



Mary Beth Mann, Ph.D., is assistant professor of child and family development at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield. She has been active for 22 years in developing and directing programs for young children, in addition to teaching at the college level at SMSU the past four years.

Maternal Guilt

by Mary Beth Mann and Kathy R. Thornburg

Ann has just arrived at the child care center to pick up her ten month old son, Justin. The child care provider gives the following report: "Oh, Ann, Justin had the most exciting time today in school! He got really excited when he saw himself in the mirror. He just laughed and kicked and talked to himself. It was really fun to watch! And look at the picture he made for you. It's his hand print! He really seemed to enjoy the way the paint felt when he put his hands in it. His eyes got great big and he splattered the paint all over his arm!"

Possible reactions:

Mother #1 response

"How neat! I'll have to put the picture in his baby book; his father will be so impressed. I'm really glad you all take the time to do such fun things with the babies. We just bought an unbreakable mirror to go in his crib. I hope he enjoys it at home, too!"

Mother #2 response

"Oh, I wish I'd known that those were good activities for Justin. I thought that

he might eat the paint! And I never thought to put up a mirror for him! I guess I was afraid that he might break a mirror if I gave it to him."

This scenario begins with an enthusiastic infant child care provider sharing information with a parent. The first mother seems to have good rapport and positive communication with the provider. However, the second mother appears to be making excuses about why these activities were not done at home rather than enjoying the information about her child's day at school. She may



Kathy R. Thornburg, Ph.D., is professor of human development and family studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She is also director of the Child Development Laboratory, which serves over 90 children and their families. She has taught and/or directed programs for young children and taught college students for over 30 years.

In 1994, 61.7% of married women with children under age six were in the labor force (Children's Defense Fund, 1997) as compared to 39% in 1975. More than half of infants under one year spent some time in the care of someone other than their parents on a regular basis (Gomby, Lerner, Terman, Krantzler, Stevenson, and Behrman, 1996).

be feeling some guilt. A sensitive response on the part of the child care provider may help reduce the guilt that working mothers experience.

Working women have become a fact of life in our society. The increase in working women can be attributed to the rising educational levels of women, the need to develop some occupational competence due to the instability of marriage, and personal satisfaction as well as economic need (Hoffman, 1989). The increase in numbers of working women will continue as mothers currently receiving welfare payments are required to go to work.

Significant social and personal stressors have resulted as a consequence of women entering the labor force. Working women may have difficulty coping adequately with the dual responsibilities of motherhood and employment. Among other emotions that can be a part of maternal separation anxiety (apprehension, stress, sadness), leaving young children may produce guilt. If a mother believes that only she should care for her infant and feels guilty about being away

from her child, and she is employed, her internal conflict could potentially affect the well-being of the infant (Stifter, Coulehan, and Fish, 1993).

The concepts, causes, and issues surrounding maternal guilt have significant implications for professionals in the field of early childhood. The following suggestions are based on research concerning the variables contributing to the guilt of working mothers of infants and toddlers.

**RESEARCH FINDING:
The more satisfaction
with the provider,
the less guilt a
mother may feel.**

(Mann and Thornburg, 1987)

To assist parents in their search for appropriate care, a child care provider can:

- provide education to parents about high quality child care for infants through an informative brochure that includes a basic checklist;
- encourage parents to consider their goals for their children in selecting child care (e.g., what is more important to the parents: a clean, sterile environment or a warm, nurturing caregiver?);
- suggest parents tour and observe several programs attempting to find a good match of the parents' goals, the child's needs, and the center's philosophy, prior to making a placement decision; and
- provide parents with specific, written information about his or her program, including

philosophy, policies, and infant and toddler individualization.

**RESEARCH FINDING:
Mothers who reported
more satisfaction
with home-provider
communication reported
feeling more guilt.**

(Mann and Thornburg, 1987)

At first, this finding seems to make little, if any, sense. Perhaps the mothers who reported more satisfaction with communication knew more about what was going on in their child's daily life and realized they were missing developmental milestones.

To promote positive communication and rapport with parents, a child care provider can:

- develop mutual trust, a key ingredient to effective communication, with the parents;
- temper information shared with parents, especially at the onset of the relationship (e.g., rather than reporting exuberantly that "Timmy just took his first step today!" a provider may want to say, "You know, Timmy has really been working on walking today. You might want to watch for a step.");
- ask parents to complete a questionnaire about their preferred means of communication — e.g., written daily activity sheets, daily verbal exchanges with teachers, group parent meetings, newsletters, telephone conversations, and individual provider-parent conferences; and
- develop a written staff policy about how, when, where, and how often communication with parents is desirable, appropriate, and expected.

**RESEARCH FINDING:
Some maternal
anxiety/concern
is “normal.”**

(Hock and Schirtzinger, 1992)

Extremely low levels of maternal separation anxiety may, in fact, indicate unhealthy underinvolvement with the child.

To reassure parents regarding feelings of guilt, a child care provider can:

- be sensitive to the probability mothers are experiencing some guilt when leaving their very young children;
- provide written information regarding normalcy of some maternal guilt; and
- offer a list of parenting education topics, including “maternal guilt,” from which parents can choose. During sessions on this topic, allow opportunity for open discussion and sharing among parents.

**RESEARCH FINDING:
Healthy separation
of the mother/child dyad
is part of children’s
development.**

(Hock and Schirtzinger, 1992)

To promote an understanding and recognition of the concept of “separate selves,” a child care provider can:

- emphasize that the maternal role changes from one of physical closeness and constant surveillance to one of recognizing the age-appropriate need for autonomy as the child develops through infancy and toddlerhood;

In 1993, of the 7.7 million children with mothers in the labor force, 59% were cared for in family- and center-based child care centers (Children’s Defense Fund, 1997).

- provide toddler activities, which are shared with parents, that emphasize and promote healthy “separate selves”; and
- offer parenting workshops that explain and promote healthy mother-child separation.

**RESEARCH FINDING:
Mothers of babies
perceived as particularly
vulnerable (e.g., those
prone to sickness or
with colic) tend to feel
more guilty about
leaving them.**

(Hock, McBride, and Gnezda, 1989)

To exhibit sensitivity to mothers’ need for involvement and reassurance, caregivers can:

- seek mothers’ input, regarding them as a credible, valuable source of information on their children’s unique characteristics and needs; and
- provide records (individualized daily reports) carefully documenting children’s schedules, activities, and how their needs were met.

As the number of women entering the work force continues to rise, maternal guilt will remain an issue of concern. To deal effectively with young children and their families, early childhood professionals must be sensitive to the guilt working mothers may experience. Hopefully, the concrete suggestions we have

provided will help lessen the guilt mothers feel during this difficult time of transition.

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