



# Is Too Much Mothering Bad for You?

*A Look at the New Social Science*

Judith Warner

**H**OLLY SCHIFFRIN AND MIRIAM LISS, PROFESSORS of psychology at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, spent their early years as students reading about the perils of insufficient mothering: John Bowlby's war orphans, scarred with the lasting psychic wounds of "maternal deprivation"; René Spitz's bereft infants, starved for mother care in foundling homes; Harry Harlow's baby monkeys so desperate for maternal contact that they'd cling to a terry cloth mother-substitute. Once they

themselves became psychologists, however, and—eventually—mothers, their interest in the dynamics at work in the mother-child relationship took a somewhat different turn.

There was, they realized, more than a half-century of research looking at the needs of infants and the psychological fallout for children when mother-baby bonding goes wrong. Indeed, the parenting culture they'd entered, as new mothers in America in the early 2000s—a culture that celebrated stay-at-home mother-

hood, idealized mothers who submerged themselves completely in the care of their babies, and treated all mother-child separation as a problem fraught with the potential for psychic tragedy—had sprung, to a great degree, from the lessons of that research.

As working mothers obliged to employ some degree of child care, guilty about doing so and yet convinced that their professional activities were not just important but healthy, both for themselves and their families, they found themselves in an intellectually troubling version of the work-family bind that affects the vast majority of mothers today. They were stressed, and emotionally divided. Rushing to do all and be all, to rise to the exacting standards of the twenty-first-century culture of motherhood in America while striving to achieve tenure, they found themselves starting to fray. Could this, they wondered, possibly be a healthy thing? And was it—did it need to be—a new avenue for psychological research?

“As highly educated professionals wanting to maintain this profession but also to be present for our children, we feel that pressure. We feel that stress,” Schiffrin said in a phone interview this past summer, not long after she and Liss (and former student Kathryn M. Rizzo) had published the fruit of their queries, “Insight into the Parenthood Paradox: Mental Health Outcomes of Intensive Mothering,” in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. “When we were younger, in grad school, we were interested in child outcomes. Now as parents we’re seeing first-hand the pressure on parents.”

Schiffrin and Liss weren’t the first to sense that there was something very wrong with the contemporary culture of motherhood. Many critics in recent years have denounced the demands for extreme self-sacrifice, total child-centeredness, and time-intensive, high-stakes mothering performance that took root in America in the final decades of the twentieth century. In popular books and much-emailed newspaper and magazine articles, they’ve denounced the effects on family life of “hyperparenting,” incessant “helicopter parenting,” and “frantic family syndrome.” They’ve ac-

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cused today’s overly involved mothers of raising American kids to be inveterate narcissists, charged them with producing a “nation of wimps.” But these mainstream critiques have generally remained focused on the effects, once again, of incorrect mothering on children, families, and society.

In academia, on the other hand, some researchers had started to focus on mothers. In 1996, sociologist Sharon Hays had gone so far as to label what had become the prevailing philosophy of 24/7 “intensive motherhood” an “ideology,” and in so doing energized a new mini-field of motherhood studies, dedicated largely to deconstructing that ideology and redefining and reclaiming motherhood in ways more in line with the conflicting realities of contemporary women’s lives.

Sociologists, psychologists, women’s studies scholars, and literary critics started describing many of the negative effects of intensive motherhood—what legal scholar Joan Williams has called “Giving Tree Motherhood”—on women’s self-conception and well-being. They found, for example, that mothers who say they lack resources—whether due to insufficient money, help from family, or paid child care—show increased levels of depression. They found that mothers who say they feel they should be able to provide constant, high-quality intellectual stimulation plus emotional succor for their children also re-

port more stress and guilt. And that those who try to make their lives center perfectly around their children report a chronic feeling of overburdenedness.

Schiffrin and Liss felt, however, that the evidence behind many of the conclusions being reached about the deleterious effects of intensive motherhood was largely anecdotal—drawn from qualitative, not quantitative research, from personal interviews, not carefully designed surveys. They wanted more, and better, hard data. No one, they felt, had adequately defined and isolated the specific tenets of intensive motherhood to see how they affected women's emotional well-being. So they developed a survey tool, the "Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire," that broke the ideology of intensive motherhood down into five measurable components. They called the belief that women were uniquely and solely qualified to be primary parents "Essentialism." They labeled the idea that there is no higher, more satisfying, or more pleasurable calling than motherhood "Fulfillment." The notion that a mother must constantly strive to optimize her child's brain development they called an adherence to an extreme belief in "Stimulation." The conviction that motherhood is "the hardest job in the world" became a variable belief called "Challenging." And the belief that mothers must tailor their lives to revolve around their children was given the shorthand label "Child-Centered."

They surveyed 181 mothers of children aged five and under. They found that indeed a strict adherence to certain of these beliefs was associated with poor mental health outcomes for mothers. Notably, believing that women are the essential parent, naturally endowed with a sense of calling for motherhood, led not only to reports of feeling less well supported, but also to lower scores on a life-satisfaction scale (which, basically, asked women if they felt good about their lives and what they'd accomplished in them). Beliefs in maternal "essentialism" were also correlated with higher scores on questions that gauged how "stressed" (overwhelmed, out of control, unable to cope,

buffeted by unexpected events) they felt. Believing that motherhood is extremely challenging also was linked to less life satisfaction and more depression and stress. And assiduous child-centeredness, too, was linked with less life satisfaction.

Schiffrin and Liss's study and its conclusions proved intriguing to some journalists ("Mother Is Best?" questioned *Time*), joining a stream of reporting over the past year that has spotlighted research indicating that living an all-motherhood-all-the-time lifestyle isn't necessarily good for a woman's mental health. There was, for example, notice of research from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which found, based on survey data for more than 1,300 mothers in the United States, that women with jobs—especially part-time jobs—were both less depressed and in better overall health than those whose lives were devoted full-time to their homes and their kids. Then, this spring, a Gallup poll made headlines when it found that mothers who don't work outside the home were far more likely to be depressed—and plain old angry, sad, stressed, and worried—than mothers who were engaged in professional activities.

That this research is being done, that questions are being posed about hyper-devoted, stay-at-home mothers, and that the results are being happily picked up by the popular media, signals the fact, I believe, that we have come to a major shift in cultural attitudes toward motherhood in America. This change has been fed, in part, by the bad economy, which has made stay-at-home motherhood an impossibility for even greater numbers of women. With male unemployment pushing more women than ever to be their family's primary breadwinners, the notion of full-time, at-home motherhood as women's highest and most noble calling has proved to be untenable. After decades of promoting child-centered "surrender," popular writers and academic researchers alike are now articulating a sort of backlash.

The backlash began, in the popular press at least, as a jokey, edgy, subversive pose, in books like Christie Mellor's *The Three-Martini Playdate*,

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which suggested moms might want to lighten up their lives with a bit of old-fashioned adult fun, or Ayelet Waldman's *Bad Mother*, which explored the real-life limits of maternal devotion. But more recently, the pushback has become part of an ongoing mainstream conversation, fueled by a rising wave of parental exhaustion. Indeed, one could argue that the books that have shaped our cultural discussion of motherhood in the last year or two (*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, in which hyper-parenting reaches quasi-sadistic proportions, and *Bringing Up Bébé*, which makes a French-flavored case for parental affective restraint), have actually tapped into an undercurrent of hostility toward children, an almost angry impulse that reflects the bitterness and disenchantment so many bone-weary and frazzled women feel after years of intensive motherhood.

Of course, academic work on motherhood tends not to swing so widely to the popular press's rhetorical extremes. And yet, in recent years, there has been a clear, observable shift in academia to focus on mothers' irreducible needs as well as those of children. According to Boston College's Pratyusha Tummala-Narra, even psychoanalytic theory has critically expanded its interest in the mother-child dyad well beyond its traditional focus: No longer does the discussion simply center on how a mother acts upon her baby, but how the demands of the relationship as a whole—and of the society that surrounds it—acts upon the mother. Excessive motherhood of the stay-at-home, constantly hovering, “helicopter” variety is now being problematized, just as insufficient, “selfish” working motherhood was made a problem in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

**IF THE PAST IS ANY GUIDE, THIS SHIFT IN FOCUS** could more widely signal the arrival of more forward-looking, reality-embracing attitudes about contemporary women's lives. There's a historical precedent, after all: In the 1970s, with the women's movement on the rise and optimism about its potential for social change still great, social scientists were regularly producing research that showed that maternal self-sacrifice—the loss of self for the sake of what Hays would later call the “sacred child”—was bad for mothers' well-being. And a depressed and unhappy mother could hardly be good for the larger family. Self-fulfillment, experts then argued, was actually a necessary part of good motherhood. And the key to self-fulfillment was clear: get out of the home, break out of the postwar trap of excessive domesticity, rescue the self from the demands of others, and meet one's own needs. In 1972, prominent British child psychiatrist Michael Rutter argued persuasively in his influential *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* that the narrow idea of mother-child bonding needed to be reexamined, and that, while children did need to form secure attachments, they didn't need to be exclusively with their mothers. Anthropologist Margaret Mead was often invoked in the popular media for her views that having many caretakers early on was better for a child than being taken care of exclusively by his or her mother.

In the conservative 1980s, however, all this changed. Popular authors like British psychologist Penelope Leach, American pediatrician and child psychiatrist T. Berry Brazelton, and child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan started comparing the sorts of separations experienced by children of working mothers with

the loss and deprivations suffered by Romanian orphans who had been found living in horrific conditions in the immediate aftermath of Ceausescu's regime. The post-World War II work of psychoanalysts like John Bowlby and René Spitz on catastrophic childhood loss and deprivation breathed new life in Leach's and Brazelton's writing, never more awfully, perhaps, than when Leach, in 1994, devastated a new generation of moms with the following words:

The grieving of a baby who loses her one and only special person—her lone mother who dies, for example, or the lifelong foster mother from whom she is removed—is agonizing to see because we know we are looking at genuine tragedy. But the pain of separations we arrange and connive at every time we change caregivers or leave a baby in the daycare center that has new staff—again—or with an agency babysitter she has never seen, may not be as different as we assume.

As I wrote in my 2005 book *Perfect Madness*, an obsession with abandonment and loss—linked, in the late twentieth century, to the not-yet-fully-accepted fact that a majority of mothers in America were working—made its way both into pop culture and a whole new slew of social-science studies emerged to reinforce the importance of children's early and exclusive relationship to their mothers. Attachment theory was updated to include such further refinements as the notion that there were "critical" or "sensitive periods" for bonding and learning, in which mothers played absolutely crucial roles in helping or impeding the intellectual/emotional/artistic flowering of their children's brains.

The Carnegie Corporation published a report in 1994 describing a "quiet crisis" among American children, whose minds, it said, were being neglected by their overworking parents, incompetent caretakers, and inadequate schools. Then, in 1997, came an onslaught of coverage of "new" scientific data showing the

importance of brain development between birth and age three. *Time* and *Newsweek* turned over their covers to special coverage of the infant brain. Hillary Rodham Clinton organized a White House conference on early childhood development, in conjunction with a national communications campaign, which included a prime time TV special, *I Am Your Child*, narrated by Tom Hanks.

The news came out of the White House conference that an adult's potential vocabulary was determined largely by the words processed by his or her brain before the age of three. Soon, studies showed, almost 80 percent of parents with a high school education or less were buying flash cards, brain-teasing puzzles, and other educational aids to foster their babies' intellectual development. A mini-industry arose of Baby Mozart tapes, sold as a way to enhance spatial reasoning, musical and artistic talent, and Baby Einstein bilingual products to train the brain—all of which came with warnings about the limited window of opportunity during which a parent could enhance a young child's intellectual development.

With all this information came a crushing sense of responsibility, and a challenge. For if, as *Psychology Today* claimed, child prodigies were "made, not born," and "parental encouragement and exposure" were more important than "genes or a natural 'gift,'" then any properly ambitious parent could turn his or her progeny into a young Mozart (provided he or she respected the "critical period" in which the child could learn to be a piano or violin or math or paleontology prodigy, defined by that magazine as the age of four to seven years). And on the flip side of this, if mothers neglected to nurture their children's potential talents, then they could hold themselves responsible for a lifetime of future academic and professional (not to mention social and psychological) failure.

Accompanying all this, of course, was a creeping message that it was impossible to properly monitor and stimulate a child's intellectual development if a mother worked. *Time* magazine said, "In an age when mothers

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and fathers are increasingly pressed for time . . . the results coming out of the labs are likely to increase concerns about leaving very young children in the care of others. For the data underscore the importance of hands-on parenting, of finding time to cuddle a baby, talk with a toddler, and provide infants with stimulating experiences.”

It's hardly even a matter of debate anymore that the demands of American motherhood have spiraled out of control. Yet, in the popular media at least, there appears to be little sense that the excesses of our parenting culture are anything more than a personal problem: a question of individual psychology, requiring mothers to take responsibility, adjust their attitudes, and help themselves. We continue to be resistant to thinking more broadly about the subject: about the ways our society—and particularly our glaring lack of a work-family policy—have created the high-pressure, high-stakes world of family life. It is, in large part, those premises that have produced the anxiety, isolation, and sense of overwhelmedness that go hand in hand with toxic levels of intensive mothering. Unfortunately, there remains, too, in America, a bias toward excessive child-

centeredness, and a difficulty in focusing on “mothers as people,” as Columbia University Teachers College psychologist Suniya Luthar, who has surveyed more than 4,000 mothers over the past six years, likes to put it.

Schiffrin herself says that in the next phase of her research she will bring her focus back to children. Her next project will be a study on the ways and degrees that mothers' commitment to intensive parenting can alter children's mental health. “There's so much research that says when mothers are stressed and depressed children have bad outcomes,” she says. “If it turns out to be bad for the kids, we really have to educate mothers that the best gift is to be a relaxed, happy mother.”

She's right, of course. The only thing that will truly motivate mothers—and those who judge them—to change their attitudes and behavior will be proof that today's overly intensive parenting style is bad for the very people it's meant to help, the children. One can only hope that, someday, what's good or bad for women—both as mothers and as individual human beings—will finally come to be considered a worthy enough topic of concern on its own. ■