

What future has motherhood?

*Rosalie Rayner Watson**

Abstract

This is a reprint of the article written by Rosalie Rayner Watson and published in the *Psychology Magazine* issue of February 1932. According to the author, Child care and children training requires so much effort that it is difficult for a mother to satisfy the demands of a husband who primarily wants a cheerful playmate. In order to free her from such a burden, she thinks that in every city should be at least one great institute for training men and women to take care of youngsters. This wouldn't mean that the mother must give up her contact with her babies, because she would continue to act as supervisor of all schemes and plans of the Institution. It would be only a matter of changing her mind and behavior to suit the exigencies of present day life.

Keywords: behaviorism, motherhood, child care, women emancipation.

Resumen

Este artículo de Rosalie Rayner Watson fue publicado en la revista *Psychology*, en el número del mes de febrero de 1932. La autora del mismo cree que la educación y cuidado de los hijos requiere tanto trabajo de la madre que ésta no puede satisfacer las demandas de un marido que sobre todo busca en ella una alegre compañera de juegos. Con vistas a liberarla de tan pesada carga, debería existir en cada ciudad al menos un instituto para la formación de hombres y mujeres en el cuidado de los niños. Esto no significaría que la madre dejara de tener contacto con sus niños, porque supervisaría todos los programas y planes de la institución. Se trata simplemente de un cambio de mentalidad y de conducta para adaptarse mejor a las exigencias de la vida moderna.

Palabras clave: Conductismo, maternidad, cuidado del niño, emancipación de la mujer.

The young married woman today brought up on the poetry of motherhood written for another era has a rude awakening when she becomes pregnant. She is no longer looked upon as being in an "interesting condition." Even her husband, often

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tho he tells her he loves her, shies away from taking her out in the daytime. To be quite frank, he takes her, at least during the last four mouths of her pregnancy, out for a walk in the evening when the airedale has to be exercised on a not too-well lighted street.

One has to be very careful about inviting her to dinner parties. She herself feels awkward and embarrassed about the situation. She is literally set aside for the last five months – not on a pedestal but on a shelf. In Spain her male friends may gallantly kiss her hand and say, “Would that I had had the honor.” Picture that in New York or in another American city!

Of course, there are those women who overcompensate by being “inordinately proud.” I personally don’t know any woman today who accepts pregnancy as a “natural” phenomenon and feels just at ease about it. America has developed the slim figured female to such an extent that she has become a fetish and therefore mothers must be excused for inferiority over lost shapes.

Possibly a keener emotional disappointment even than the loss of her shape comes when her baby arrives at a well-regulated hospital. Many, many thousands of children are born in hospitals today – not the majority, but the number is constantly increasing. The mother of the unborn child dreams of *taking care* of her child; of handling it, feeding it, dressing and doing all the other things the baby’s needs demand. In other words, she expects the baby to provide a real vocational outlet for her.

What does she find? Thanks to the excellent work of the children specialists, both medical and psychological, she is rarely allowed to touch the child. Every two or three hours she is allowed to administer the one remaining biological function left to her – nurse it, if she is able; if not – and many thousands of modern mothers are unable – the baby goes on the bottle and the mother becomes as completely useless as the drone bee in a hive.

The trained nurse who comes to the mother’s home for a few days instructs the permanent infant’s nurse in preparing the milk formula – sterilizing bottles, nipples and the myriad of other hygienic measures necessary to the child’s regime. All this science frees the mother and gives her more time to think of herself. Many mothers I know are so little used to handling their babies that the nurse’s “day off” is a panic to them. They are awkward about bathing their baby; the baby becomes irritable and by the end of the day when Daddy comes home, Mama is what she calls “a complete wreck.” But the fact remains that even with a good ordinary baby’s nurse, the mother has relatively little to do or even to interest her during the first fourteen months. As long as the baby can’t walk, it can’t very well get “into mischief” and it does not cry; fewer and fewer well babies cry.

But as soon as the baby gets on its feet and still more so when the second and third begin roaming the house, the mother’s troubles begin. She has to handle young adults – regular power dynamos. The nurse is quickly outgrown. “Mother” has come

in for superintending eating, dressing, bathing, and a thousand other activities. She herself knows all too little about her job. Nor can she go anywhere to learn it. Motherhood, child care, children training as taught by academicians are like all other vocations learned in school. When you get to practicalities, you first have to forget what you learned in school before you can get on with the job. She gets tied into a knot. She loses her freedom and becomes slave to her children.

There was a time when this slavery of motherhood filled and fulfilled a woman's ambitions and wishes as well as those of her husband in respect to his wife. When a man said he had a club meeting at night or a late business conference, his wife took it for granted, sat home and knitted booties for the baby or embroidered scalloped collars for her little girl's party dress. When the husband arrived home this little domestic scene delighted him no end. But each era has a shifting point of view and when husbands come home now they tolerate a half-hour with the family – then they want a woman to be ready to play. If the wife won't function he soon finds someone who will.

The good psychiatrists and modern novelists are right when they tell her what her husband wants in a wife is a cheerful helpmate, playmate and mistress (no small order)!

We live in an exciting world and women have caught the fever. They don't want to miss anything. The growth of the "movies", the theatres, art exhibits, lectures, dinners, commuting to and from the suburbs to parties, night-clubs and the exciting speakeasies – all these things that take her out of the home are on the side against motherhood.

She has another difficult problem to face which has been rapidly developing in the business world. With the expansion of American industries the conquest of America no longer satisfies the heads of growing business concerns. America is carrying her genius overseas from Australia to Russia and all through Europe. This means that men in business have to travel. Shall the wife go on breeding in her little nest and let her husband go alone to foreign countries, sometimes for a month, sometimes for a year? If she goes with him can they afford to take the children? Usually they can't. What does the wife do if she finds herself inconveniently pregnant? Why she has an abortion. There is an abortionist handy on every street. They have cropped up in our cities like the speakeasies, in response to public demand.

It takes an historian, psychiatrist and philosopher to tell how women got into the present situation, but few deny that it is real. I can't tell where the circle started – whether men desired their wives to be more interesting than domesticity allowed, or whether women started it all back in the "equal rights" stage of affairs because they desired more freedom. And did they desire more freedom because the home did not satisfy their own daydreams? And why did their daydreams wander to a world outside the home instead of toward some solution of the home problem? These are difficult questions to answer but women *are* dissatisfied with just being mothers and making a home for their children. They are restless. Many women are in business today not

because they need to be but just to “do something.” “Doing something interesting” puts them in the spot-light – no matter how small the spot-light is. Have you ever noticed when people are talking about some woman the rest of the group does not know that someone invariably asks, “What does she do?” Not long ago I was talking to a young man at a party attended by many authors, theatrical people and artists. I flattered myself that I was being very amusing but he was not so impressed. Suddenly looking over my head at some distinguished guest he said, “And what do you do, dear lady?” With my best control, I said, “Nothing but entertain dull young men like you,” whereupon we parted company.

I think the trouble is that we are taking motherhood too seriously. We haven't yet quite had the courage to debunk it. The real truth of the matter is that we mothers are not specialists. We are trying to do a job that is too difficult. Consequently we make lots of accessory and compensatory movements with all the attendant emotional distress. Children need specialists from the start. If the specialists do not exist, we shall have to develop them.

It is more than obvious that in the past ten years much has been done in the direction of developing specialists who can take the child away of the mother. The progressive schools want to get children as young as possible. I think that the youngest are taken at eighteen months. They keep the children all day; have beds so that they can nap after lunch and they are returned home in the evening.

Boarding schools are over-crowded with older children. Camps are popping up all over the country like toadstools. For those city mothers whose children are home in the afternoons and who have no nurse-maid, just read the lists of classified advertisements for visiting governesses and reliable women wanted at fifty cents an hour to stay with the children nights so that the mother can get out. Institutions and home bureaus in New York have grown up and you can call them day or night and get an infant's nurse for an hour, a week, a month or for any emergency. Then we have afternoon groups, boys' clubs, girls' clubs, so that when the children want to visit the Statue of Liberty or Grant's Tomb they can be taken while the mother does her interior decorating or plays backgammon. I heartily approve of all this organization. But this industry is becoming so vast and so important that it needs further scrutiny. We need better-trained yet experienced and practical people in it. There should be a super-bureau of some kind that can “certify” all these people, as doctors and trained nurses are certified. People who care for children should at least be as carefully trained as a trained nurse.

What sublime egotism there still is on the part of parents who think they must spend their lives with their children; those who feel that if they send their darlings away from them and they fall ill nobody can take care of them like “mother,” whereas a trained nurse is infinitely more capable. Why should we thwart and limit our children in their outside life because we fear for their welfare? Rather they should not grow up

at all than grow up to be neurotic, incestuous and difficult in their relationships with people outside the family group. Many persons have asked me how I can go abroad for months at a time and leave my children and then when I come home send them away to camp. My answer is this: "No matter how much in my egotism I think I can teach them and influence them, they would be missing what some other group of people could show them if I keep them always near me. When we do see each other after a shorter or longer intermission, we have a marvelous time. I have things to talk over with them; they in turn are bursting with news for me, problems to be solved, points of view to be debated and plans for the weeks to come.

The old notion of wrapping youngster in thin foil to prolong innocence and protect ideals as long as possible is to my mind as wicked a theory as could possibly be propagated. What should replace it is an abundance of information about everything in life; as much as they can swallow and often as it can be crammed down their throats. A discussion on this subject arose the other evening in a group where one of the men present held forth the "don't rob them of the sweet mysteries of life" theory and the only answer I had for that was, "How can we?"

It seems to me that the more we know about everything in life the more exciting the many yet undiscovered problems become. To think that a full knowledge of sex takes the edge off of it is absurd. It only makes the youngster that much more capable of accepting romance when it comes this way. One misfortune of life is that its span is too short to learn all the things and do all the things that the world offers us. Days are but twenty-four hours and months but thirty days.

The prolongation of adolescence has spoiled many opportunities for personal development. Why should it be impossible to retain ideals with knowledge and sophistication? One of the great tragedies that I see among many groups is that people become middle-aged before they even realize the adventure and lure in life. It has taken too long to find out and years of energy and poetry have slipped away in the tedium of discovering what they want and how they want to live. Why not push the wheels a little faster and give youth a chance? One way it can be done is to give a variety of experience to children, and how can they get it if they are tied to our apron strings? They need points of view – good and bad, so to speak. When a mother learns to listen to her youngster with tolerance towards his or her point of view and a desire on the own part to learn what the child has acquired in its absence from the maternal cotton wadding, then she has made a great step in solving life for both herself and her sons and daughters.

There are all kinds of ethical notions which have developed out of the ages of barbarism; "duties" and what we owe our children and what they in turn owe us when they become adults. It is easy to see that the great causes that have influenced mankind in this direction are fear and economics. Most of us fear the punishment of our social

group, if not the Almighty, if we do not “do right for our children.” We slave for them so that in our turn, when old age overtakes us, we can demand them to turn around and become our parents; to support us if necessary, care for us and keep us happy. As far as I can see, our children owe us only the respect and friendship that we as individuals (not in *loco parentis*) are able to command. We owe them physical care as infants, and education and habits of work, but most of all, an organization on our own parts which will allow us to step out and let them run their own affairs when they grow up. It is for this reason that we must continue our interests outside the home but naturally not at the expense of having our children dirty, ill or neglected.

The great social experiment that is taking place in Russia should someday be able to teach us a lot if we can get correct information. So far two people who have returned from that country ever give the same description of what goes on.

So far no two people have returned from that country ever give the same description of what goes on. You hear on the one hand that the children are hungry and brow-beaten; that the expectant mothers who have been promised abortions if they did not want children have been denied their pleas and that the government is forcing them to go ahead and bear the children in order to increase the population. On the other hand there are those enthusiasts who claim that the children are happy, well-fed and getting educated; that the mothers are relieved to have their children taken care of and that they are content in the various tasks assigned them. It will take at least two generations, I suppose, to discover what kinds of men and women these young Russians turn out to be.

While we are waiting to find out from on great social experiment, why not do a little on our own part? Not in the desultory fashion in which it is now taking place but along organized lines. Every city *ought* to have at least one great institute for training men and women to take care of youngsters. Lots of mothers might themselves go in for this kind of work. Actually mothers should be the ones who are trained for this kind of specialty – not some old-maid school teacher who has never had a child.

Unfortunately most of our “specialists” today have learned to swim without going near the water. If mothers still wish to maintain a home and keep children in it, then they should be able to call on such an institute for help. This would not mean that the mother would have to give up her contact with her babies. She would continue to act as supervisor of all their schemes and plans. She should be the big executive and a member of the board of directors of her own small but important human “concern” and in the meanwhile her own urges, hobbies and talents could flourish and expand. If she had to be with her radio audience or address the garden club or take out a pilot’s license while her child had the mumps, there would be accessible to her some properly trained person to see that the child got the necessary medicine and that the simple routine essential to a child’s life was not broken. This same institute should be

equipped to take any child in – as does a hotel; a place where the mother, who does not for an hour, a day or a week, wants her child or cannot keep her child, can send him or her without interfering with school routine or organized habits. If the parents have to go away they would know that their children would be with competent people, have other playmates, be watched and understood.

Boarding schools don't do this. They are overlaid with impossible rules which happen to fit with the personal prejudices of the head master or the board of trustees regardless of their usefulness in the lives of the younger generation. They may get the children through their fractions and geography and French but they certainly are not equipped to understand "youth." This castle in the air of which I dream could be so amazing, so beautiful; could be a veritable retreat for the world's mishandled babes, a real power in the adjustment of midget lives.

As the situation is now, among families who can afford it, there is the ever-present "governess-mother": the ghost-like member of the tribe who gives the real mother time off. These women are for the most part even worse for the children than the mother herself (which is bad enough). There are many of them women who have never been "Mamas" and are bursting with sentiments. They get terrific attachments for their young charges, and the children, in turn form deep – too deep attachments for them; a "governess-complex" which is as destroying as any parent attachment could be.

As I am writing this, the radio is crooning to me and strange as the coincidence may seem, the song which is being sung is one of those sob ballads with choruses. *Was your mother ever wrong?* The false glorification of motherhood has been a long, sad story. Whereas motherhood is a tremendous adventure, there is certainly no good reason to believe that the fact per se of being a mother makes one good mother. The many systems and mores of the past, such as the killing of girl babies and the sacrifice of the fairest in the family to please the gods, are proofs enough that society is run by its own superstitions. The mothers who gave up their children did not spend their lives suffering in silence, for they were convinced that they were doing right. They probably got more secret satisfaction out of their behavior than our mothers do over sitting in a chair all night, holding the hand of a sick baby.

So it seems to me that the emotional satisfaction women get out of motherhood is not necessarily in the close physical contact she can have with their children, nor in the absorption of their child into herself. It is only a matter of shifting our values and our behavior to suit the exigencies of present day life and the new mother will not lose any of the qualities and kindness and patience and love thru her emancipation of old time motherhood.

My solution then of the problem of motherhood and at the same time of getting the most out of life and being a playmate for my husband is not to take motherhood too seriously. I scrutinize carefully and prayerfully the myriads of people I resign my

children to but when I am convinced of their proficiency and kindness, I resign them cheerfully except for “executive” supervision. Then I plunge wholeheartedly into whatever I what to do – it may be the night clubs and dancing; three hours a day at a beauty parlor; tennis, writing now and then, even flirting a little and not always with my husband! Motherhood to me consequently is not a bore. It is just one or the many things that makes life amusing and joyous.