Raising Happy Healthy Children

Why Mothering Matters

Sally Goddard Blythe

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Contents

God could not be everywhere, so he created mothers.

Jewish proverb

This book is in praise of all mothers, past and present.
It is especially for mothers in the future.

Dedication

For my daughter

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Foreword

In meeting rooms up and down the country, in medical practices and schools, as well as policymaking circles nationally and locally, there's a great deal of concern about children and young people's well-being.

Other childhood issues are also hotly debated in policymaking, for example the expansion of childcare provision, the importance of a father's influence and involvement, the education system, and impact of screen-based technology. Curiously there's little or no focus on the rapidly changing world of mothers and the need to properly value, respect and protect the vital work of nurturing children. In today's socio-economic climate mothers often don't have the time and resources they need to mother. Mothering-time has been squeezed out in the name of 'progress' and chasing growth; however, despite households working longer hours, this hasn't led to more prosperity for all, far from it. Children often absorb the tensions experienced by their parents, and are worried about the stress their parents are under in trying to do it all. There's little room for the currency of love – ***time***.

This is a book that explains why mothering matters probably more than ever, not just for children, but for all of us. Sally Goddard Blythe takes us on a journey from conception to the teenage years, exploring human biology, physical and emotional health, our response to the environment around us, what makes us tick and the impact on our bodies of exposure to stress. Above all she looks for possible answers and action points, and it is significant that the book ends with a chapter entitled 'What needs to be done?' This includes the need for better understanding from the teens upwards about the kind of environment and relationships children need to thrive and be healthy.

Whether your interest in this book is from the perspective of a mother, father, professional, expert or policymaker, or anyone responsible for the health and education of the younger generation (or picking up the costs involved), everyone is united in asking 'what needs to change in order for us to give our children the best possible start in life?' After all, the legacy we leave behind depends largely on our collective response to that question, not just for childhood but also into old age: so it is really 'bigger picture' stuff.

Of course our interest in 'raising happy, healthy children' may not always be out of concern for the child's lived experience. We are all motivated by

multi-layered factors whether it is the economy, human rights, trends in crime and addiction, a fairer and more equal society, or international league tables of exam results at 16 years old and having a productive workforce. Common sense tells us our country needs to grow a regular supply of engineers, doctors, creative thinkers, team players, negotiators and problem solvers. Whatever the 'work' they do, we need individuals who connect well with others and are empathetic in nature, able to take care of themselves and their loved ones, who won't need to rely on over-stretched health services.

Whatever our motivation, it is impossible to overstate the importance of this book that dares to focus anew on why 'mothering matters' so much to children's overall physical, emotional and cognitive development, their everyday happiness, resilience, capacity for empathy and future well-being. It is a book about a child's 'first love' – the mother – and how this relationship influences how we develop, grow, learn, relate to others and the world around us, especially in an increasingly complex world. If time devoted to mothering was protected could this in turn be the best gift of opportunity we claim to want for our children and for a better functioning society?

Such a focus on mothers will no doubt be contentious in some circles, leading to protests along the lines of 'we're in the 21st century: it is no longer just about mothers!' They might ask 'why not *Parenting* Matters?'

In actual fact it was never *just* about mothers, but a complex system of interconnecting factors: it takes partnership work between many different family and community members. What's different these days is that 'motherhood' is conspicuous by its complete absence from the policy agenda. The word 'mother' is airbrushed out in favour of more gender neutral language, deemed more politically correct… That is unless the debate is about 'problems' that need 'fixing' such as maternal mental health rates or how to get more mothers back into the paid workforce sooner, so that they're once again productive and contributing to the economy. There's reluctance to admit that waning support for mothers during the child-rearing period might be a key driver in maternal mental health. Or that many mothers (not all) would prefer to take care of their children themselves, read with them, play with them – and only return to work part-time when the time feels right. Too many mothers feel guilty if they're not in work and relying on registered provision, especially now that 'childcare' is referred to as 'early education', formalised and tick boxed.

It is so refreshing to have a book that bears the subtitle *Mothering Matters*! At last we have permission to explore again what mothers do for their children and why this should be cherished, because they're literally shaping the future.

What Sally Goddard Blythe addresses in the book is the 'elephant in the room' where experts have for some time not dared to talk about mothering

matters for fear of being wrongly labelled regressive or out of touch. Yet modern science continues to offer more insight into how mother's-love acts as an external regulator or thermostat for a child's emotions, development and behaviour. Emotional disturbance can have lasting long term consequences but sadly the mother-child dyad is inconvenient for people who've bought into the idea that women are only 'equal' in paid employment (and as an aside, it is somewhat ironic that the drive to get all adults into more work coincides with more tasks being automated and soon there won't be enough work to go round, but the essential work of caregiving will always be necessary).

Mothers alone can never be solely responsible for provision of care, but when our systems are in danger of failing mothers, and denying the centrality of the mother-child relationship, then children are bound to suffer. Women are failed by denying them recognition and financial support in one of the most fundamental roles in life, bringing children into the world, being responsive to their needs and caring for the people we love the most. This will increasingly include elderly relatives especially with the crisis in social care.

If it is about money, then what is mothering worth? It is incredible that in 2017 mothers caring for children can feel so undervalued, even though society purports to respect diversity and inclusion. The ONS calculates unpaid care work at around £343 billion. Society and the economy depends on the invisible work of caring, whether carried out by men or women. How can we achieve equality for all citizens if this work still doesn't count or get factored into GDP? It is children's lifeline to health and happiness and saves the country a fortune, so mothers deserve to have their experiences validated and heard, which Sally Goddard Blythe achieves through the medium of this book.

Raising Happy Healthy Children: Why Mothering Matters is a book that's hard to argue with and explains the science in great detail, meticulously researched. It is packed full of knowledge and understanding backed up by extensive professional experience of working with children and families.

A mother isn't always a biological mother and some of us feel we have two mother figures, perhaps through kinship care or a loving foster mother or step mother who cared for us. Many sadly feel the lack of presence of a mother in their lives whether through loss, ill health or because our mother struggled with inadequate support from family or mother-denying systems. The simple truth is that mothering – in all shapes and sizes – really does matter and now is the time to stand up for mothers and children who have no voice.

Perhaps a more fundamental question than what makes a happy, healthy child might be 'Can we afford NOT to support mothers in their mothering?'

Hopefully more and more people will share their personal stories and start accepting nothing less than a mother-friendly society. A good place to start is to get fully up to speed with the knowledge and wisdom in this book and then harness it to start celebrating motherhood again.

> 'The nature of a child's first relationship, usually with the mother, is crucial, because it acts as a template that permanently moulds the capacity to enter into all later emotional relationships.'
>
> WAVE TRUST (Alan Schore, 2000)

Marie Peacock, former Chair of *Mothers at Home Matter* MAHM

Foreword to previous edition
What Babies and Children Really Need

It is not easy to be a twenty-first century baby. He or she is born into a world of bright artificial lights and sound-effects, an electronic global village that buzzes ceaselessly twenty-four hours a day. This high-tech world affects babies' development from the moment of conception, through the food their mother eats and the ways she spends her time. And once babies are delivered into it, the electronic global village will continue to affect the way they grow, body and mind, for the rest of their lives.

There's much to celebrate about our electronic village. Most of the developed world has enjoyed over half a century of peace and prosperity, universal education, and a level of material comfort that previous generations could only dream of. Old geographical borders, and the human prejudices that went with them, are beginning to break down, and the global nature of information technology offers the chance to share ideas and wisdom throughout humanity. Today's babies may live to see great wonders, and huge leaps forward in human understanding.

But there are also dangers. The ease of existence in the twenty-first century means we take the basics of life for granted – indeed, for many, 'lifestyle' now seems more important than the human context of daily life. Babies however are very basic creatures – since evolution is a long slow process, the blue print for our species has not changed significantly since Cro-Magnon times. So – as Sally Goddard Blythe so brilliantly describes in this book – our twenty-first century baby is actually the same creature as it was in Stone Age times, with the same, natural human needs that have characterised homo sapiens through the millennia. If he or she is eventually to become a fully-fledged adult member of the human race, with all the characteristics civilised humans have accrued through the ages, we must provide the right sort of environment and experiences. In some ways, material wealth makes this easier – we no longer have to go out hunting and killing our own food – but in others it makes it much more difficult.

The force keeping our global village afloat is competitive consumerism, so politicians and big business have to keep us constantly on our toes, ensuring money continues to circulate in an ever-expanding market. Today's global

villagers have become trapped on a monetary merry-go-round – needing to earn more and more money in order to spend it on more and more goods. This means that the two most important commodities babies need are increasingly difficult to supply.

The first of these commodities is time. And in the quick-fire, quick-fix modern world, time is often in very short supply. Yet, as you will see in this book, babies need endless supplies of time…and not the high-powered highly-managed time we associate with twenty-first century multi-tasking either, but the slow, ancient rhythms of human time and the constant attention of a loving human carer.

This leads us to the second, and most important, commodity of all: love. Fortunately, there's no shortage of love in most children's lives – parental love is still probably the most powerful force on the planet. Unfortunately, in a competitive consumerist climate, love can sometimes be perverted by the force of the market. Smiles, cuddles, closeness, communication, attention – the best things in any infant's life – are all free. But parents trapped in pursuit of a lifestyle may find this difficult to accept – surely love should come in an expensive package, ready-wrapped?

So twenty-first century babies, with their basic, old-fashioned, human needs, are in direct competition with the world into which they're born. And unless twenty-first century adults can resist the siren calls of the market and find a way of providing for these needs within our modern world, the development of the next generation could well be impaired. In fact, there's the distinct possibility that development will be so impaired that they won't be bright or balanced enough to keep the twenty-first century show on the road.

Fortunately, science is now coming to the rescue. Advances in psychology and neuroscience over recent decades mean we have a very clear idea of what babies really need for healthy development. Sally Goddard Blythe sets it all out with admirable clarity, providing the scientific evidence that empowers parents to resist the pressures of the market and concentrate on the realities of child development.

This comprehensive book provides parents with the information they need to raise healthy, balanced, resilient children. It guides the reader through all the factors affecting a child's development from conception to the teenage years, with particular emphasis on two critical elements within the first year – movement and communication – upon which children's social, emotional, and educational development depend. Above all, it demonstrates that what babies really need is the time, love, and attention of the loving adults in their lives.

Sue Palmer, author of *Toxic Childhood*

1. Introduction

When this book was first published in 2006 two documents had recently been released on the state of childhood in the United Kingdom and other economically advanced nations. The first, compiled by UNICEF,[1] had assessed children's well-being across six dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective well-being. It concluded that 'the United Kingdom and the United States find themselves in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions reviewed'.

The second report, produced by the UK children's charity NCH (formerly called the National Children's Home) had found that a million children in the United Kingdom were suffering from mental health problems. One of the areas of growing concern was the increase by more than a third of the number of children being admitted to hospital suffering from eating disorders, which it was suggested was being fuelled by idealistic images of supermodels and celebrities, social media, and pressure on young people to measure up to unrealistic standards.

In 2015, the fourth in a series of reports prepared by the Children's Society (UK) was published based on 10 years of research investigating children's subjective well-being in the UK by asking children questions about their feelings, hopes, and frustrations. Children described *relationships* as being at the heart of their perception of well-being. When talking about what was important in their lives, they highlighted the need for 'love, support, respect, fairness, freedom and safety'[2] – concepts that are central to what it means to be human, social beings. These are also the qualities that are nurtured primarily within the context of a stable, loving home. While children listed these values principally in relation to their family and friends, they also valued them in all of their relationships, including schools, communities, and beyond.

The report also indicated that children in England fared particularly poorly in terms of their feelings and perception of themselves and also their feelings about their life at school. Girls especially described having much lower satisfaction with the way that they look, a trend consistent with findings from earlier reports.

It was also clear that some sub-groups are at particular risk of experiencing much lower than average subjective well-being. These included children living away from family, such as those 'looked-after' in residential and foster care, and children who have specific learning difficulties.

Earlier reports tried to offer explanations for some of these findings, suggesting that extension of the transition from childhood to adulthood and increasing peer pressure fuelled by social networking sites may have been playing a significant part. While these may be contributing factors they do not seem to be sufficient to account for the increase in the incidence and range of problems that we are witnessing.

Issues related to depression and mental health in the UK are particularly prevalent in two age groups – the young and the elderly – with the ageing population being especially at risk of declining mental health linked to social isolation. Whilst there is a direct relationship between increased social isolation and ageing, *perceived* social isolation can occur in the young as a result of fractured relationships, poor self-image and increased reliance on virtual communication as opposed to physically present relationships as a medium for contact.

Other factors such as lone-parent families, stepfamilies, patchwork families, under-age drinking, use of drugs, increasing social and emotional isolation throughout childhood and the teenage years, and the power of the media to influence the minds of the young are also reflections of a dysfunctional society. It was in the attempt to find an explanation and a remedy for this sickness in the context of children's primary biological and developmental needs that I first set out to write this book.

First Love

From the moment of conception, Mother is a baby's universe. Cradled inside a miniature ocean of amniotic fluid, the developing baby feels every movement she makes, experiences the sounds of her body, the variations in her heart rate and biochemical changes which take place in response to the emotions she feels and even flavours from the food she eats. This shared physical environs is the beginning of what we later come to understand as sympathy – derived from Greek, meaning 'to be affected like another'. This union between mother and child in the first nine months of prenatal life led Russian paediatrician Michael Lazarev to describe mother and baby as a single being, which he likened to a 'matryoska doll' – the traditional Russian wooden painted doll – sometimes described as the 'nesting doll', which holds within it smaller and smaller versions of itself. When the physical union between mother and child is severed for the first time at birth, the baby, totally dependent on its mother to fulfil all its needs, embarks unquestioningly on the *first love affair of life* – unconditional love for its mother.

Animals also have an instinct to attach at birth. Konrad Lorenz[3] found that goslings are primed to 'attach' themselves to the first moving object they see upon hatching. Usually this is the biological mother, and the gosling will learn to follow its mother and approach her when in distress; but if the moving object first seen by the gosling during this crucial period for 'imprinting' is something else, such as a human being, the young bird will follow that object as if it were the mother bird. There are some wonderful photographs showing Konrad Lorenz going for a walk, being followed by a line of young goslings who mistakenly believed him to be their mother.

Imprinting is a fixed pattern of action or stereotyped behavioural sequence that is set in motion when the appropriate environmental stimulus or 'releaser' occurs. Some fixed action patterns can only be elicited for short periods of time during an animal's development. These periods are called 'sensitive' or 'critical' periods.

Not all human mothers feel an immediate rush of love towards their baby. Many factors in modern life have combined to impose stresses on the mother, leading to physiological changes and problems with the infant that can interfere with mother instinct. The purpose of this book is not to engender guilt in mothers and future mothers, but to explain what lies behind nature's design for human reproduction and healthy development so that parents can harness the knowledge of generations to make environmental and social choices about when and how they bring children into the world, and what sort of milieu they provide for them to grow up in.

In my work as a psychologist investigating a physical basis for certain learning and behavioural problems, I have the opportunity to talk with many parents, teachers, and health professionals. Whilst for many the problems they deal with have developed as a result of unavoidable events, I am also increasingly asked the question 'why?'.

- Why are we seeing an increase, not only in behavioural problems that plague society, but also one in four children leaving primary school with inadequate mastery of the three R's (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic)?[4]
- Why are we seeing so many children entering primary school not toilet-trained, unable to use a knife and fork or to dress themselves?[5]
- Why do so many children seem to be inattentive and unable to sit still?
- Why are so many children entering school with immature language skills?[6]
- Why is there such a rise in childhood obesity?
- Why is there an increase in childhood depression?
- Why do we see so much disaffection amongst young teenagers?
- Why does there seem to be so much substance abuse amongst the young?
- Why in a superficially affluent society, are issues related to child poverty actually on the increase?

- Why has the nature and quantity of time children spend engaged in play changed significantly in the last 50 years?

Some 120 years ago, my grandmother grew up in a very different world from the children of today. A world in which she waited patiently seven long years to marry my grandfather, during which my grandfather had to play billiards and drink with his future father-in-law for the entire evening in order to be allowed to speak to her for ten minutes. She and her sisters had to ask permission just to leave the house to post a letter, and yet my grandmother was one of the least repressed or emotionally damaged women I have ever known. Despite losing twins in her first pregnancy and two of her four sons in their early twenties, she exuded an aura of calm, warm contentment. She had extraordinary self-control, never showed anger, was always interested in everyone around her, and, as a small child, I can still remember basking in her company. She used to say that it was a nation's women that made it great.

Such stories are often dismissed as nostalgic sentimentalism, looking back to former times through rose-tinted spectacles and failing to embrace the progress of the present. All of life is about change. Survival, even in the technological jungle of today, is about being able to adapt to changing circumstances and meet the demands of new and unexpected events. Nevertheless, the strongest societies are those that hold on to values, customs, and practices that have served them well while being open to new, more efficient ways of living and learning, the concept of continuity and change. The example of my grandmother is to illustrate how different the experiences of children, men, and women are today compared with what they were in her time, and how some of those changes may be playing a part in the problems we are experiencing as societies today.

While Western technological societies undergo changes at breakneck speed, the physical processes of child development take thousands of years to evolve. A computer's brain can be assembled in less than a day in a factory, but the human brain takes some 25 years to mature, and in the early years, the innate process of maturation is dependent upon physical interaction with the environment and social engagement with a primary source of love, to unfold in healthy ways.

Starting in the late twentieth century and continuing in the present, the place of women in Western society has undergone a revolutionary change since the days when my grandmother was a young woman. Many of those changes have been for the better, and few would wish to return to the days when a woman was her husband's chattel; but there is another side to women's freedom to choose. In the swing toward personal freedom, pursuit of self-actualisation (achieving the best we can), and a society driven primarily by the 'ideology' of economics and materialism, these shifts threaten to overwhelm the greater human needs of society as a whole. In the technology-

driven West, a woman's worth is often judged by what she does as a career rather than whether she has children. In other so-called 'less-advanced' societies a woman's passage into adulthood is only considered complete when she becomes a mother for the first time. This is, in part, recognition that parenthood confers responsibilities on mothers and fathers in which the needs of dependents become the priority in motivating parental behaviour.

The future of society depends on its children, and a child's experience of the world begins with its mother. When a society ceases to value and barters the role of motherhood in exchange for materialistic gain, status, national revenue, or instant gratification, it mortgages its own future. 'We are the only species of mammal to deliberately separate our young from its mother for social reasons before it is physically able to take care of itself.'[7]

Historically, society has never been very good at valuing motherhood[8] although it has idolised images of motherhood such as 'The Madonna and Child'. In the money-centred culture of today, women and mothers are increasingly contributors to the gross national product and are not valued sufficiently (by themselves or by society more generally) for what they are contributing to family stability and society in the future, in their role as mothers.

A number of years ago, my late husband and I were staying in a small country hotel in the Ceiriog Valley in North Wales. As we sat having coffee after dinner, we started to talk to some of the other guests, one of whom was a famous biologist. When I asked him what his particular area of interest was, he replied, 'religion and behaviour'. In my ignorance, it struck me that this was unusual for a biologist, so I pressed him further. He said that nearly every religion carries within its belief system codes of behaviour, many remarkably similar to the Jewish (and later Christian) Ten Commandments.

At a fundamental level, these codes of practice are simply an attempt to sublimate the animal instincts of humankind to allow a greater society to flourish. Whilst man is capable of extraordinary acts of altruism, he is not a naturally altruistic creature. In the wild, it tends to be the selfish who survive. In order to create and sustain a society, it is necessary to curb the selfish instinct; to create rules and laws which society accepts and obeys, with lesser laws or codes becoming the social norms or manners of the culture and the day. The essence of good manners is consideration for others – being 'civil', derived from the Latin 'cives', meaning citizens. A key component of civilisation is self-regulation and self-control. The origins of self-discipline are rooted in the symbiotic relationship between mother and child with mother acting as an external regulator of her child's emotional state before it is neurologically or developmentally able to do so itself.[9] Mother is nature's universal teacher, and the nature of motherhood has a profound effect upon society.

Even in absentia, mothers have a lasting impact on the emotional life of their child. Children who have lost their mothers at an early age frequently suffer emotional isolation for the remainder of their lives, finding it difficult to form lasting emotional attachments unless an adequate substitute can be found. This is particularly true for children who lose their mothers in the first six months of life.

Parenthood is not for everyone: some people choose it and repeat the experience over and over again; others become parents accidentally, reluctantly adjusting to a role they had not planned; others look forward to being parents, only to find that the natural parenting instinct they had anticipated does not arrive with the birth of their child; some long to be parents but the much-wanted baby never comes. There is an abundance of literature for parents and parents-to-be on pregnancy, baby care, and child-rearing practices, with advice varying from one generation to the next. Most of the advice is offered from an adult's point of view. Over the years I searched the shelves to find a book that approaches motherhood from the *child's* perspective.

Dr Ursula Anderson, a former psychiatrist who deserted psychiatry in favour of paediatrics having found psychiatry to be too mechanical and blinkered in its approach to heal conditions of the soul, explained how literature which looks at childhood from the *child's* point of view tends to be

> submerged if not ignored by the over-riding power of the military industrial complex that has taken over society's mind as the centrepiece of existential importance. It is a commentary on values wherein society would rather pay for its mistakes than prevent them. Also pregnancy and the first years of life are, as it were, hidden from the general flow wherein money making and achieving status are considered to be the important things of life. The fact that you do not see too many of these books in bookshops is because there is a general devaluation of the role of mothers and the early nurturing of children, which we need to address in terms of how adults arrive at their belief systems, which dictate their feelings and behaviour.[10]

Raising Happy Healthy Children is a book which sets out to explain ideally what children need – biologically, developmentally, and in the context of relationships – from the adults and society that surround them, in order to grow into healthy, well-adjusted, and happy individuals.

Study of child-rearing practices around the world shows how remarkably adaptable and resilient human beings are. Different traditions, customs, and cultures nurture their offspring in a myriad of different fashions, many of them developing as a direct result of the climate, landscape, and type of society as well as religious traditions under which the child will be expected to live. Despite the wonderful variation of traditions and practices,

there remain certain underlying universal factors, which transcend codes of belief, fashions, and the politicisation of society. It is some of these constant factors, viewed from a developmental perspective, that will be explored in the following chapters; not to suggest that we should aim for a child-dominated society, or a de-liberation of women, but rather when society places the needs of its children first, the future for the next generations looks bright.

The following chapters will examine some of the changes in how and when fertilisation occurs that have taken place over the last 60 years and the implications for children in the long term; why factors during the course of pregnancy can affect the development of the unborn child; the impact of events surrounding birth, early feeding practices, and why developmental milestones may indicate children's needs at different stages in development.

We will explore some of the physical foundations for learning and emotional regulation, mechanisms of movement control, development of vision and hearing, and why balance and touch are often the forgotten senses in the classroom and a society increasingly haunted by the fear of sexual abuse. We will discuss why a child's physical experience of the world is often mirrored in his emotions, and how we can help children's physical experience of the world to be a happy one.

There are no absolute rules for parenting. Every child is different and the parenting techniques that work with one child in the family will not necessarily work for others. The purpose of this book is to give parents and professionals who work with children an understanding of the physical nature of child development and *what children need* so that they can solve problems when they arise, understand the language of children, and provide the best environment they can for healthy, secure, and happy development.

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