

## CHILDREN AND WORKING PARENTS

by Dr. Silvana Quattrocchi Montanaro

During preparation courses for birth and parenthood and at workshops dealing with the first part of the human life (pregnancy and the child's first three years), these questions are frequently asked: "Is it possible to work and, at the same time, to raise a family?"; and, "Can the children of working parents receive the care and attention necessary for the development of happy, integrated human beings?"

I have been thinking a lot about the answers, especially over the last fifteen years, and I wish to share with you my understanding which I verified through my involvement working with Infant Communities.

If we follow Maria Montessori's vision of the human being based on the discovery of the child, education must be an "aid to life", and these aids vary according to the different planes of development. It is the knowledge of the special characteristics of each plane that help us understand what we must offer to children.

Nowadays it is impossible to talk about education without considering the pregnancy. Maria Montessori herself was well aware of this. We know that pregnancy is a time of many changes. From the union of two reproductive cells, a single cell, the zygote, is formed and implanted into a specially prepared environment, the uterus. The next 8-10 weeks are called the embryonic period during which (and this is still a wonder to me) all the parts of our body are formed. The fetal period completes the pregnancy, during which the child grows and the various systems and their functions develop. The child in the uterus is in a continuous relationship with the environment because all sensory organs develop early. The rich sensory input reaching the fetus provides much information. Parents should take advantage of this period and talk, sing and expose the child to music in order to start their family relationships. Fathers and mothers must prepare themselves for parenthood and be ready for the moment of birth.

The process of birth is not only the passage from the internal to the external environment, but it is primarily a total change in the way of living. It is the experience of a completely different world in which a much greater possibility of growth begins. Maria Montessori says on page 81 of the Italian edition of *The Absorbent Mind*: "It is evident that something of the greatest importance happens in the first days of life." We should arrive at this moment ready to respond in the appropriate way.

Once the child is born, the parents must establish a new way of living and organize their lives to accommodate the special needs of this human being. It is not simply a change from two persons living together to three persons living together. It is the presence of a third human being whose needs are very different from those of his/her parents. Even though parents attended preparation courses and studied topics like breastfeeding, bathing and changing a baby, the real presence of a newborn can cause difficulties when trying to rearrange the family routine around a child. This is particularly so when the child eats 6-7 times a day (some of the meals occurring during the night), and as the baby is changed as many times as he/she is fed (or even more), and as the baby needs to be comforted when crying (and often without the parent even understanding the reason for the baby's crying)! In a few weeks, even the most dedicated parents can become distressed and/or frustrated. Many times parents confess that they never imagined that the presence of a child could bring about so many changes.

This first period, the 6-8 weeks after birth, called symbiotic life, is the most difficult because the child must establish a preferential relationship with the mother through the time they spend together. If we think for a moment about it, we would easily realize that after the child spends continuous time with us during the pregnancy, we pass to a period where the child is every day more capable of entertaining himself, especially if helped with an appropriate sensory stimulation

and freedom of movement. Yet it is also clear that a newborn needs a lot of the mother's time during this period.

In many countries working mothers have three months off after birth. This amount of time is absolutely necessary for a happy transition. When this amount of time is not given, the parents should work out a plan which allows the mother to be free for at least the first three months and allows the father to be free for the first 2-3 weeks. The easiest way could be to save vacation time for the moment of the child's arrival. This is possible because the pregnancy usually lasts 280 days; we know with anticipation that a child will arrive on such-and-such a date, so there is time to make plans. The tale of the stork delivering a child at our house has become obsolete!

The importance of the father's presence as a help and protective barrier can never be underlined enough.

*A prepared father knows the importance of the special relationship that must be established between the mother and the child through nursing. He also knows that especially in the first weeks it takes a lot of time for breastfeeding and maternal care. So the first role of the father at the beginning of symbiotic life is to be a protective barrier.*

*At home it is difficult to avoid being disturbed during mealtimes or when resting. A new daily routine must be established, and the support of a partner who understands the situation is extremely important.*

*With such intelligent protection, the gratifying experience of symbiotic life is more attainable, and the first message to the newborn about the new environment is more positive. These experiences will form the components for the child's basic trust.*

Silvana Montanaro, [Understanding The Human Being](#)

When the first three months have passed, the mother has overcome the transitional period of puerperium. She has reached the physical and psychological adjustment of motherhood and feels ready to resume her duties outside the home. The big problem is the child's care during her absence. The child must enter an Infant Community or be left at home with a caregiver. There are some ways that can facilitate this change and can allow the child to develop well from all points of view. Depending on the country in which the parents live, it may be possible to choose a part-time work schedule until the weaning time is completed, sometime around 8-10 months of age.

Although a child of three months is perfectly capable of distinguishing between the two different environments, the home and the Infant Community, we must help him to understand and adapt to this new situation. The knowledge of the sensitive periods can guide us. Children of this age are in the sensitive period for order, and they have an internal clock that can't be changed continuously. It is the respect for this order that brings out the first and most important commitment of working parents: self-discipline.

Children who attend an Infant Community (or are left with a caregiver) must wake up in the morning with the mother present, be changed by her and receive their first meal from her even if it is a bottle. The day must start at the home environment and, only after that is the child told (an exact explanation of what the parent is going to do) that we are preparing to go out, together or alone. All this action needs a certain amount of time, so it is necessary that we get up early. This also means that we must go to bed on time in order to be well-rested when our long day starts.

Then the child goes to the car (or any other means of transportation), and we arrive at the Infant Community. The moment in which the child must pass from the accompany parent to the caregiver is a crucial one and needs its own routine. The parent must talk again to the child about what is happening. The French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto says in her book, [La Cause des Enfants](#), that the human being is capable of understanding language from the moment that he/she can hear it. Because of my experience, I quite agree with this. Children can understand the

message we express with words and are reassured by the repetition of the message. Very rapidly they can put the word in relationship with what will come and feel secure and in control of reality, not just submerged by it. Their life becomes a sequence of repeated happenings that are announced and can be well understood. This contributes enormously to a happy adaptation in the new environment.

At the beginning, and for at least a couple of weeks, the same caregiver should be available at the moment of receiving the child so the child can recognize the face, voice and uniform. These become the new points of reference in the environment. The uniform is especially important. It can be any comfortable dress and style. The caregiver chooses, but it must always be the same so the color and shape can be easily recognized by the child. The point of view of small children who are usually on the floor or, even when they walk, is very low; they see mainly the adult's legs and the lower part of his or her dress.

When the child enters a new environment, the parents should be sure that all the useful information (like the quantity of food, the way it is given, the preferred position for sleeping, etc.) are given to the people who will take care of the child. These are important details that can facilitate the acceptance of the new place and help link the life in the Infant Community with the life at home.

Another crucial moment is when the parent comes to pick up the child. Again, the child must leave a place where he/she lives and return to a different one where the relationship with the people is also different. It is this emotional aspect that must be carefully considered and helped. We must wait for the moment in which the child is not concentrating on any work or observation before calling his/her name. When we have gotten the child's attention, we must say his/her name announcing, "Marc, your mother (or father or whoever the person is) is here." We offer our arms and only when the child starts a movement towards us do we pick him/her up (or hold his/her hand) and bring the child to the parent.

Here we must protect the child's time. The parent can smile and offer his/her arms, but wait for the child's response and never grasp the child before he/she is ready. When doing it, we must avoid embracing the child too strongly. Just smile, pick the child up and keep him in your arms. Talk to the child and explain what we are going to do: "We put your coat on, and we go to the car and drive home." Move slowly, dress the child, help him into the car, and when you reach the house, undress the child and finally resume your special, loving relationship with him/her.

Now we can be more affectionate, talk and enjoy life together, involving the child in the preparation of the meal or other domestic chores. As is appropriate to the child's age, we can just bring the child into the kitchen so he/she can observe us while we explain what we are doing, or the child can be directly involved in the work. The evening meal is a cornerstone in the life of the child: at breast, with the bottle, or at the table with both parents – this meal must be a moment of encounter and relationship. The family members are again together in their environment and they share, as much as possible, the activities of their life together.

It is necessary for the child to go to sleep on time in order to be able to deal with rising early the next morning. Even during weekends and festivities, the routine must be maintained for a young child.

Parents of small children must acknowledge that some of their previous activities are no longer possible. Movies, concerts, and theatre need to be forgotten for a certain time because the education of a child, along with the long working hours, do not allow it. Even when a good babysitter is available, we must understand that we still need to give time to the demanding task of educating a human being. But this is just the first 2-3 years when the foundation of the personality is built. If we want to help our children properly, to witness their growth and to enjoy the process of education, we must allow ourselves the time. This is possible only by reducing drastically, for a certain time, many activities. The priorities must change and our scale of values must adapt to the

new situation. But, I wish to underline again that this sacrifice is temporary, for just a few years. It is possible to see friends and relatives but at lunch. Friday night dinners are not advisable because the child will wake up exactly at the same time on Saturday morning. If we go to bed late, we can still respond to the child's needs, but if we are tired, a lot of the joy of this work is lost. It is difficult to enjoy an relationship when the only desire is to continue to sleep. We must give ourselves time to rest.

What I call a "Parents' Support Group" can be very important and helpful at this time. Two, three or four couples (not too many) who live nearby and share the same educational ideas can see each other regularly so the children soon come to know all the adults and trust them. It is, in a certain sense, like the experience of an extended family. When one couple needs one evening off (with sleep the next morning) or a very short vacation, or unexpected emergencies arise, the children can be given to the friends who know the child's habits and are familiar to the children. It is an important form of mutual help that can provide for the parents needs while at the same time protecting the children.

If we plan our life well and change our routine according to the new necessities, then it is possible and enjoyable to work and raise our family successfully. We can provide a very favourable educational environment for our children, see them grow well and watch their human potential unfold with our help.

I can assure you that it is the best of the possible human adventures. ■

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