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D. W. Winnicott  
The Child,  
the Family  
and the  
Outside World



*The Child, the Family and the Outside World*

D. W. Winnicott (1896–1971) was one of the pioneers of child psychiatry, described by Alain de Botton as ‘the greatest British psychoanalyst who ever lived’. He was the first paediatrician in Britain to train as a psychoanalyst, and his ground-breaking work drew on his expertise in both disciplines. In over forty years of clinical practice at the Paddington Green Children’s Hospital he introduced pioneering concepts which continue to influence our understandings of childhood today, from the ‘good-enough’ mother to the transitional object (also known as the comfort blanket).

Winnicott was committed to presenting his ideas in accessible, everyday language that could be understood by parents, teachers and social workers. Between 1943 and 1962 he gave more than fifty anonymous BBC broadcasts aimed at mothers, and received sacks of letters from women who had listened in. His work changed lives and minds, both within psychiatry and among the general public.



D. W. WINNICOTT

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Much of this book is based on talks broadcast by the BBC at various times, and I wish to express my gratitude to the producer, Miss Iza Benzie. I would like also to thank Dr Janet Hardenberg who helped to prepare the talks for a reading (as opposed to listening) audience when they were first published.

D. W. W.



## *Introduction*

This book seems to me to need an introduction. It is about mothers and babies, and about parents and children, and towards the end it is about children at school and in the wider world. The language I have used grows up, so to speak, with the growing child, and I hope it alters to match the change from the intimacy of infant care to a more detached relationship that is appropriate when the child is older.

Although the early chapters are addressed intimately to mothers, I am certainly not putting forward the view that it is essential for the young mother to read books about child care. This would imply that she is more self-conscious about her state than she is. She needs protection and information, and she needs the best that medical science can offer in the way of bodily care. She needs a doctor and a nurse whom she knows, and in whom she has confidence. She also needs the devotion of a husband, and satisfying sexual experiences. But she does not necessarily need to be told in advance what being a mother feels like.

One of my main ideas is this, that the best mothering comes out of natural self-reliance and there is a distinction to be made between the things that may come naturally and the things that have to be learnt, and I try to distinguish between these so that what comes naturally may not be spoiled.

I believe there is a place for addressing mothers and fathers directly, because people want to know what is happening in the early stage of infancy, and somehow the subject comes more to life in this way than if I were to write about mothers and babies in the abstract.

People want to know about the beginnings of their lives, and I think they ought to want to know. It could be said that there is something missing in human society if children grow up and become in their turn fathers and mothers, but do not know and acknowledge just what their mothers did for them at the start.

By this I don't mean that children should thank their parents for conceiving them, or even for their cooperation in home-building and the management of family affairs. I am concerned with the mother's relation to her baby just before the birth and in the first weeks and months after the birth. I am trying to draw attention to the immense contribution to the individual and to society which the ordinary good mother with her husband in support makes at the beginning, and which she does *simply through being devoted to her infant*.

Is not this contribution of the devoted mother unrecognized precisely because it is immense? If this contribution is accepted it follows that everyone who is sane, everyone who feels himself to be a person in the world, and for whom the world means something, every happy person, is in infinite debt to a woman. At a time in earliest infancy when there was no perception of dependence, we were absolutely dependent.

Once again let me emphasize, the result of such recognition of the maternal role when it comes will not be gratitude or even praise. The result will be a lessening in ourselves of a fear. If our society delays making full acknowledgement of this dependence which is a historical fact in the initial stage of development of every individual, there must remain a block to ease and complete health, a block that comes from a fear. If there is no true recognition of the mother's part, then there must remain a vague fear of dependence. This fear will sometimes take the form of a fear of woman in general or fear of a particular woman, and at other times will take on less easily recognized forms, always including the fear of domination.

Unfortunately the fear of domination does not lead groups of people to avoid being dominated; on the contrary it draws them towards a specific or chosen domination. Indeed, were the

psychology of the dictator studied one would expect to find that, among other things, in his own personal struggle he is trying to control the woman whose domination he unconsciously still fears, trying to control her by accommodating her, acting for her, and in turn demanding total subjection and 'love'.

Many students of social history have thought that fear of woman is a powerful cause of the seemingly illogical behaviour of human beings in groups, but it is seldom traced to its root. Traced to its root in the history of each individual, this fear of woman turns out to be a fear of recognizing the fact of dependence, the initial dependence of earliest infancy. There are therefore good social reasons for instigating research into the very early stages of the infant-mother relationship.

At present the importance of the mother at the start is often denied, and instead it is said that in the early months it is only a technique of bodily care that is needed, and that therefore a good nurse will do just as well. We even find mothers (not, I hope, in this country) being told that they *must mother* their infants, this being the most extreme degree of denial that 'mothering' grows naturally out of being a mother.

Administrative tidiness, the dictates of hygiene, a laudable urge towards the promotion of bodily health, these and all sorts of other things get between the mother and her baby, and it is unlikely that the mothers themselves will rise up in concerted effort to protest against interference. I write this book because someone must act for the young mothers who are having their first and second babies, and who are necessarily themselves in a dependent state. I hope to give them support in their reliance on their natural tendencies, while at the same time paying full tribute to the skill and care of those who give help where the mother and father and the various parent-substitutes need help.



PART ONE

*Mother and Child*



## I

### *A Man Looks at Motherhood*

To begin with, you will be relieved to know that I am not going to be telling you what to do. I am a man, and so I can never really know what it is like to see wrapped up over there in the cot a bit of my own self, a bit of me living an independent life, yet at the same time dependent and gradually becoming a person. Only a woman can experience this, and perhaps only a woman can imaginatively experience it, as she has to do when by bad luck of one kind or another the actual experience is lacking.

What is there for me to do, then, if I am not going to give instructions? I'm used to having mothers bring their children to me, and when this happens we see what we want to talk about right before our eyes. The baby is jumping about on the mother's knee, reaching out for things on my desk, climbing down on to the floor and crawling round; clambering up on the chairs, or pulling books out of the book-cases; or perhaps clinging to mother in dread of the white-coated doctor who will surely be a monster who eats children if they are nice, and who does worse things if they are nasty. Or an older child is at a separate table drawing pictures while mother and I are trying to piece together the history of his development, and trying to see where things started to go wrong. The child is listening out of one ear to make sure we are up to no mischief, and at the same time is communicating with me without speaking, by the drawings which I go over to see from time to time.

How easy is all this, and how different is my task now, when I have to build baby and small child out of my imagination and experience!

You have had the same difficulty. If I cannot communicate with

you, what did you feel like having a baby a few weeks old, not knowing what was or was not there to communicate with? If you are thinking this out, try to remember at what age your baby or babies seemed to notice you as a person, and what made you feel fairly sure at that exciting moment that you were two people communicating with each other. You did not have to do everything from different sides of the room, by talking. What language would you have used? No, you found yourself concerned with management of the baby's body, and you liked it to be so. You knew just how to pick the baby up, how to put the baby down, and how to leave well alone, letting the cot act for you; and you had learnt how to arrange the clothes for comfort and for preserving the baby's natural warmth. Indeed, you knew all this when you were a little girl and played with dolls. And then there were special times when you did definite things, feeding, bathing, changing napkins, and cuddling. Sometimes the urine trickled down your apron or went right through and soaked you as if you yourself had let slip, and you didn't mind. In fact by these things you could have known that you were a woman, and an ordinary devoted mother.

I am saying all this because I want you to know that this man, nicely detached from real life, free from the noise and smell and responsibility of child care, does know that the mother of a baby is tasting real things, and that she would not miss the experience for worlds. If we understand each other thus far, you will perhaps let me talk about being an ordinary devoted mother and managing the earliest stages of the life of a new human being. I cannot tell you exactly what to do, but I can talk about what it all means.

In the ordinary things you do you are quite naturally doing very important things, and the beauty of it is that you do not have to be clever, and you do not even have to think if you do not want to. You may have been hopeless at arithmetic at school, or perhaps all your friends got scholarships, but you didn't like the sight of a history book, and so failed and left school early; or perhaps you would have done well if you hadn't had measles just before the exam. Or you may be really clever. But all this does not matter, and it hasn't anything to do with whether you are a good mother or not. If a child can play with a

doll, you can be an ordinary devoted mother, and I believe you are just this most of the time. Isn't it strange that such a tremendously important thing should depend so little on exceptional intelligence!

If human babies are to develop eventually into healthy, independent, and society-minded adult individuals, they absolutely depend on being given a good start, and this good start is assured in nature by the existence of the bond between the baby's mother and the baby, the thing called love. So if you love your baby he or she is getting a good start.

Let me quickly say that I am not talking about sentimentality. You all know the kind of person who goes about saying, 'I simply *adore* babies'. But you wonder, do they love them? A mother's love is a pretty crude affair. There's possessiveness in it, appetite, even a 'drat the kid' element; there's generosity in it, and power, as well as humility. But sentimentality is outside it altogether, and is repugnant to mothers.

Now, it may be that you are an ordinary devoted mother, and you like being one without thinking about it. Artists are often the very people who hate thinking about art, and about the purpose of art. You, as a mother, may prefer to avoid thinking things out, so I want to warn you that in this book we are going to talk about the things a devoted mother does by just being herself. But a few will like to consider what they are doing. Probably some of you have finished with actual mothering, and your children have grown up and gone to school; you may then like to look back on the good things you did, and think about the way in which you laid the foundation for your children's development. If you did it all intuitively, probably that was the best way.

It is vitally important that we should get to understand the part played by those who care for the infant, so that we can protect the young mother from whatever tends to get between herself and her child. If she is without understanding of the thing she does so well she is without means to defend her position, and only too easily she spoils her job by trying to do what she is told, or what her own mother did, or what the books say.

Fathers come into this, not only by the fact that they can be

*Mother and Child*

good mothers for limited periods of time, but also because they can help to protect the mother and baby from whatever tends to interfere with the bond between them, which is the essence and very nature of child care.

In the following pages I shall be deliberately trying to put into words what a mother does when she is ordinarily and quite simply devoted to her baby.

We still have much to learn about infants at the beginning, and perhaps only mothers can tell us what we want to know.

## *Getting to Know Your Baby*

A woman's life changes in many ways when she conceives a child. Up to this point she may have been a person of wide interests, perhaps in business, or a keen politician, or an enthusiastic tennis player, or one who has always been ready for a dance or a 'do'. She may have tended to despise the relatively restricted lives of friends who have had a child, making rude remarks about their resemblance to vegetables. She may have been actually repelled by such technical details as the washing and airing of napkins. If she has been interested in children, her interest can be said to have been sentimental rather than practical. But sooner or later she herself becomes pregnant.

At first it may easily happen that she resents this fact, because she can see only too dearly what a terrible interference with her 'own' life it must mean. What she sees is true enough, and it would be silly for anyone to deny it. Babies are a lot of trouble, and they are a positive nuisance unless they are wanted. If a young woman has not yet begun to want the baby she is carrying she cannot avoid feeling that she is just unlucky.

Experience shows, however, that a change gradually takes place in the feelings as well as in the body of the girl who has conceived. Shall I say her interest gradually narrows down? Perhaps it is better to say that the direction of her interest turns from outwards to inwards. She slowly but surely comes to believe that the centre of the world is in her own body.

Perhaps some reader has just arrived at this stage, and is beginning to feel a little proud of herself, to feel she is someone who deserves respect, and for whom people should naturally make way on the pavement.

As you become more and more sure that you will soon become a mother you begin to put all your eggs into one basket, as the saying is. You begin to take the risk of allowing yourself to be concerned with one object, the little boy or girl human being that will be born. This little boy or girl will be yours in the deepest possible sense, and you will be his or hers.

To become a mother you go through a great deal, and I think that it is because you go through so much that you become able to see with especial clearness certain fundamental principles of infant care, so that it takes years of study for those who are not mothers to get as far in understanding as you may get in the ordinary course of your experience. But you may very well need support from those of us who study you, because superstitions and old wives' tales – some of them quite modern ones – come along and make you doubt your own true feelings.

Let us consider just what it is that the ordinary healthy-minded mother knows about her baby that is so vitally important, and yet which is apt to be forgotten by those who only look on. I think the most important thing is that you easily feel that your baby is worth getting to know as a person, and worth getting to know from the earliest possible moment. No one who comes along to give you advice will ever know this as well as you know it yourself.

Even in the womb your baby is a human being, unlike any other human being, and by the time he is born he will have had quite a lot of experience, unpleasant as well as pleasant. It is, of course, easy to read into the face of a new-born baby things that are not there; though to be sure, a baby may look very wise at times, even philosophical. But if I were you I should not wait until the psychologists have decided how human a baby is at birth – I should just go right ahead and get to know this little person, and let him or her get to know you.

You already know something of your baby's characteristics because of the movements you have learned to expect from him inside your womb. If there has been a lot of movement you have wondered how much there is in the amusing saying that boys kick more than girls do; and in any case you have been pleased to have

the actual sign of life and liveliness that this quickening has provided. And during this time the baby has, I suppose, come to know quite a lot about you. He has shared your meals. His blood has flowed more quickly when you drank a nice cup of tea in the morning, or when you ran to catch a bus. To some extent he must have known whenever you were anxious or excited or angry. If you have been restless he has become used to movement, and he may expect to be jogged on your knee or rocked in his cradle. If, on the other hand, you are a restful sort of person he has known peace, and may expect a quiet lap, and a still pram. In a way I should say that he knows you better than you know him, until he is born, and until you hear his cry, and are well enough to look at him, and to take him in your arms.

Babies and mothers vary tremendously in their condition after the event of birth, and perhaps it will be two or three days in your case before you and your baby are both fit to enjoy each other's company. But there is no real reason why you shouldn't start to get to know each other right away, if you are well enough. I know a young mother who made a very early contact with her baby boy, her first child. From the day of his birth, after each feed, he was put in a cradle and left by his mother's bed by the sensible matron of the nursing home. For a while he would lie awake in the quiet of the room, and the mother would put down her hand to him; and before he was a week old he began to catch hold of her fingers and look up in her direction. This intimate relationship continued without interruption and developed, and I believe it has helped to lay the foundation for the child's personality and for what we call his emotional development, and his capacity to withstand the frustrations and shocks that sooner or later came his way.

The most impressive part of your early contact with your baby will be at his feed-times, that is to say, when he is excited. You may be excited too, and you may be having feelings in your breasts which indicate that you are usefully excited, and that you are preparing to give milk. The baby is fortunate if he can take you and your excitements for granted at first, so that he can get on with the business of meeting and managing his own impulses and urges.

For, according to my view, it is a most alarming thing to be an infant discovering the feelings that turn up when excitement comes along. Have you ever looked at it in that way?

You will see from this that you have to get to know your infant in two states, when he is contented, and more or less unexcited, and when he is excited. At first, when he is unexcited, he will spend a great deal of his time asleep, but not all his time, and the moments of waking but peaceful life are precious. I know that some babies hardly ever manage to get satisfied and for a long time cry and show distress, even after feeding, and do not sleep easily, and in this case it is very difficult for the mother to make satisfactory contact. But in time things will probably settle down, and there will be some contentment, and perhaps during the bath-time there will be a chance for the beginnings of a human relationship.

One reason why you should get to know your baby both in contentment and in excitement is that he needs your help. And you cannot give this help unless you know where you are with him. He needs you to help him to manage the awful transitions from sleeping or waking contentment to all-out greedy attack. This could be said to be your first task as a mother, apart from routine, and a lot of skill is required which only the child's mother can possess, unless it be some good woman who adopts a baby in the first days after birth.

For instance, babies are not born with an alarm clock hanging round their necks, with instructions: feed three-hourly. Regular feeding is a convenience to the mother or to the nurse, and from the baby's point of view it may well turn out that regular feeding is the next best thing to having a pull whenever the impulse to feed turns up. But a baby does not necessarily start off *wanting* regular feeds; in fact, I think that what an infant expects to find is a breast that comes as it is wanted and disappears as it is unwanted. Occasionally a mother may have to give her breast in a gipsy way for a short period of time before she can adopt a rigid routine that suits her convenience. At any rate, it is well that when you are getting to know your baby you should know what it is that he starts off expecting, even if you decide that he cannot have it. And, if you know the whole of your infant, you will find that it is only when he

is excited that he has such an imperious nature. In between times he is only too glad to find mother behind the breast or bottle, and to find the room behind mother, and the world outside the room. Whereas there is a tremendous amount to learn about your baby during his feed-times, you will see that I am suggesting that there is even more to learn about him while he is in his bath, or lying in his cot, or when you are changing his napkins.

If you are being looked after by a nurse, I hope she will understand me and not feel I am interfering when I say that you are at a disadvantage if your baby is only handed to you at feed-times. You need nurse's help, and you are not yet strong enough to top and tail the baby yourself. But if you do not know your sleeping baby, or your baby as he lies awake wondering, you must get a very funny impression of him when he is handed to you just for you to feed him. At this time he is a bundle of discontent, a human being to be sure, but one who has raging lions and tigers inside him. And he is almost certainly scared by his own feelings. If no one has explained all this to you, you may become scared too.

If, on the other hand, you already know your infant by watching him as he lies by your side, and by allowing him to play in your arms, and at your breast, you will see his excitement in its proper proportions and recognize it as a form of love. You will also be in a position to understand what is happening when he turns his head away and refuses to drink, like the proverbial horse taken to the water, or when he goes to sleep in your arms instead of working at his feed, or when he becomes agitated so that he is no good at his job. He is just scared of his own feelings, and you can help him at this point as no one else can by your great patience, and by allowing play, by allowing him to mouth the nipple, perhaps to handle it; anything that the infant can let himself enjoy, till at last he gains the confidence to take the risk and suck. This is not easy for you, because you have yourself to think of too, your breasts being either over-full or else waiting till the baby sucks before beginning to fill. But if you know what is happening you will be able to tide over the difficult time, and enable your baby to establish a good relation to you when he feeds.

He is not so silly, either. When you think that excitement means an experience for him rather like what being put in a den of lions would be for us, no wonder he wants to make sure you are a reliable milk-giver before he lets himself go for you. If you fail him it must feel to him as if the wild beasts will gobble him up. Give him time and he will discover you, and you will both eventually come to value even his greedy love of your breasts.

I think that an important thing about a young mother's experience of *early* contact with her baby is the reassurance that it gives her that her child is normal (whatever that may mean). In your case, as I have said, you may be too exhausted to start making friends with your baby on the first day, but it is well you should know that it is entirely natural that a mother should want to get to know her baby right away after the birth. This is not only because she longs to know him (or her), it is also – and it is this which makes it an urgent matter – because she has had all sorts of ideas of giving birth to something awful, something certainly not so perfect as a baby. It is as if human beings find it very difficult to believe that they are good enough to create within themselves something that is quite good. I doubt whether any mother really and fully believes in her child at the beginning. Father comes into this too, for he suffers just as much as mother does from the doubt that he may not be able to create a healthy normal child. Getting to know your baby is therefore in the first place an urgent matter, because of the relief the good news brings to both parents.

After this you will want to get to know your baby because of your love and pride. And then you will study him (or her) in detail so as to be able to give him the help he needs, help that he can only get from the one who knows him best, that is to say, from you, his mother.

All of this means that the care of a new-born infant is a whole-time job, and that it can be done well by only one person.