

Maternity in a Woman's Life

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Abstract

Maternity is one of the most important functions a woman is to perform in her life. A childless woman may even be regarded as “deficient” by the society she lives in. Maternity is of a biological nature, of a social nature and also it may be viewed as a psychological fact. The creation of the need to have a child depends on such factors as different family models, the degree to which maternity attitudes have been developed and life experiences, hormonal mechanism (which are very often identified with a maternal instinct), health conditions, mental and professional routines and a supportive function on the part of the family.

An emotional development of a child is conditioned by the intensity of emotional bonds with the mother. It depends on the variety of life experiences and mother's mental state. The most important factors in a child's development is maternal love. Maternal love is expressed in pursuing an object and the same time entering into the spirit of this object, it is a kind of unity with it. The most sophisticated type and expression of maternal love is devotion. It takes on its fullest form in traumatic moments of life.

Maternity provides a purpose in a woman's life, her love towards the child helps to develop her own emotional life, and through maternity she performs an essential function in an emotional life of her family. Maternity is a kind of a complement to womanhood, is also a combination of a strong emotions and intellect. Maternity satisfies the need for security in woman because it eliminates fear and anxiety. Thanks to maternity a woman has a possibility to realize one of the most essential human needs – the need for respect. To become an “ideal” mother is possible not only for a “good” mother, but also, and first of all, for a mother who is a happy human being, which unfortunately does not happen very often.

Zusammenfassung

Die Mutterschaft ist eine der wichtigsten Dimensionen im Leben einer Frau. Kinderlosigkeit kann sogar als ein Mangel angesehen werden. Mutterschaft hat eine biologische, soziale und psychologische Seite. Die Entwicklung dieses Grundbedürfnisses, ein Kind zu haben, hängt von sehr verschiedenen Faktoren ab: Den Formen der Familie, der Entwicklung von mütterlichen Einstellungen in der Gesellschaft, Lebenserfahrungen, hormonalen Mechanismen, Gesundheitsbedingungen, geistigen und beruflichen Gewohnheiten und der unterstützenden Funktion der Familie.

Die emotionale Entwicklung eines Kindes wird durch die Intensität der gefühlsmäßigen Beziehung und Bindung zur Mutter bestimmt. Sie hängt von der Vielfalt der Lebenserfahrungen und der emotionalen und psychologischen Verfassung der Mutter und ihren geistigen Einstellungen ab. Die wichtigste Bedingung für die Entwicklung eines Kindes ist die mütterliche Liebe. Die mütterliche Liebe drückt sich in der Sorge um das Kind aus und gleichzeitig im gefühlsmäßigen Kontakt – es wird eine Art Einheit hergestellt. Hingabe ist eine besonders entwickelte Form mütterlicher Liebe. Sie bewährt sich und beweist sich am umfassendsten in den schmerzlichsten Momenten des Lebens.

Mütterlichkeit ist ein Sinnelement im Leben einer Frau und die Liebe zu ihrem Kind hilft ihr, ihre eigene Emotionalität zu entwickeln. In der Mütterlichkeit spielt sie eine wesentliche Rolle im emotionalen Leben ihrer Familie. Mütterlichkeit ist eine Art Ergänzung zur Weiblichkeit. In ihr kombinieren sich Emotionalität und Intellekt. Mütterlichkeit befriedigt das Bedürfnis nach Sicherheit in der Frau, da sie Furcht und Angst zurücktreten läßt. In der Mütterlichkeit hat die Frau die Möglichkeit eines der wesentlichen menschlichen Grundbedürfnisse zu realisieren – das Bedürfnis nach wechselseitiger Achtung. Um eine ideale Mutter zu werden muß man nicht nur eine „gute“ Mutter sein, sondern vor allem ein glücklicher Mensch, was unglücklicherweise nicht allzuoft der Fall ist.

Then God remembered about Rachel's plight and answered her prayers by giving her a child. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. "God has removed the dark slur against my name."

Genesis, ch. 30, lines 22–23

The desire to possess progeny is one of the oldest human anxieties. Maternity is one of the most important functions a woman is to perform in her life. A childless woman may even be regarded as "deficient" by the society she lives in.

Maternity is of a biological nature – because of physiological changes in a woman's organism during pregnancy – of a social nature – new interpersonal

relations are created alongside with maternity – and also it may be viewed as a psychological fact – since it produces emotional and personality changes in a woman.

The creation of the need to have a child depends on many different factors. Apart from such factors as different family models, the degree to which maternity attitudes have been developed and life experiences, hormonal mechanisms – which are very often identified with a maternal instinct – health conditions, mental and professional routines, and a supportive function on the part of the family are also often mentioned.

Maternity as a human characteristic belongs exclusively to a woman; similarly as in an animal world, maternity is only a female's share. As far as animals are concerned, however, maternity serves the purpose of the continuation of species and results from a sexual drive. In human beings maternity includes many different activities – practical actions, attitudes – it also has an emotional aspect – maternal feelings are the origin of emotional energy indispensable for a mother to perform her function properly. It should be emphasized that maternal emotions are not connected with a delivery process itself since there are mothers who, in spite of the fact that they have not given birth to their own children, are able to develop strong maternal feelings³. Maternal love does not appear automatically in each parturient woman. About 20% of mothers, especially very young ones, feel that they have been forced into maternity¹⁰.

Mothers, in contrast to fathers, show a greater ability to generate all partial attitudes that constitute the principal attitude referred to as “emotional closeness”. Women are also able to adopt stronger attitudes of love, acceptance and friendly feelings towards their children than fathers would do. Every case of maternity includes a huge potential of maternal love to the child as well as a potential to influence a child's development. This results from the fact that a woman is the first person to be called upon to transmit love to her child and thus constitutes the basis for all future emotional relationships with other people. The mother is the first person to fulfil all the child's needs, she is the one who controls all the external stimuli coming to the child, she organizes a child's life, inspires future competence and the future habits of the child.

On the one hand, an emotional development of a child is conditioned by the intensity of emotional bonds with the mother. On the other hand, however, it depends on the variety of life experiences and mother's mental state. Thus, maternal love is the most important factor in a child's development.

The concept of love is a multimeaning concept. In different languages we can find different definitions of love⁸. For instance, in Greek there are two distinct phrases referring to love: one is used to express strong friendly attitudes and the other denotes a relationship between a man and a woman. In Latin, apart from the word “amor” there also exist the notion of “caritas” which does not convey any sexual elements and the word “pietas” which defines love to gods, parents and children. French “amour” corresponds to what we understand by the word “love”, though other types of love characteristic of friendly attitudes are referred to as “affection” in this language, and the word “piété” is usually used to define love of children towards their parents.

Love, in the strict sense of the word, is connected with an emotional state typical of an individual which is expressed in pursuing an object and the same time entering into the spirit of this object. Apart from pursuing an object, one also experiences a kind of a unity with it. Love of this type is characteristic of maternal love.

An interesting definition of love was given by E. Fromm². He described love as a personal trait, an attitude, which defines a general attitude to the world. Maternal love should always include two elements: responsibility and care for the child as well as inspiration for the love of life in the child.

Maternal love dates back to the origin of the world. The Promised Land has always been its biblical symbol. Mother-earth has been a symbol of a mother, fertile and feeding with "milk and honey". Land of milk has been a symbol of this aspect of maternal love which refers to care and affirmation. Land of honey has symbolized the other aspect of maternal love including happiness coming from the fact that one is alive. True and complete motherhood should be the combination of the two aspects. Unfortunately in everyday life, mothers are usually able to offer only the first aspect of love to their children and there are only few mothers who know how to include the second aspect in their maternal feelings. Mother's love is not selfish. It is by no means important whether we deserve it or not. On the other hand, however, it is impossible to win such love or provoke it. Maternal love of his kind becomes a source of happiness for the child and it conditions a child's development.

The mother not only provides for biological needs of the child without which it would not be able to go on living but she also satisfies the need for social contacts, the need for emotional bonds with another human being and the need for affirmation and acceptance. Therefore maternal love fulfils a basic and essential function in a social development of the child.

Love of this sort is unconditional, mainly because of its altruistic, not egoistic character. It is connected with friendly attitudes towards the child. Maternity can be defined as a complex of attitudes towards people in general with given inclinations, mainly of emotional character⁵. A woman able to undertake maternity in its mental aspect should be capable of offering and receiving emotions, and the shape of her maternal love will always be an indicator of her mental maturity.

The fact that maternal love never poses any conditions is another essential element in this type of love. As far as this aspect of maternal love is concerned it is more essential for the mother to love than to be loved. Thanks to this type of love, a woman can satisfy her need to love another human being, which corresponds to the strongest desire present in each human being.

The most sophisticated type and expression of maternal love is devotion. It is expressed not only in everyday acts of resignation from numerous personal aspects of a mother's life. It takes on its fullest form in traumatic moments of life; for instance, when the child falls ill and the mother is ready to perform the greatest acts of devotion for her child. Many examples of mother's extreme devotion that was an expression of maternal love can be found in literature connected with World War II concentration camps⁹. Descriptions of mothers hiding their sick children in the camps, giving all their food to their children or even sacrificing

their lives for their children, are commonly met in the literature of that period. Thus maternal love can be considered to be a special type of love, unconditional, constituting the basic element in an all-round development of the child.

Each mother who gives birth to a child, presents it to an external world as a part of herself. A woman conceives her child because of such existential motives and she has the child within her power throughout the period of pregnancy. She is the only person responsible for the fact whether the child will be delivered or not and whether it will become a happy human being. A woman-mother becomes a scene of an unusual activity which structuralizes the mother. And although from the very beginning the child is an independent being, it is the mother who is responsible for a complex process of creating a human being.

Maternity provides a purpose in a woman's life, her love towards the child helps to develop her own emotional life, and through maternity she performs an essential function in an emotional life of her family. Maternity is a kind of a complement to womanhood.

Long time before a child is conceived, it is born in human motives. The need to have progeny appears in human imagination pretty early. A declarative attitude towards maternity is already expressed by a small girl who hugs or feeds her doll when she plays at being a mother. At our young age erotic feelings are of primary importance whereas the need to have a child is secondary. Similarly, in our contemporary world, in our everyday life routines full of ambitions and professional work, a human need may be lost among other needs.

Mother secures basic needs of her child without which the child would not be able to exist. The child, on the other hand, provides many experiences due to which the mother may develop her personality. Such experiences may help to create a strong feeling of love in the mother, they may even change mother's attitudes completely.

The examples may be provided by classical experiments made by H. Harlow⁴ who examined monkeys which did not want to accept their first-born children and which were indifferent or aggressive towards their offsprings. An attitude of a baby-monkey which clings to its mother in spite of all the slaps it gets, can influence the mother's attitudes and make the mother-monkey accept the baby after some time.

Likewise, it may happen that a human mother does not want to accept her child after the delivery. The constant presence of the child however as well as the fact that she has to feed it, take care of it, change the mother's attitude in the direction of the full acceptance of the child.

Maternity is a combination of strong emotions and intellect. A mother who spends her time with her baby, assumes a cognitive approach to the object of her love.

Maternity helps the woman to find a purpose in her life and love to her child stimulates her emotional development.

The need for some purpose in life is the quality which results in the fact that a human being cannot function properly if he or she cannot find some values in their everyday life routines which would help them to find a purpose in life. Without such values the actions any human being undertakes seem pointless.

Love and constant contact with the child provides the mother with a whole range of positive emotions and can even weaken some strong fear reactions. The fact that maternity helps to overcome fear reactions in a woman is confirmed by the observation that each war – when all fear reactions are maximally intensified – usually results in a demographic explosion. Women try to combat their feeling of anxiety and fear through having children. There has even been an attempt to explain the origin of demographic explosions in terms of such phenomena¹.

Maternity satisfies the need for security in woman because it eliminates fear and anxiety. Maternity helps to combat existential anxiety since the child is regarded as the continuation of its mother's life and very frequently as a possibility of future accomplishment of all unfulfilled mother's dreams. The child also satisfies a natural need for a relationship with another human being. The need to this type is satisfied as early as when a woman becomes aware that the fetus is a human being⁷.

Thanks to maternity a woman has a possibility to realize one of the most essential human needs – the need for respect. The fact of having a child, or even the fact of becoming pregnant, satisfies this need in an obvious way. A pregnant woman increases her self-esteem, her position in the family becomes stronger because a woman-mother gains some special acceptance from the society. Moreover, she is granted some specified prerogatives and she is protected by the society.

A woman who is also a mother is offered a possibility to satisfy the need for self-realization connected with a human aspiration for perfection. Apart from that, the fact of having a child is a source of great satisfaction for a woman, satisfaction that cannot be compared to the achievement of any other life purposes. The positive influence of delivering a child upon the mother's personality is also well-known. Maternity provides a woman with what we usually refer to as happiness. The child is one of the factors and the source of human happiness.

Thus maternity constitutes an essential factor in an all-round development of a woman. It has always been a matter of curiosity whether there exists an ideal model of maternity. Such characteristic features of maternity as the ability to satisfy the need for security in the child, as responsibility, devotion and unselfish love have usually been mentioned. It has also been emphasized that domination, care and responsibility are the most essential elements of a maternal function. Faithfulness, which is stronger than in any other type of human relationship, is also a very important factor of maternity. "It is difficult for a human being, a thinking being and thus prone to scepticism, to persist in such an emotional absolute; only a mother is capable of achieving it⁶."

The model of maternity is one of the most tried and proven ones, it is based on strong emotional bonds between the mother and the child, even if the child is not the mother's own child.

The ability to love other people is an obligatory element of an ideal model of maternity. Such ideal maternity should include an element of care and responsibility for a child as well as an emotional element of awakening the love of life.

To become an "ideal" mother is possible not only for a "good" mother but also, and first of all, for a mother who is a happy human being, which unfortunately does not happen very often. The whole life of a woman, starting from her birth, is preparing her for performing a difficult function of a mother, and a woman who desires to model her maternity according to an "ideal" pattern has to fulfil a lot of requirements.

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