

What are three harmful maternal behaviors that can affect the developing child re...

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The bond between a mother and her child is one which cannot be replicated in any way. The development of human beings is fundamentally built upon this bond and it is from our parents that our initial development grows. Through these primary relationships, we learn about love, affection and being sociable. The obvious question is whether we would successfully grow up into happy, functioning adults if we were not privy to these early experiences. Even further, the comments our parents make as we are developing through childhood and into early adolescence, can also have a marked effect on our confidence, self-esteem and our ability to be outgoing. In the course of this essay, I will discuss three key maternal behaviors which are harmful to the development of her child.

In 1959, a psychologist named Harry Harlow decided he wanted to try and limit the infant mortality rate in his research lab's monkeys. The experiment consisted of removing the new-born monkey from its mother and all other social contact immediately after birth, and keeping them in a controlled environment. These monkeys quickly began displaying negative behavior: they would sit and stare, absently, into space; circle their cages in a repetitive way; they would hold their head in their hands and rock back and forth; and perhaps most worryingly, they developed self-harming compulsions. (Harlow, 1959, p 217) The human connection to monkeys is well-known and as such, Harlow quickly made the leap to recognising how his work can help us to better understand human attachment and the effect it has on our development.

When we are first born, one of the first things that happen to us is being handed to our mothers for our first cuddle. This is clearly an important activity as without this immediate affection, we feel vulnerable and we feel fear instead of love. Some of the monkeys in the study were reared by 'cloth mothers': a wire model covered with a terry cloth and a monkey-like face. These monkeys were still socially inept which demonstrates how important the bond with a mother is for our emotional, social and mental development; we need someone to follow and copy in order to develop an understanding of 'norms.' This example of a mother neglecting to socialise her child affectionately and lovingly demonstrates a harmful maternal behaviour.

J. Koluchova published a 1972 study into severe emotional deprivation, focusing on the development of two twin children, known in the case as 'P. M.' and 'J. M.' to protect their privacy. The twins' mother died during childbirth and for the first 18 months of their life, they lived in a children's home but were then reunited with their father, his new wife and their children (a number of whom were blood siblings of the twins). In 1967, their father took them to a doctor and the doctor stated that " Gradually, it became clear that this was a case of criminal neglect." What followed was an investigation and court proceedings that showed that the twins had been brought up in virtual social isolation, their room was not heated, they were frequently kept in the cellar and beaten. The result of their five years and six months of social and emotional deprivation included the inability to walk still at age seven, hardly any spontaneous speech, " primitive" play skills, they were " timid and mistrustful", limited emotional expression and extremely

low IQs indicating a level of induced imbecility. (Koluchova, 1972, p 225-226)

This example of harmful behavior relates to prolonged deprivation and neglect on the part of both father and step-mother, in lieu of their real mother. Arguably, there was a lack of maternal instinct having any effect on their upbringing and as such, they were under-developed and likely to struggle for the rest of their lives. Their step-mother claimed that the twins were “ defective from birth” but there was no evidence of this in their early experiences in the children’s home. The conclusion is clear: prolonged deprivation from maternal (or paternal, for that matter) nurture can cause severe under-development in all areas of a child’s development: mental, social and emotional.

Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961) studied how an act of violence, committed by an adult and witnessed by a child, can affect the child. They questioned whether a child who is witness to such acts can be passive or whether they will imitate this behaviour. The general, overall result of the study was that children who were witness to violent acts were more aggressive than those who weren’t. (Bandura et al. 1961, p 246 – 249) This is unsurprising as children are like sponges: soaking up experiences and knowledge all the time. Our first experience of society is through our parents and as such, if either of them (particularly the mother) are violent, then children are more likely to grow up thinking that it is okay to hit someone out of frustration, aggression or even, for fun. Our mother represents safety and love; if our mother physically abuses us then our concept of these things is shattered and is likely to cause stunted emotional development.

## References

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