

Mothering Denied: the development of infants when separated from their convict mothers

Robyn Everist

I started out thinking about this paper years ago when I was working as a guide and researcher at the Cascades Female Factory.

I came across a document referring to a letter from the 1840s from a farmer near Brighton. He was complaining about a boy who had been sent to him from the Orphan School to work as a farm hand, having been born 8 years earlier at the Female Factory.

According to the farmer the child was of no use at all. While the boy looked perfectly formed he couldn't talk, couldn't work and didn't respond to instruction. According to the farmer, all the child could do was eat. This didn't impress the farmer at all, so the little boy was returned to the Orphan School. I was thinking about what impact that place could have had on the emotional, psychological and intellectual development of babies born at the Female Factory where mothering was denied.

This got me thinking that the conditions at the Female Factory were unique in British society, particularly in regards to those mothers who were separated from their babies, either by being sent out on assignment or being punished in the solitary cells. I began to wonder to what was the extent of the impact of the denial of mothering on the infants. To what degree was it the cause of the problems of the little boy who was sent to the farm? Or was it just another factor contributing to the hardship and torment experienced by the babies and their mothers, alongside overcrowding, poor sanitation and inadequate nutrition?

Mothering is all about the physical acts of care for a newborn, the intimate, personal love of a mother as shown by the intent focus of mother on baby, the close and intense eye contact that occurs during breastfeeding, as well as holding, comforting and nurturing acts by the mother for her newborn. Mothering is the natural, biologically-based, best-fit pattern of infant care that includes carrying, secure attachment, mutual rewards, enjoyment, and empathy—that is, a mother's sensitivity to her baby's feelings and her appropriate response. Mutual playfulness and joy help to sustain healthy development of the infant if the environment is supportive and meets basic human needs.

Disruption of infant-mother attachment by separation rouses powerful, negative emotions, with risks of serious and sometimes prolonged emotional and intellectual disturbance for the infant. These risks are lessened if the infant is cared for by a motherly person with whom baby has first formed a good secondary attachment. This secondary attachments can occur with other relatives or carers, if they are a constant presence, dependable and love the child. Mothering creates the foundation of healthy brain development and is the foundation for later developmental stages of life.

The value of love and dedication in parenting is now universally recognised. Research has revealed that mother-baby interaction, in the first year especially, is the very foundation of human emotions and intelligence. In the most essential terms, mothering grows the brain.

In his book, *Raising Babies*, Steve Biddulph, the famous Tasmanian psychologist and author wrote: "The capacities for what make us most human—empathy, co-operation, intimacy, the fine timing and sensitivity

that makes a human being charismatic, loving, and self-assured—are passed from mother to baby, especially if that mother is supported and cared for.”

Research conducted in high-quality day-care facilities in Sweden revealed that prolonged maternal separations negatively influences the infants’ cognitive development and capacity to develop appropriate human interactions.

The highly regarded Canadian Early Years Study found that the infant’s early experiences set up lifelong patterns for coping with challenges and new situations. The first 6 months are a particularly sensitive period in the life of an infant when neural pathways in the brain are established, and after this sensitive period has passed it is difficult to alter the function of these pathways. Early experiences have a powerful influence on the infant’s later capacity to use language, become literate, and understand the complexities of their environments. Research has shown that there is a vital bond of mother-baby attachment fostered through frequent maternal breastfeeding and this is reflected in improvements in child cognitive functioning. There is also a direct correlation between breast feeding and the psychosocial development of the child.

We know that at the CFF babies were denied mothering as a standard practise, many were weaned at a very early age, especially if the mother was sent out on assignment or was denied access to her baby as a punishment.

So if the mothers weren’t at the CFF to mother their own infants, who was? We know that in the nursery at the Female Factory it was a group care situation, with one convict woman being responsible for several babies at once.

Although I think in this image there is a higher carer-to-infant ratio than that which the children would have experienced in the FF.

Modern studies into group care have indicated that there is a higher level of cognitive impairment in children who experience more than 15 hours of non-maternal care a week in the first year. Other compounding factors that would have contributed to delayed and retarded development in children born at the CFF are poor nutrition, high care ratios and poor quality non-maternal care.

In the years 1845 to 1857, 1,143 Children were born to female convicts under sentence in VDL, more than half of them were born at the Cascades FF.

Of these 742 are known to have died, which leaves 401 babies to wonder about. It is often stated that authorities in VDL were indifferent to the fate of the babies born at the FF. This is a neat line to trot out at all occasions when talking about the terrible conditions at the FF. There is no denying that the children and their mothers suffered terribly. But was the situation inside the FF any worse than the situation for the same cohort of children back home in England?

One thing I think we can all agree on – context is an important factor when considering history, so it’s important to give some thought to attitudes to mothering during the 1800s.

In the 1800s mothering was idealised, and portrayed as this: (image)

But the reality was more like this: (image)

What did mothering look like in England in the 1800s? Keep in mind that motherhood as a legal status was only a concept since the 1890s. Prior to that only fatherhood existed in law, and there was a distinct difference between motherhood and mothering.

The upper class mothers did not suckle their own babies, and did none of the intimate mothering.

That work was done for them by a wet-nurse, to feed the infant and a nanny to provide the physical care. The child was presented neat, clean and tidy to the parents once a day for inspection.

The middle class mothers were known to have suckled their own babies for a few weeks, then send the infant out to the home of a woman in the village until they were 'over that difficult age'.

After that the child would be returned to the family home and a nursery maid would be employed to do the child minding there.

Upper class and middle class mothers were taught that children should be treated as young adults, and there was plenty of advice for mothers on mothering, including that of Dr George Napheys in the 1840s.

He wrote - During pregnancy the mother should often have some beautiful scenery painting before her eyes, as well as paintings representing cheerful and beautiful figures, or she should often contemplate some graceful statue.

She should avoid looking at, or thinking of ugly people, or those marked with disfiguring diseases. She should take every precaution to escape injury, fright, and disease of any kind, especially those disorders which leave marks on the person. She should keep herself well nourished, as want of food nearly always injures the child. She should avoid ungraceful positions and awkward attitudes, as by some mysterious sympathy these are impressed on the child she carries. Let her cultivate grace and beauty in herself at such a time, and she will endow her child with them. As anger and irritability leave imprints on the features, she should maintain serenity and calmness."

Once the child was born, further advice for the upper class parents on how to behave with their babies.

The instructions were clear: "Let your behaviour always be objective, and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task."

So what about the working class mothers?

During the time of convict transportation, the kind of physical care that working class mothers saw as adequate would today seem like physical neglect. Working class mothers had to work long hours in factories to provide food and shelter for their family, regardless of their desire to mother their infants. Thanks to the demands of the industrial revolution, capitalism and consumerism, working class mothers experienced a significant increase in the cost of living. The situation was worse still for single mothers, as the absent father was free to avoid support and commitment. So what to do with baby if you have to go to work every day?

Usually an older sibling or neighbour's child was given the care of the working class infant. If that was not available then neighbours would be paid to feed and care for the infant. For the working classes the sooner babies were toughened up and made independent of mother the better. If it was possible for the working

class mother to take the baby to work with her, she would be able to feed the child herself. Many working class women would continue to breast feed the child up to 4 years old or until the child could eat the same food as the rest of the family.

Far too frequently however mothers found it necessary to send the newborn away to the home of a wet nurse until the child was weaned and could re-join the family to share the same food as the rest of them.

This was termed as baby farming – the practise of accepting custody of an infant in exchange for payment.

Swaddling and play pens helped the baby farmer with the physical management of many babies.

So when we look at the treatment of babies in the CFF it can no longer be any surprise that the babies were removed from their mothers and sent to the nursery under the instructions of a patriarchal system in a patriarchal society.

At the FF this was perceived as efficient group care of infants, which would free the mothers to return to work as soon as possible, leaving their babies behind for a considerable length of time. As this was standard practise for the time in England the same processes were put in place here in VDL. In colonial Hobart, economic arguments and pressures were used to get convict mothers back into the workforce and infants into early group care. This policy was never subject to a full economic analysis that took into account all the collateral damage that was only exposed many years later.

Infancy cannot be re-run later. The primary needs of infants revolve around consistent, loving mothering in a supportive environment. Inside the walls of the CFF was created an environment that saw a departure from the natural patterns of mothering. It was an environment which failed in important ways to match the needs of infants.

So where does this leave us? I have to admit to a level of frustration – I was so convinced that the treatment of infants born at the CFF was unique. My research for this paper has revealed that the treatment of the infants at the Cascades Female Factory was standard practise for the children of the working classes in England. I have had to consider historical practises in context, and while it gives me the creeping horrors, it has also engendered an even greater level of admiration for the resilience of convict mothers and their children who survived. Being subjected to the cruelties of an institution which denied them mothering, it's a wonder any of them survived at all.

While this is a very grim topic, I'd like to leave you all thinking of happy babies, so here is one last photo to leave you smiling,

Thank you.