unrecognised, and un-fought with) there tends to be a bogey figure around during pregnancy and early motherhood: someone, something, some malign fate that is going to harm and prevent us from looking after the baby. This is represented in fairy tales: for instance the wicked fairy Malefice in Sleeping Beauty. More prosaically and moralistically it crops up as some critical mother person who is going to chide or blame the new young mother for her carelessness.

Here is Mary reminiscing about the early weeks with her first baby:
I was managing all right with him, feeding was going well, but somehow it still felt pretty precarious. I thought what would I do if he took it into his head to go on screaming in the night or to refuse to feed. I just might not manage to cope.

We were away one weekend when he was six weeks old, staying with my parents. I hadn’t taken his little bath with us and decided to use the big one. He didn’t seem to mind and was kicking his legs as usual when suddenly my right arm supporting his back and head slipped so that he slid under the water for a moment. I panicked completely, not so much from concern for him, but I felt my mother at my back, and was saying wildly to myself, “She must never find this out, she’ll never forgive me”.

Now my mother wasn’t at my back and the baby was all right. He didn’t even cry; just spluttered a little and I’m on very good terms with my mother who wouldn’t dream of interfering and thinks I’m perfectly capable of looking after my own child. What gave me this crazy thought? I didn’t really register till then how jumpy I was feeling underneath.

Mary is on friendly civilised terms with her mother. They are both well-motivated affectionate people. She has a brother five years younger than she is; the only other child in her family. When he was born she was said to show no sign of jealousy; quite the reverse. Indeed when he was only three weeks old and her mother was lying down for an afternoon rest, she was startled to be wakened up by her little daughter staggering in with the baby saying, “Don’t worry mummy, I’ve brought you your little baby”.

I think we might surmise here that Mary as a little girl was having quite a struggle with complicated feelings about the new baby. In some ways she must have felt that her mother might have reason to worry about him: because she wanted to hurt him, to steal him, to drown him maybe? Anyway she was fighting against bad wishes, and bringing the baby to their mother to be looked after.

These deeply buried experiences of long ago are revived and forced nearer consciousness when the little girl who coveted her mother’s baby but realised that he was not hers and that she was not able to take care of him, becomes a mother herself, with a baby who depends on her and whom she must learn to look after. When her infant slips out of her hands in the bath she becomes the little girl again, accountable to a stern mother for failing to look after mother’s baby, and we see how for a moment her childish fear of being blamed interferes with her adult responsibility and concern.
It is only too easy by explicit or implicit criticism to undermine a vulnerable young mother who is struggling to grow into her responsibilities and trying to sort out her more mature resources from childish dreams of being mummy.

This is where the husband has an important part to play, if he can sympathise with his wife’s feelings of inadequacy, as for instance we saw in the case of Mr R, who helped his wife to become more motherly.

*Irrational anxieties about the baby before and after birth*

These are usually more intense and more frightening when it is your first baby. They may be especially great if you have waited for a while before conceiving, and his birth has to compensate for years of waiting and disappointment. But there is no simple way of explaining why some mothers are more anxious than others: external circumstances alone will certainly not account for these states of mind. It is perhaps a help to know that certain anxieties are to some degree, common to nearly all mothers.

*Is the baby all right? Is he the right one, is he my baby?*

That’s a common worry in a maternity ward, and could even seem to have some realistic basis, although instances of wrongly labelled babies must be so rare that it should be easy to be reassured on this point. As no doubt it would be were it not that most mothers have at times during their pregnancy deep-seated fears about the nature of the baby they are carrying. A healthy pregnancy, a baby whose movements and rhythms become familiar, comforting, and, as it were, second nature to the mother who carries him, is the best antidote to these fears. She’ll tend to build a personality from the feel of him, to give him a face and a name.

But potentially present, although usually unconscious, are the fears of producing a quite different, nameless, strange, monstrous, defective or dead infant. Intimations of these fears come sometimes in the dreams of pregnant women, in which the baby can figure as something frightening, hurtful, or dwindling and dying, evoking terrible grief and sense of loss. Here are two dreams of this kind:

I dreamed that my baby was born, a beautiful golden-haired little boy, just like my little brother. Then as I watched him he grew smaller and shrunken and weak. I had no milk to give him, so I knew that he was going to die, and I woke up crying. I couldn’t forget that dream all day.
The woman who dreamed that dream had just such a golden-haired little brother three years younger than she was, of whom she had been intensely jealous.

The second dream, of a woman in her third pregnancy was this:

I dreamed that the baby was just about to be born. I realised in a panic that it wasn’t going to be able to get out this time, it had grown too big. Then I realised how much I wanted this baby after all; that I didn’t care what happened to me so long as it was born safely. I begged the doctors to get it out no matter how much they cut into me. But I don’t think they managed to save the baby and when I woke up I found myself sobbing: “Margaret, Margaret, my darling, I never realised before how much it hurt to lose a baby, and I’ve got two beautiful children already while you have none”.

Margaret was the dreamer’s friend who had had several miscarriages and who had not yet managed to have a live baby.

Both of these dreamers were women who were having simple uncomplicated pregnancies from any ordinary medical point of view, followed in time by normal births. But their pregnancies were evoking in them memories “in feeling” of their own infancy and infantile fantasies of their own mothers’ pregnancies.

It would look as if the first dreamer was suffering some kind of revenge, herself becoming the mother with the dwindling golden-haired boy, a fate that her envy had wished on her mother who fed the beautiful little brother. The second dreamer with the friend Margaret also had a mother called Margaret whose third pregnancy had ended in a still birth, followed by severe depression when the dreamer was about five years old. She had not wanted to have a third child herself and this pregnancy was unplanned. One might surmise that the reluctance sprang from some conflict about triumphing over, or suffering the same fate as her mother, and of her friend of the same name. The dream in its intensity may have expressed a need to share and to experience more deeply the grief she had apprehended in them in a more distant half-awareness.

Adopting a baby

Fundamental attitudes to other women’s babies are evoked when you adopt a child.

One of the features about adoption is the relative sadness with which you are confronted by the baby. The woman who becomes pregnant has nine months during which she carried and becomes gradually more aware of the reality of the life which
is growing, ever-present and becomes part of her own long before she sees it and has to be acquainted with it outside herself. The husband becomes accustomed to a wife who is becoming a mother and preoccupied with the baby within. The months of pregnancy afford an opportunity for reverie and preparation for adjustment to parenthood, however much the new-born infant is bound to be a revelation, a mysterious stranger to be known only gradually in the course of time.

On the other hand, one could say that there is a kind of prenatal experience too for the parents who adopt a child. The decision to do so will most likely have been reached after much thought, discussion and probably disappointment at being unable to conceive and give birth in the usual way.

Sometimes the couple who have waited a while in vain may have become somewhat embedded in rather a set pattern of married life. They may have been working long enough to establish a measure of financial security and have more freedom to enjoy their leisure than other married couples of their age. The idea of this freedom being curtailed after being long enjoyed may be a little frightening. Couples may have their different ways of trying to cope with this. The important thing is, however, that there should be some imaginative preparation, some recognition beforehand of some of the adjustments that will have to be made. You can't know exactly of course, until they are upon you, just what they will be and how you are going to take them.

*Preparation for adoption*

Here is how one couple tried to prepare themselves:

Mr and Mrs D are a couple in their mid-thirties who have waited for over ten years hoping for a baby, but without success in spite of various medical examinations and visits to fertility clinics. Meantime they have carried on with their respective jobs in which they have become rather successful and well-established.

Close contact with a younger sister who has just had her first baby has suddenly made Mrs D feel panicky to realise how she and her husband have come to gear their style of life to not having a child. Talking things over together they have come to the conclusion that they would both always feel vaguely troubled that they had missed something essential: that their relationship with each other would be that much less complete, if they never had a family. They have begun to be afraid that if they continue much longer in their present busy
social way there will be no room for a child in their lives.

Consequently they have begun to enquire about adoption. Mrs D meantime begins to get acquainted with how to bath, feed and comfort a baby, by spending time with her sister’s child. She has grown immensely fond of her little niece and sees her as the prototype of the baby she would like to have. She is still rather scared, however, to contemplate herself in the role of a full time mother with the constant care of a young baby. She doesn’t know how she is going to feel about being unable to put it down when things get too much for her, to escape for a holiday or a weekend when so inclined. Her way of preparing further, of trying herself out with this kind of responsibility, is next to buy a small puppy to look after, which she then visualises as growing up with the baby.

This is her way. She and her husband like dogs and have often toyed with the idea of having one before this, but have hitherto rejected it as too much of a tie. Now they see it as a way of breaking themselves into being tied.

Not everyone who loves babies and children likes dogs! Other people may have different ways of preparing themselves for the responsibility of looking after the child. For many the experience of watching a baby develop with its mother, as Mrs D with her sister, would be a sufficient imaginative experience.

Possibly better even than watching your sister’s baby (a situation which may be fraught with too many family rivalries for some people) may be to try to learn from a friend or the friend of a friend, who is willing to let you share a little in her experience. Whether you are preparing to adopt, or whether you are actually pregnant yourself, the opportunity to go and visit regularly a mother and young baby, to see them learning to live with each other, can be an enormous help in preparing emotionally for this role yourself.

Many people do of course get this kind of preparation from more casual observations and talking to friends or relatives. Long before this some little girls get the feel of the experience through watching their mothers with younger siblings - if their own jealousy and covetousness has not been too great to allow them to look, and learn and identify with their mothers.

If we can observe other mothers and babies closely enough to empathise with both, this may help us to get to know in a practical way some of the baby’s needs, and also how the mother adjusts herself to bearing the weight of responsibility, and finds her way to respond appropriately to his communications. Sympathy with mothers (which is ultimately linked with our earlier but still present infantile capacity to
appreciate and tolerate shortcomings of our own mothers) helps to mitigate the anxiety we may feel when our time comes that our inadequacies will be treated harshly.

I think there are reasons why the opportunity to watch over a period, the development of a baby’s relationship with his mother and father, may be particularly helpful to couples who are intending to adopt one. There is likely to be particular anxiety about your fitness to be parents, if you have tried for a while and failed to conceive; whatever the cause of the failure may be. The fact that the baby you will adopt is the child of some other woman is likely to intensify the anxiety of so many first-time mothers about being on trial and subjected to critical judgement. The feeling of being judged which in all mothers, adoptive or otherwise, has its deep unconscious roots in childhood – fantasies of stealing “Mummy’s babies” can be emphasised by the fact of having to meet the requirements of the adoption society, and the ratification of the permission of the natural mother before the baby is legally yours.

So to watch a baby growing from week to week with a mother who is finding her own way of getting to know him, and of coping, not perfectly, but as best she can, could be especially helpful to an adoptive mother who is prone to fear that she is managing badly if she has nothing but some unrealistic standard of perfection before her.

*Is he any less your child because he is adopted?*

To the baby his mother is the person who loves and looks after him, whom therefore he learns to know and to trust.

I suspect that the adoptive mother – the adoptive parents – who care for the child, who are interested and able to enjoy him as a developing personality, probably feel no differently towards him than they would have done had they been responsible for his procreation – although there may remain in the depths of their heart some residue of regret about their sterility.

When the parent-child relationship goes wrong, however, it becomes only too easy to blame it upon “bad genes”; much as a husband and wife at odds with each other, can attribute the defects of their offspring to the spouse’s family.

As parents, adoptive or otherwise, I would think it profoundly true and important to remember that our children are not our possessions, or our creation. They are little persons with potentialities for growth which are to us largely unknown and which, being close to them and entrusted with their care, we have a unique opportunity of trying to surmise and of fostering as best we can.
We may find that the qualities and characteristic of a particular child continue to irritate or disappoint us unduly. It is our job as parents to think whether these are reflections of aspects of our own personality and behaviour, overt or subtle, or whether they are indeed the expression of something essentially difficult or unpleasant in the child’s own personality. We need to sort ourselves out from him if we are to be able to appreciate the innate resources upon which he can draw and the difficulties in his nature with which he will have to contend. We are then able to have a clearer idea of what, from our own resources, we can offer him and can try to avoid setting up situations in which we are likely to be provoked beyond endurance.

*Leaving your infant in the care of others*

A fairly close appraisal of the needs and nature of a young child, together with perception of our capacity to meet these is necessary when we leave him in the care of others for any length of time. I have already touched upon this in the chapter on “Brothers and Sisters”, but it is worth considering some other aspects.

There are times for instance when the prospective mother has to, or wishes to continue to work when the baby is still very young. In some instances this may be a forced choice: there may not be a husband with whom she can discuss things helpfully beforehand; or she may be a person who can manage to have a relatively enjoyable and caring relationship with her baby only if the responsibility for him is shared with someone else.

When there is a husband and the wife is going to work, his agreement and help is most important. It often means that he will have to be relied upon much more for actual help with the baby and housework, and will also have to be content with less attention and mothering from his wife than she could otherwise give him. Of course if she has been working previously, they have most likely already worked out some satisfactory pattern of sharing responsibilities and the chores of the household. They may be evolving together a marriage which is truly a marriage of two minds and interests, where both feel that their work is a vocation, in addition to a means of acquiring the wherewithal to live in a way in which their talents are being expressed creatively and where the arrival of the baby is felt as an additional and welcome way of expressing these but not necessarily as the only way of perpetuating themselves.

However much of one mind you may be, if you are a couple expecting your first baby, and if the wife is meaning to continue working, it is probably wise if possible, not to make plans too cut and dried, for a return to work, but to leave a loophole. You do not know how you will be and feel when the baby arrives, and you do not
know what kind of baby you are going to have. It is best not to be under so much pressure yourself that you then try to pressurise the baby into being the kind of infant you need him to be. He may not oblige; on the other hand he may do so, but at the expense of trying too hard to meet your expectations, and of feeling unable to express himself as freely as he might otherwise have done.

Other things being equal it is probably less of a strain to sort out the rival claims of work and family with your second child. Until they have had some experience of sorting out these competing claims, most mothers who work away from their homes while the baby is quite young and who are able to love their baby as most mothers do tend to be harassed by guilty feelings about not giving him enough time and care. They can then be so overwhelmed by the need to compensate for leaving him that they almost kill themselves with kindness when they are at home. Children are very quick to sense this and to play upon it.

There are of course parents who treat infants and small children as packages or pets, or who can be harsh, cruel or neglectful, but I do not imagine that they will be bothering to read this book. It is more likely that I am being read by people who are thinking about doing the best they can for their young children, and who are more likely to be suffering from over-anxiety than from indifference.

If we are uneasy and over-worried about leaving a small child in the care of some-one else there is always the tendency to pass the blame on to the helper, the babysitter, the relative for anything which seems to be amiss with him. It does not help him to feel secure with his mother-substitute; he needs to feel that the important caretakers in this world are on reasonably good terms of mutual respect. So it is vitally important that we do leave the child with someone we can trust and go on to support and respect that person in her caretaking role. This will no doubt mean that we shall have to be aware of and try to struggle with our own feelings of jealousy and possessiveness at times when we see our child being fond of, and occasionally perhaps even seeming to prefer another person.

Learning to live with tragedy

Throughout this little book I have tended to assume that we all have anxieties about child-bearing and rearing, difficulties in relationships which to a greater or lesser extent are part of ordinary growth and development.

I have said little of what we as parents have to face in the happily much rarer event, of having to do the best we can with a child who is irrecoverably maimed or defective, or who may seem quite unable to thrive despite our best efforts.
In disastrous situations we as parents are likely to feel in the depths of our hearts that it must be our fault, and feelings of self-reproach can work against a realistic appraisal of what we can try to do and how we can best understand the child or possibly the effect of his difficulties on other members of the family. There is in us all some vestige of the old childish belief in the omnipotence of parents who are to blame for all disasters. Some readiness to accept our own adult limitations – both defects and limitations of power – is necessary if we are to develop real strength to live with painful situations.

Parents who are on profoundly harmonious terms with one another are probably the best able to help each other in such cases and may wish to be given some privacy to get on with it; but often, and especially if there is only one parent, it may be necessary to seek some help outside the circle of family and friends: to make an opportunity to talk with or receive advice from someone professionally acquainted with the difficulties of child development. For most people the best route to this is likely to be through their general practitioner or their infant welfare clinic. To discuss with a friendly outsider may sometimes give us a clear perspective. It may stimulate us to consider what else might be done, or make us feel a little better about what we are already trying to do. Time taken up in self-reproach is time taken away from living in the present and from bringing our experience to illuminate it.
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