

Book Review

Being There: Why Prioritising Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters'
by Erica Komisar, LCSW published by Penguin Random House Penguin.com)

This is an explosive book. Erica warns us at the outset that it may make some readers feel uncomfortable. It should be read by all new parents or prospective parents - and our leaders and politicians, head teachers and sixth-formers alike. Erica recommends counselling for would-be mums to address any buried, subconscious conflicts from the way they were mothered, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past. She quotes Philip Larkin's famous poem 'They f*** you up, your mum and dad...' We have to remember that Erica's clientele tend to be the wealthy professional classes around New York, who may have a choice as to whether to work or not when they start a family, and she does admit that it is better for a single mother to go out to work to lift her family out of poverty and put food on the table for them. In general, however, Erica says that the children who grow up most emotionally healthy tend to be the offspring of middle-income families, neither dogged by poverty nor emotionally neglected by absent high-fliers who have delegated the business of child rearing to others.

She reminds us that 'we can do everything in life, but not at the same time'. Sound advice.

This book is structured into three sections, with useful Appendices at the back, and a copious bibliography displaying an impressive amount of research to support the writer's claims. The Appendices deal with such topics as how to choose a caregiver when there is no choice about returning to work, mindfulness exercises to help the caregiver's own mental health, and The Great Sleep Challenge, a must for all parents of young children. Part One deals with the importance of a mother's presence in the first 1000 days, what 'presence' means and how to repair the bond if it becomes damaged by overlong absence. Part Two deals with the costs of being absent, either physically or mentally, such as mothers with post-partum depression (PPD) or those who feel overwhelmed by the challenge of motherhood, especially if they had a difficult relationship with their own mothers. Part Three, 'Changing the Conversation', offers solutions for the future, examining why we in the West don't value mothering and how children instinctively know when their mother prioritises work, materialism and status over looking after them. Erica says that the child of a working-class single parent who has to work - even doing shifts - to feed their family may be better off emotionally than the offspring of **well-off** business or professional families where both parents work long hours to afford luxuries such as 60" TV screens and exotic holidays, rather than being at home with them.

Erica is dismissive of the fashionable notion of 'quality time' as it is parent-led, not child-led, and puts pressure on the child to 'perform'. Quantity, not quality, is of the essence here, when lovely moments between parent and child can happen spontaneously, without forethought or planning. Equally, constantly repeating 'I love

you' shouldn't be necessary to reassure each other that they are loved; it should be self-evident.

It really is all in the title. Erica Komisar's message is that by enabling and encouraging mothers to stay at home with their under-threes, we have a chance of making the world a better place by increasing our children's happiness and sense of security, identity and confidence. A happier child is likely to grow into a happier adult. Conversely, a child deprived of its mother's presence in the early years is may grow up more unhappy, more stressed and less confident.

But putting this into practice may involve some hard sacrifice and an unpopular message with many on both sides of the Atlantic: with governments, employers, economists, feminists and even some parents themselves. Erica Komisar found it very difficult to get her book published, as nobody wanted to acknowledge this truth, but many deny: that the secret of a fulfilling life is to have a solid foundation of undivided loving attention in the earliest years of life. The author has been accused of antifeminism and of wanting to put the clock back to pre-War ideas of 'a woman's place is in the home' - with her pinny and rolling-pin.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Erica is greatly in favour of choice, the choice of how to balance the conflicting needs of earning a living with raising an emotionally healthy family. Her book is full of practical 'how-to' solutions, such as first persuading husbands / partners to support time given to raising children, not outsourcing this to daycare. Erica advocates campaigning for a system of Social Security payments whereby a mother is State funded when children are very young. repaying this later by adding those extra years on to the end of their career. It is important to remember that Erica is an American psychoanalyst working in New York, where maternity pay is not comparable to the UK, but the message can be translated for a British audience, viz: that motherhood is not something put on to the back burner and tidied out of the way, but should be allowed to take centre stage in a woman's life. And that the rest of society - politicians and employers support this important role, both financially and morally.

But it is not just a woman's life: in her book Erica says that although women and men parent children in different ways, fathers are a huge resource and take on additional responsibilities in the family and home. Already in the UK, many dads are stepping up to the **plate** and doing their bit, but the impression is that American dads need a bit more prompting?

All children need 'mothering' in the sense of a more female type of nurture, Erica confronts the challenging questions about 'Who will be mother?' in same sex parent families? Fathers and mothers are complementary in that women tend to be more empathetic and 'kiss it better' where men tend to 'jolly the child'. Men encourage **risk-taking**, rough and tumble playwhereas women tend to hold the child close and offer balm to its distress: both are necessary forms of parenting.

In her book Erica describes the 'dance of attunement' between an emotionally 'present' mother and her young child, where the mother helps her infant to regulate his own emotions by 'mirroring' them, both describing his own feelings back to him verbally and in her own facial expressions. In this way, the child learns that his

sufferings are validated and understood, he learns how to cope with life's downsides and he becomes more emotionally resilient. This can only be achieved by a caregiver who is not only physically present most of the time but 'emotionally present' too.