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Maternal Overprotection Reexamined: A Further Contribution
to the Understanding of Separation-Individuation*

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The term maternal overprotection, coined by David M. Levy in 1936, has enjoyed unparalleled popularity in the United States. Levy (1943) delineated a behavioral constellation in children, characterized by "disobedience, impudence, tantrums, and tyrannies, the consequence of maternal indulgence." In view of Mahler's ^{concern with engulfment and} emphasis on the parent's role in promoting separation-individuation, the present interest in self psychology with its emphasis on parental deficiencies and neglect, Brody and Axelrad's alarming findings that infant's potentials are not fulfilled even in the good enough mothering group, it may be well worthwhile to take another look at the concept of overdosing mothering.

The idea that a mother's involvement with her children can be damaging struck an immediate responsive chord. Bewildered mothers reacted guiltily to the cry, "You are overprotecting your children and making mamma's boys (or girls) out of them," with an increased distrust of their already beleaguered intuitive protective responses. The

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fear of raising an overly dependent child was and is prominent in our culture where standing on your own two feet and the pioneer spirit are important goals. Appropriate attentiveness, concern and physical presence became readily confused with over-indulgence, giving in to a child's wishes and not setting limits. Maternal overprotection became a catch phrase applied to a great variety of behaviors only remotely related to the type of maternal over-indulgence Levy referred to. Thus a child who whines, clings and refuses to separate from mother is often thought spoiled or over-protected, regardless of the appropriateness and the meaning of this behavior.

Though the term "maternal overprotection" is not part of the present psychoanalytic vocabulary and is not even listed in the Psychoanalytic Dictionary, Glossary of the American Psychoanalytic Association, Index of the Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, etc, the concept nevertheless has had far-reaching implications. "Mommism" (Philip Wylie), the "Jewish Mother" are related phrases, all critical of a mother's inability to let go of her progeny. More subtle evidence can be found in Mahler's emphasis on mother's interference with the establishment of the child's autonomy by keeping the child too close, and also in Winnicott's views of transitional objects as a positive step in development, not acknowledging its use as a mother substitute when the child wants the real mother - (Brody).

In contrast Bowlby Ainsworth, Margaret Mead, Heiniche,

Robertson have been more in touch with the importance of attachment of the child to the mother and the significance of separation anxiety when she leaves.

Despite frequent references to overdependency in the clinical literature, there seem to be few studies in which adult patients or children are selected on the criterion of overdependency and then compared with a contrast group (Bowlby, 1973). Moreover the term overdependent is an ambiguous one and comprises children who exhibit anxious attachment as well as children who cannot do things for themselves, such as feeding and dressing. The few available studies quoted by Bowlby showed that those who turned to their mothers for help came from stable homes, whereas the anxiously attached children had led very unsettled home lives. There also was a significant correlation between a high degree of dependency and parents who used withdrawal of love as a disciplinary measure, including threats of abandonment. Bowlby (p. 243) strongly challenges the theory of spoiling in contrast with Freud who adopted the theory of spoiling as it was the accepted opinion of his day. Freud, according to Bowlby, was misled by a show of affection and over-protection that is so frequently present either as over-compensation for a parent's unconscious hostility to a child or as part of the parent's own desire to cling to the child (Three Essays).

Neuropathic parents who are inclined as a rule to display excessive affection, most likely by their caresses, arouse

the child's disposition to neurotic illness (SE 7:223). When these cases are investigated in a psychoanalytically oriented clinic, the child's heightened anxiety over separation and loss of love are not due to excess affection but experiences of the opposite kind.

This article sets out to illustrate how deeply and mistakenly the concept of maternal overprotection has become ingrained in the attitude of the American public toward children, affecting parents as well as mental health professionals. It is used as a rationalization for leaving children without needed maternal care and an unwillingness to examine the consequences. The increasing numbers of working women and the push of the Women's Liberation Movement have added fuel to the conflict about the desirability of a mother's presence in the home and made it into a political issue. Many women are no longer satisfied staying home with their children and those who do often feel that they need to justify their choice. In light of these cultural changes it is particularly appropriate to reexamine what adequate mothering constitutes so that women who do work or have other interests they wish to pursue will be knowledgeable enough to take the needs of their children into account.

In the same vein caretakers and teachers can be more helpful if they understand the difference between appropriate parental concern, separation distress and over indulgence. It is my contention that it is crucial from a practical and

theoretical point of view to differentiate what Levy described so well from other types of behavior referred to as overprotection, but of a different origin.

My attention to the crucial importance of the concept of maternal overprotection was drawn many years ago (1958) when I became aware that well adjusted children whose parents had every reason to believe that their toddlers would enjoy the welcoming environment of a nursery school protested at being left and remained unhappy for prolonged periods of time; well beyond what was expected. Their reactions came as a surprise as nothing in my psychoanalytic training had prepared me to expect this. These children neither seemed neglected nor overindulged. Hence, it became a topic of enquiry. The children at nursery school were expected by both parents and teachers to separate fairly readily. If this did not come about the child was often labeled overprotected. Many a mother felt self-consciously that there was either something wrong with the child or his upbringing. Had she made him too dependent on her? Had she given in too much? Had she given him too much of her time? Nevertheless, the very same mothers who raised such questions were not at all overprotective and quite ready to relinquish their children only a few days after they started school and often before the child was ready to let go of her. Mothers were puzzled by the strength and intensity of the children's reactions, which was not in keeping with their expectations.

Observations of 100 children entering nursery school showed that whining, clinging, controlling, and demanding behavior occurred in a significant number of children in response to separation from the mother (van Leeuwen, 1966; van Leeuwen and Pomer, 1969; Miller, 19). These reactions were not at all infrequent and occurred in two-thirds of the children. One-third few weeks but many months to master the separation and adapt to a new environment. Moreover, these very same children continued to have problems with new separations such as changes in schedules or teachers throughout nursery school. Encouraged by these initial findings, a more systematic examination (van Leeuwen and Tuma, 1972) of sixteen mother-child pairs before and after starting nursery school, revealed that these separation-individuation phenomena are associated with the child's increased need for refueling (Mahler, 1975) at a time of stress. Separation anxiety expressed itself in an increase of attachment behavior toward the mother, increased reactivity to her comings and goings at home and at school, and, often, in a more controlling attitude toward her in general. It also resulted in a turning inward, a withdrawal, a decrease of exploration of the environment, a reluctance to get involved with peers or play, or reduction of cognitive development, and a low-keyedness of mood.

Each child had his own reaction pattern, and distress

was either expressed openly or disguised. These affects or defenses against affect were repeated under stress and became the basis of a reaction pattern demonstrated at later occasions well into adult life.

Rather than an interference, maternal physical and emotional availability was helpful and facilitated separation and nursery school adjustment. Fear of appearing over-protective and responding to the child's increased need for mother on the part of mother and teacher tended to prolong the struggle. Previous closeness of the mother-child relationship and willingness to respond to the child's demands did not affect the separation adversely at nursery school entrance. The demanding, clutching behavior displayed was not the result of maternal overprotection but, rather, a response to separation stress and an unconscious means of eliciting the needed increase in maternal involvement at a time that the mother was quite ready to release the child. It often replaced a more sharing, less demanding previous relationship.

The focus on maternal attitudes did not mean that paternal attitudes were unimportant. However, fathers rarely accompanied their children. When they did the youngsters observed had less trouble leaving father than mother. Father's visits to school were joyous important occasions. Rapprochement behavior increased significantly when the father would be out of town or when marital friction

made the child more anxious.

To return to Levy's description of maternal behavior, referred to as "pure maternal over-protection:"

The mother lives only for the child and is uncomfortable even when away for only a few minutes. She allows her husband to have little or no share in her baby's training, her career becomes more and more exclusively maternal, restricting the parents' social life. When the child is ready to go to school, mother accompanies him there longer than most, helps him with all his studies and allows no friends
(p.

Contrary to present suppositions Levy specifically excluded the dynamic constellation of overprotection induced by guilt and over compensation for hostile rejecting impulses or maternal indulgence followed by later rejection. Actually only twenty, indeed a very small fraction of the 3,000 mother-child pairs Levy reviewed retrospectively from child guidance records, were designated "pure maternal overprotection." The behavior towards these twenty children, (almost all boys) between the ages of five and sixteen, was characterized by unnecessarily extended infantile care, excessive contact such as prolonged nursing, persistent help with dressing, permitting the child to sleep with the parent, and prevention of independent behavior. Levy made a further distinction between eight children who were submissive and compliant, and twelve who were demanding, selfish, tyrannical, undisciplined, anticipating constant attention, affection and

service. Only the latter group responded to denial of their wishes with impatience, outbursts of temper, and assaults. These same children were restless and at a loss in solitude, and they used every device such as charm, wheedling, coaxing or bullying to get their way. Some would not go to school unless mother went along. Many had difficulty in making friends.

The question under consideration is, what does Levy's "Beloved Tyrant" have in common with two and a half and three and a half year old boys and girls protesting mother's leaving upon entrance to nursery school. They are very different indeed though both categories include children attempting to control mother.

If mother and teacher misinterpret the child's clinging behavior and judge it to be the result of overprotection, rather than an age appropriate expression of need for the parent's presence, they will take the wrong measure and accentuate instead of ameliorate the problem. They create the very situation they are trying to avoid. Recognizing the child's feeling, providing appropriate measures and making use of the child's attachment to the other to help, tends to forestall power struggles about releasing the mother and thus ease the transition from home to school.

In spite of awareness in psychoanalytic circles of the

importance of the mother's availability, both physically and emotionally, during early infancy and during the separation-individuation stages of development and the need for gradual disengagement, no data are available nor are recommendations made of how much physical separation can be comfortably tolerated at a given age, at a given moment during a given state and under given circumstances. Theoretically sufficient object constancy is established at thirty-six months to evoke mother's image during her absence (McDevitt, 1975), protecting the child from suffering separation anxiety or its equivalence.

Though Mahler does not use the term maternal over-protection, and is cognizant of the importance of sufficient availability of the mother to establish object constancy, some of her data indicate her favoring early disengagement of the mother over too close involvement. In "A study of the separation-individuation process and its possible application to borderline phenomena in the psychoanalytic situation" (1975), she compares the development of two children, Sammy and Barney. Sammy, breastfed for one and a half years, was kept physically close to the mother and confined in a playpen. Mahler comments on his failure to react to mother's leaving, and because of this views his individuation with alarm. In comparison, nine month old Barney precociously runs from mother before he is emotionally

ready, a configuration Mahler considers far healthier. Nevertheless, she comments favorably on Sammy's extensive use of visibly emerging perceptive, cognitive, and prehensile faculties. However, she does not recognize a possible connection between this aspect of his development and Sammy's feeling more secure because of mother's greater physical availability.

Perhaps Sammy's individuation proceeded along other lines. What is so superior about Barney desperately crying upon being left and hurting himself! Why does Mahler judge Barney's crying and darting away as proof of healthier ego development than Sammy's?

Is it possible that Barney and Sammy evolved different styles of coping and chose different paths of individuation? If Barney's separation anxiety when left persists and remains unmet, he may develop further defenses against being mothered by running away or becoming hyperactive, being injured and thus securing rapprochement. Sammy, on the other hand, has a sense of security about mother's leaving and returning, though hesitant about physical exploration, and has developed capacities in the cognitive sphere which may serve him well in later life. This fits in with the finding (van Leeuwen and Tuma 19) that cognitive capacity, pleasure in play and concentration are promoted by mother's accessibility and disrupted by separation stress. One sees in Barney and Sammy the effect of two different sets of circumstances,

each with their benefits and hazards. Sammy shows increased development in the cognitive sphere whereas Barney functions better in the motor sphere, using motility to dart away and be caught to bring back mother and master her disappearance. Both practice their skills and develop capacity for autonomy. Mahler rightly comments that the state of longing as well as the exhilarating effect of locomotion is missing in Sammy, whose symbiotic period is unduly prolonged.

Though Mahler notices his cognitive development, she does not see it in the context of autonomous development. Does Mahler's favoring development away from mother have something to do with the origins of her work with autistic children and emphasis on fear of engulfment on a par with the concept of maternal overprotection? Premature locomotion and anxiety regarding mother's disappearance, in my opinion, also interferes with separation-individuation and true independence, though in a different way as too much physical closeness of the mother. Just how this applies needs further examination and Mahler may well be able to supply the necessary data to further scrutinize and examine the effect of separation stress on separation-individuation.

Does the apparent confusion about the appropriate amount and effect of physical presence and degree of emotional involvement of the mother stem from a failure to clearly differentiate dependency and attachment needs, from confusion about the necessity of mother's availability to accomplish

autonomy. Because of the exclusive attachment to the mother, evolving from care provided, a young child needs access to mother to refuel under stress. A relatively independent, well individuated child, able to perform age appropriate tasks, enjoy play with peers, and the ability to turn to adults other than the mother for need fulfillment, may, under stress, crave mother's physical presence in preference to another helpful adult. If mother is physically or emotionally unavailable at these times, the child experiences separation anxiety adversely affecting the recently acquired autonomy of functioning. On the other hand, appropriate physical separation, under the child's control, strengthens individuation. Under these circumstances, the child remains appropriately attached to the mother, continues to enjoy sharing new experiences with her; his dependency on her for help is diminished, and he can reach out for other adults, children, or toys. A battle of wills may not ensue.

"Sufficient" object constancy may be a relative term, changing with maturation. Vulnerability to separation is heightened during certain stages of development. In our studies the children between the ages of 2 years eight months and 3 years and 2 months reacted with markedly greater anxiety than the children who were over 3 years and 3 months unless they had been exposed to recent previous trauma, such as a change of school or birth of a sibling. Perhaps we retain the need for physical presence of those we love throughout life, particularly under stress. As adults we

continue to cling to our loved ones if our dependency needs were not sufficiently gratified earlier. Internalization of the love object does not replace the wish for physical presence.

Kohut's self psychology focuses once more on the role of the mother, however, in a manner different from Levy or Mahler. He talks of the pathogenetic parent who withholds direction and approval. He emphasizes the importance of transmuting internalization. He does not specify just what the ideal situation is. His concepts fit in to a limited degree with my concept of narcissistic hurts stemming from lack of presence or support by the mother during important childhood events. Though his theoretical conclusions are not the same as mine (van Leeuwen, 1981), he emphasizes similar issues; he talks about the disintegration of the self rather than in terms of defenses against affect and separation anxiety.

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