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# Motherly Instinct or forced?

It is assumed that a mother and child have a bond like no other, one naturally born through the life that grows within a woman. Maternal Instinct is seen as a biological factor, through many eyes, but there is a strong possibility of the trait appearing through social influences; this debate is the timeless one of nature versus nurture. There are both biological and social factors that tie into the “maternal instinct”, but which is more influential we do not know. Is there actually such thing as “maternal instinct” if there are so many cases of child neglect and abuse among those relationships? Certainly, there is a turning point at which an ongoing disregard a parent has for a child develops into neglect. The effects of neglect can be destructive to a child’s life and development in the long run. Where does this overlooking a child’s needs take a sudden change into abuse or neglect, and how does this debunk the possible assumption of maternal instinct? There are many factors that tend to contradict the theory of maternal instinct being a biological characteristic cross-culturally. Although it is argued that ‘Maternal Instinct’ is a true natural trait, factors such as division of housework in the household and neglect often disprove this theory.

First off, what is the definition of maternal instinct? An unbreakable bond and the instinct to protect and love formed between mother and child, which develops as the child lay inside her womb for nine months of pregnancy. But what proof do we have to make this belief reality? Maternal Instinct is not only seen through interactions of humans, but animals as well; it is a global and culturally similar concept. Tokyo researchers studied thirteen mothers, along with their sixteen-month-old children and their biological attachment. They recorded the mothers engaging with their children in play and cooing, and continued to record the children after the mother had left the room. In order to get the results they desired, the researchers documented M.R.I. scans of the mothers’ brains while they watched these recordings of their children reacting to the separation from their mother. Tara Parker-Pope, an author for *The New York Times* wrote “Maternal Instinct Is Wired Into the Brain”, an article introducing the results from the study, stating,

“When a woman saw images of her own child smiling or upset, her brain patterns were markedly different than when she watched the other children. There was a particularly pronounced change in brain activity when a mother was shown images of her child in distress. The scans suggest that particular circuits in the brain are activated when a mother distinguishes the smiles and cries of her own baby from those of other infants.”

This research displays the biological, natural devotion mothers have toward their children, and their natural instinct to protect and love their children. Researchers also often cite postpartum depression when attempting to prove the validity of maternal instinct. My.ClevelandClinic.Org affirms that fifty to seventy-five percent of all American women experience depressive symptoms after giving birth and up to fifteen percent of women are likely to experience post-partum depression. MayoClinic.Org states that post-partum depression is the chemical reaction from loss of hormones resulting from detachment from their offspring. This displays the possibility of maternal instinct, but others argue that the depression arises through the loss of their true identity, along with the new label of ‘mother’, new duties, expectations and stress accompanying the tedious job of motherhood. Although there is some evidence supporting the maternal instinct theory, neglect is still an indisputable factor in our society. If the theory states that mothers have a natural tendency to love and protect their children, then what predisposes mothers to neglect their children? If there is such thing as this instinct, then why do some mothers find their jobs as mothers to be troubling? Then again, not all mothers initially wish to be mothers, showing the fault in the efficacy in this concept and the rising rates of teen pregnancy is just one example of this. Many feminists like to argue that the reason ‘maternal instinct’ has arisen in our society is simply based off of the statistical differences in childcare between men and women. *The Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* states the many expectations placed on mothers.

“…a woman must fulfill three roles: being a mother, that is, taking care of the children and educating them; being a homemaker, that is, handling domestic duties and making sure the house is well managed; being an esthetician, that is, ensuring that the house is clean and tidy, and taking care of her physical and outward appearance” (Lampe ́rie`re, 40)” (Thomas 291).

Although men’s amount of childcare has risen drastically over the past decades, it is still evident that women do most of the childcare in the household on a daily basis. The feminist approach is to claim that women are seen as “naturally devoted mothers” because they are forced into the job. Although maternal instinct is known as the bond formed during pregnancy, some believe that it can be a characteristic developed between a mother and child, trained into a mother’s brain over time, which is where the rates of childcare come into play. The hours of childcare mothers do versus fathers is one argument to support how the role of maternal instinct has emerged among women. Oriel Sullivan, a professor of sociology of gender and co-director at the Centre for Time Use Research, in *Families As They Really Are*, wrote the article “Men’s Changing Contribution to Family Work", discussing men and women’s’ changing roles and dynamics.

“At the start of the twenty first century, the average full-time employed American married man with children has increased his contribution to child care by four hours a week since 1970s, and his contribution to other family care by two hours a week. Overall he now does six hours a week of childcare and ten hours a week of other family work. By comparison, the average full- or part-time employed American married woman with children is employed for fewer hours per week on average than her male counterpart, but she does eleven hours of childcare and nineteen hours of other family work”(397).

This information supports the perspective that the perception of maternal instinct is an acquired characteristic resulting from the hours of childcare women participate in. Although men have increased their amount of childcare over the years, women have drastically as well, reinforcing this perceived bond between mother and child. This demonstrates the fact that maternal instinct is not a biological characteristic, but instead, a socially constructed one.

Although there are claims stating that maternal instinct is inevitably true, there are still cases of contempt that contradict this view. Some mothers do not have the ambition to become mothers and others do. Either way, the task of being an affectionate mother is forced onto them, and this absence of maternal instinct that some mothers obtain can often lead to neglect of their children. Child maltreatment can lead to many different social, psychological, and even biological changes within a child during development as well as their adult years. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* states,

“Other studies have shown that chronically maltreated children have higher rates of juvenile offending, poorer peer relations, increasing levels of anxious and depress behaviors over time, more behavior problems over time, increased levels of aggressive behavior, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, and decreased levels of interpersonal and coping skills, in comparison with children who experienced transitory maltreatment”(Jaffee & Maikovich-Fong 184).

Neglect overall leads to less productive, malnourished and depressive characteristics among children. The lack of connection between a mother and child can lead to cognitive disabilities and improper behaviors versus those children who are raised in a household without neglect. Research by Jaffe and Maikovich-Fong from *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* also studied the effects of neglect on the IQ scores of children. They concluded,

“For externalizing problems, the proportion of situationally versus chronically maltreated children who exceeded clinical cut-offs were 13% and 25%, respectively. For internalizing problems, the percentages were 12% versus 18% and for IQ the percentages were 21% versus 27%. Differences between children who experienced situational maltreatment versus extensive/continuous maltreatment were greater, with 20% to 34% of the latter group exceeding clinical cut-offs”(190).

Along with depressive symptoms and behavioral problems come complications in rational thinking and decision-making. This research is just a small portion of the evidence demonstrating the negative effects neglect has on adolescent ages and younger.

On the other hand, what defines neglect? To what extent must a mother ignore or improperly treat a child for it to be considered maltreatment? New mothers often use the “cry it out method”, also known as ‘ferberization’, yet there is a certain extent to how long a mother lets her baby cry until it becomes an injustice act. This method is a sleep training technique used among many mothers, but there has always been a debate on how it can lead to neglect of children and affect their personalities later in their lives. *TIME* magazine defines the method, “Ferberization is one of the most popular, if harrowing, sleep techniques. Recalcitrant sleepers are left shrieking in their cribs for progressively longer periods at night so as to learn to soothe themselves”(Paul). Some parents look at the method as a form of torture, ignoring their child for so long that it becomes emotionally damaging to a child. Other parents look at the method as a way to train their children to be more independent and overall easier sleepers. When you let a child cry for hours on end without comforting or interacting with a child, it often is labeled as neglect. There is no right answer when it comes to whether the cry it out method is substantial or not. Letting a child cry for long periods of time is very low on the scale of neglect, while hitting, kicking or harming a child continuously is surely considered child abuse. All of these actions are considered violent and corrupt, but what about the old-fashioned punishment of spanking? There is a lot of proof pointing to the view that no, we should not spank children, and many studies have been done on how it affects children. An expert in human development and family sciences from the University of Texas at Austin states,

“The United Nations has said unequivocally that ‘Corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence’ (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, para. 18); that corporal punishment violates Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protects children from “all forms of physical or mental violence” (United Nations, 1989, Article 19, para. 1); and that it should be banned in all contexts (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006)”(Gershoff 136).

Spanking is essentially an illegal act from many points of view. It may be a traditional form of punishment, but it Gershoff also found that it is ineffective act of punishment and leads to more aggression within children later in life. Spanking is on the higher end of abuse, neither mental nor emotional abuse, but physical. Letting a child cry it out is harmless, until it goes on for too long, but when it gets more serious as the child grows and physical harm appears in the relationship, the label of ‘abuse’ is portrayed on those parents who participate in the acts. All types of abuse are damaging to a child, but we as humans must try to learn what defines neglect and how to act and react. These cases of abuse among the world’s population are the main factors that tie into the idea that there is not such thing as the “maternal instinct”.

There are considerable amounts of counter information that make it difficult to prove or disprove maternal instinct, yet each and every person has been affected by it. Maternal instinct is real, but whether it is biologically construed or a social concept, we do not know. There is proof of its existence through various brain studies, but it is also debunked through social factors such as neglect and differences in childcare. Neglect is difficult to define. There is a certain level of poor treatment where it is labeled as neglect, but when it is an ongoing problem, there is proof that it can lead to poor effects on children in many different ways. Child neglect does not prove that the equivocal maternal instinct is non-existent, but it does display that not every mother has the characteristic. The ongoing argument of the actuality of the concept being real leads to two different opinions. Much of the information about maternal instinct proves it to be real, yet there are still undiscovered facts and certainty to be found. Along with the new information comes a new question: is the maternal instinct biological or social? Time will tell whether maternal instinct is natural or nurtured through the lessening amount of work put onto women. With changing contribution from men, the nurture portion of the argument will lessen, and it will be easier to determine if it is truly biological or not. With growing technology and increasing knowledge on maternal instinct, researchers will be able to answer the question for us in the foreseen future.

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