

# What About The Children?



## Book Review

### **RAISING HAPPY HEALTHY CHILDREN: WHY MOTHERING MATTERS**

**Sally Goddard-Blythe**

**Published by Hawthorn Press, ISBN 978-1-907359-83-5**

This is an excellent book for explaining the “Why should we do this?” aspect of what matters when caring for children. Every reason, and consequence, imaginable is given for every positive action that might take place between mother and child, father and child, and others who might care for children. At the same time Dr Goddard Blythe also gives many well-informed warnings as to why certain more negative behaviours and attitudes towards young children will affect their development, their brain structure, and their mental and physical health, and will have long-lasting and difficult consequences for the child.

She is not afraid to be controversial and frank, and even at times politically incorrect, when dealing with, as an example, what are perceived as the marked differences between men and women, and therefore of mothering and fathering. This is found in a section entitled “Why children need fathers”, so the book is certainly not exclusively about mothering. She does acknowledge, however, that “... the concept that children benefit from having a parent of each sex, not only in their creation but in their daily lives, is treading on sensitive territory.” Having said that she states, “as every woman knows men are different from women in how they process sensory information, understand and express emotions, use language, deal with problems, set priorities and how they view the outside world.” But she doesn’t set out to shock, that is not her aim, and she continues by asserting firmly “There is a growing body of literature available on the differences between the male and female brain and how hormones at key stages in development can influence the development of these traditionally viewed gender differences and traits.”

I have used that description as an example as to how Sally Goddard Blythe treats many different aspects of mothering, fathering, child-rearing, and the care of children in general, throughout her well-researched and well-informed book. She will firstly acknowledge that she may be about to tread on one or two toes, then she will state categorically something that is fascinating and revealing and even startling about child development, and then she will provide the evidence for this. She carefully places this considerable body of evidence, her very many references, at the end of each chapter, which is helpful, rather than the reader having to flip over to the back of the book for these (though they are listed there as well).

Another helpful aspect of the book are the “In a nutshell” boxes at the end of each chapter, where she bullet points what she considers the highlights of the chapter, her ‘take home’ message for us. It is her selection. Sometimes I ‘took home’ a different message but that is

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only because every chapter is so packed with useful and profoundly important points on child development, that one is spoilt for choice as to what constitutes a highlight.

I learned so much from this book that I had never known previously. I was fascinated to read several interesting aspects on the unique attributes of breast feeding. Dr Goddard Blythe pointed out that children who are bottle fed can have stereoscopic issues with their vision development, because bottle feeding tends to always be on the same side, with one eye always shielded from viewing the mother's face, whereas with breast feeding, both sides are used, and therefore both eyes used equally. She also informed that the actual quality of a mother's milk changes during the course of a feed, with 'foremilk' containing lower energy and fat content, starting the digestive processes working gently at the beginning, with the later 'hindmilk' having a higher fat content and therefore will keep the baby satisfied for longer. Stressed and rushed mothers can thus have a fretful baby who is never fully satisfied, as it has never had the chance of having the more nourishing and filling hindmilk, and is constantly just fed the foremilk. Also the consistency of breast milk adapts according to the needs of the particular baby, with the actual content altering as well so that the premature baby, the full term baby, the healthy baby, or the sick baby will have the precise milk required, according to need. This small section of information is just one example of the fascinating detail with which Dr Goddard Blythe tackles the enormous number of developmental issues in her book.

One of her particular areas of research is in the relationship between movement and brain development and there is much of interest to learn here. She has a stunning knowledge of so many aspects of early brain development, and the importance of the mother is clearly shown in the many places where this subject appears. Too much early separation from the mother in infancy is shown to have many important undesirable long-term 'brain-wiring' consequences. "Every child has the right to a good biological beginning" she writes, and although the book deals with such diverse topics as pregnancy and childbirth, feeding, stress, exercise, risk, developmental indicators, fatty acids, obesity, discipline, reflexes, balance, speech and language, music, play and childcare (to quote just a tiny sample of the huge range of topics covered), yet the purpose of the book she makes clear, and that is to emphasise that

"a society that really cares for its children makes it possible for a mother and child to be together for at least the first two to three years, because these are crucial years for secure attachment and emotional development." I recommend this book without reservation, particularly for those interested to read the evidence Dr Goddard Blythe gives for including that final statement.

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