

THINKING ABOUT INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN



Martha Harris

KARNAC

The Harris Meltzer Trust

THINKING ABOUT INFANTS
AND YOUNG CHILDREN

THINKING ABOUT INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Martha Harris

published for

The Harris Meltzer Trust

by

KARNAC

This edition published in 2011 by Karnac Books Ltd.
118 Finchley Road, London NW3 5HT

First published by Dickens Press in 1969 in the *Inside Information* series entitled *On Understanding Infants*.

New edition in 1975 by Clunie Press for The Roland Harris Educational Trust with an additional chapter and illustrations, entitled *Thinking about Infants and Young Children*.

Copyright © 2011 The Harris Meltzer Trust

Copyright © 2011 Margaret Rustin for preface

Copyright © 1975, 2011 Meg Harris Williams for illustrations, cover illustration and editorial matter

The right of Martha Harris to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with §§ 77 and 78 of the Copyright Design and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. is available for this book from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78049 010 6

Edited, designed and produced by The Bourne Studios

www.bournestudios.co.uk

Printed in Great Britain

www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk

www.karnacbooks.com

Contents

<i>About the author</i>	viii
<i>Preface by Margaret Rustin</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
CHAPTER 1 <i>Parenthood</i>	5
Becoming a parent	
Motherhood	
Reactions to birth	
Fatherhood	
Mrs B's first baby	
CHAPTER 2 <i>The new baby's point of view</i>	15
Uniqueness of your new-born baby	
The baby's world	
The baby's need to feel held	
Expressing his needs	
How mother becomes a person for him	
Breastfeeding	
Comforters	
Mrs R's relationship with her baby	

CHAPTER 3	<i>Coming up to six months</i>	25
	Discovering the world and himself	
	Discovering his parents	
	The ability to be separate	
	Curiosity and jealousy	
	Greediness	
	Mrs J's relationship with Olivia (6 months)	
	Alan's emotional development (4 months)	
CHAPTER 4	<i>Weaning</i>	37
	Starting to wean	
	Taking it slowly	
	Mrs L – reluctance to wean	
CHAPTER 5	<i>The toddler stage</i>	43
	Teaching obedience	
	Prohibitions	
	Allowing him to do things for himself	
	Toilet training	
	Feelings about the products of his body	
	Sleeping troubles	
	Marion's nightmares	
	Prolonged sleeping troubles	
	Jimmy – a poor sleeper and over-eater	
CHAPTER 6	<i>Encouraging growth</i>	55
	Letting the child become himself	
	Setting limits	
	Strictness and spoiling	
	Margaretta – spoiled by too much attention	
	Punishment	
	Fears and conscience	
CHAPTER 7	<i>Brothers and sisters</i>	63
	Preparing your child for the arrival of a new baby	
	Brian – whose mother is pregnant	
	What to do with your small child when you are confined?	
	Managing more than one small child	

	Melinda – playing at being grown up	
	Bob and his younger sister	
	Jenny, who won't stand up for herself	
	When to say "no"	
CHAPTER 8	<i>The young child's education</i>	79
	Parental instruction	
	Sex education	
	Nursery school	
	Starting primary school	
	Peter starts primary school	
CHAPTER 9	<i>Various questions</i>	87
	The threesome relationship	
	Sexuality in the young child	
	James – whose parents divorced	
	Explaining death	
	Willie – worries about death	
	Father Christmas – for example	
	Play and stories: their relation to the inner and outer world	
CHAPTER 10	<i>Further thoughts about marriage and becoming a parent</i>	101
	Difficulty in believing that you really are a mother	
	Irrational anxieties about the baby before and after birth	
	Is the baby all right? Is he the right one, is he my baby?	
	Adopting a baby	
	Preparing for adoption	
	Is he any less your child because he is adopted?	
	Leaving your infant in the care of others	
	Learning to live with tragedy	
	<i>Index</i>	113

About the author

Martha Harris (1919-1987) read English at University College London, and then Psychology at Oxford. She worked for some years as a schoolteacher, and taught in a Froebel Teacher Training College. She trained as a psychologist at Guy's Hospital, then as a psychoanalyst at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis, where she was a training analyst; her own supervisors were Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion. For many years she was responsible for the Child Psychotherapy training in the Department of Children and Families at the Tavistock Clinic, developing a course initiated by Esther Bick in which infant observation played a vital role. She wrote many papers on psychoanalytic training, on clinical work, and on child development (*Collected Papers*, 1987; *The Tavistock Model*, 2011); her books for parents of older children were recently republished in one volume as *Your Teenager* (2007).

Thinking about Infants and Young Children is her most popular book and has become a classic text whose deep wisdom outlives social and cultural changes. Written for parents, it was first published (excluding the final chapter) in 1969 as *Understanding Infants*. It has since been translated into Italian, French and Portuguese, and become influential in the development of child psychotherapy trainings in many countries, owing to its unobtrusive clarification of Kleinian concepts within the context of everyday family life. A detailed account of Harris's supervision of the formal observation of an infant from birth to three years can be found in *The Story of Infant Development* by Romana Negri (2007).

Preface

This short book written primarily for young parents, especially mothers, was a source of delight, of inspiration, and of deepened understanding when it was first published. A book about the insights of child psychotherapists at last, was what we felt when it appeared. The simplicity of the writing style conceals the subtlety and complexity of what is being described, and this combination of straightforward, lucid and accessible prose with a profound and imaginative appreciation of the inner world of children and their parents is at the heart of Martha Harris' unusual gifts as a psychoanalytic thinker and writer.

Rereading it now brings freshly alive many of the qualities she brought to her clinical and teaching work. I will mention some which struck me particularly. First there is her so evidently true but so challenging and wise statement that children have to be recognized as individuals quite other than ourselves with their own talents, failings and sense of direction: they cannot be moulded to suit the desires of parents or indeed teachers, psychotherapists, politicians or others. Both time and thought have to be devoted to getting to know any individual child. The book's structure, which moves from babyhood into the world of the primary school years – from the child living primarily within the confines of his or her family to the child also independently exploring relationships of learning and friendship at school – enables us to grasp that this provision of attention is the essence of the parental task. It is an ongoing process, as both child and parents develop through time, in

so far as they are able to digest and profit from their experience. This respect for the individual natures, difficulties and capacities of each person is what Martha Harris clearly believed to be the bedrock of a psychoanalytically informed approach to family relationships and the development of children. As she put it: “Relationships grow through the ability of both parties to experience and to adjust to each other’s natures” (p. 15).

This statement comes at the start of the chapter on the new baby’s point of view, and leads on to a wonderfully vivid account of the baby’s world in the early weeks, couched in ways which support the mother’s inevitable anxiety and uncertainty through demonstrating the meaningfulness of babies’ communications and their hope and expectation of being understood. She writes of the importance of allowing ourselves to make and learn from mistakes and challenges us to acknowledge the damaging impact of setting impossibly high standards of “ideal” motherhood. The reader then feels ready to learn more about the baby’s anxieties, his need for protection, his potential for disintegration and a sense of chaos which can overwhelm the early and still fragile development of the ordering of experience. There is a generosity of spirit in the exploration of different ways in which mothers and babies can come to understand and appreciate each other. The examples range from the physical closeness of holding the baby, and breast-feeding to the pleasures of bath-time. The description of the gradual coming-together of the mother-baby couple then opens out into discussion of the many things the baby needs help to struggle with – the distinguishing of need from greed, recognition of separateness, complex mixed feelings of love and hostility, curiosity and jealousy. Here is a brief quotation to convey the tone of voice which makes space for the lives of both mother and baby:

Some infants find it much harder than others ... to love and let go – to mentally allow with a good grace the mother who is so important to them to be absent and occupying herself elsewhere... If they are not inwardly reconciled to allowing her to retain her freedom, their independence has a brittle quality, in so far as it is achieved against, or in spite of a mother who is secretly resented because she is accused of neglect, or denigrated as not good enough. (p. 28)

In the chapter on weaning, another characteristic quality of the book emerges: Martha Harris can describe guiding principles which can serve as creative advice for each of us to think about our own personal situation. Such principles include the reminder that each baby’s development will go at its own pace, that changes need to be introduced slowly, providing time to take in the new experience, that flexibility is needed (to see how things work out) and most centrally that sorting out the needs

and anxieties of the baby from those of oneself as mother are the pre-requisite of successful weaning.

In the later chapters, there is a splendid discussion of the child's growing need to do things for himself, a brilliant description of the dynamics of the bully and his victim, and a particularly enjoyable depiction of sibling relationships. A sense of the real-life complexities of families comes across in the detailed observations and analysis of a variety of brother/sister relationships, which emphasize the fascinating ongoing development of character.

The chapters are studded with statements which sound extremely simple but in fact communicate essential truths about human development which have emerged from long study. A good example of this is the almost throwaway remark that babies learn to talk when they have hopes of being understood (p. 53). This relational lens on the child's gradually expanding capacities opens one's mind to fresh perspectives.

The last forty years have brought many social changes in the lives of children and parents. Many mothers of young children now pursue careers outside the home, and the majority have to find a way to contribute to family income as well as take care of children and home. Fathers are often much more actively involved in the care of babies and young children, but there are also many families where fathers are absent altogether, and others where separated parents share the care of their children in complex ways. Child-minders and nurseries are a much more frequent element in children's lives. Step-fathers, mothers and siblings are more prevalent than they were, children's Homes have been largely replaced by foster-care, same-sex couples are no longer so exceptional, the rich cultural and ethnic mix of our cities has changed the face of our public spaces, and we live in the age of virtual worlds and electronic communication. All these factors and more mean that the world from which Martha Harris drew her examples is not ours. Because she writes with the aim of articulating a conception of the complex interaction of the inner worlds of the individuals that make up a family unit, the enormous changes in the world we inhabit do not greatly alter the fundamental picture. How we can understand the experience of being a child, growing up, becoming oneself, taking on adult responsibilities - these are the elements of this book. The kindness, truthfulness, wisdom, and imagination of the writer in describing human lives is what makes it such a pleasure to read.

Margaret Rustin
Consultant child and adolescent psychotherapist



Introduction

From the moment of birth, and perhaps before, a baby's development is influenced by the quality of his mother's response to his presence and communications. Each infant is potentially a unique little person from whom his mother and his father have to learn anew, however many children they may have had before.

This book tries to describe some of the important aspects of the development of infants and young children from birth to school age, illustrated by vignettes of scenes between parents and children. The points selected for discussion do not give a comprehensive coverage of all aspects of personality development in the early years, and do not aim to present parents with norms. They do touch upon many of the questions and feelings evoked in the intense emotional relationship between parents and children at this time. It is therefore a move away from the tendency to think of child development in terms of "normality" towards thinking of children as individuals.

For coming to realise how much one may learn from the observation of infants growing up in their families I am indebted to my training in Kleinian psychoanalysis, and especially to Esther Bick, who instituted weekly infant observation as a basic

post-graduate study at The Tavistock Clinic. For an abundance of rich material with which to think about infants – to which this book does no justice at all – I am indebted to many students over the years.

The pages that follow are about relationships: some expressed in generalisations, but some as instances of how individual parents and children are facing their particular situation. Those instances are drawn from actual observations but are disguised and anonymous to preserve confidentiality.

The value in having a closer look at how other people live their lives lies not so much in giving us something to copy, or at the other extreme, to avoid at all costs; but in offering us the opportunity to put ourselves in someone else's circumstances for a little, before returning to our own with an experience that hopefully may enrich and enable us to see them a little more clearly.

Martha Harris, 1975

From the introduction to the 1969 edition

The publications of Susan Isaacs over thirty years ago on the social and intellectual development of young children did much to encourage a more sympathetic and imaginative approach to their education and rearing, to highlight the importance of the nursery years.

During the last twenty to thirty years, the work of John Bowlby and his colleagues has done a great deal to make professional people who deal with young children, especially with sick ones, very much more aware of the importance of the child's relationship to his mother and has changed the whole frame of reference within which they attempt to prescribe for childhood illnesses.

D.W. Winnicott's talks and writings for mothers - but also for fathers - have been, and continue to be for many a parent, an encouragement to her own intuition and developing commonsense in feeling free to relate to her child without being bedevilled by conflicting expert advice.

I hope this book may be just such an encouragement. It is written by one who has had the privilege of a psychoanalytic training, and of working with Melanie Klein and her colleagues, as an aid to sharpen observation of relationships.

It is not a handbook of information on how to bring up infants, although there are from time to time suggestions that may be of immediate practical use. It is certainly not meant to be a substitute for consulting your family doctor, your local

maternity and child welfare clinic, or for seeking psychological advice in situations where you are worried about your infant and in need of expert help - for experts have their place and are sometimes able to help when one is really in trouble!

The points selected for discussion do not by any means give a comprehensive coverage or even summary of the many aspects of personality development in the early years. They do not provide you with norms of development; but they do discuss some things which parents may commonly note in their infants, some of the questions and feelings which may be evoked in us by the close relationship, the responsibility for the small dependent person who is growing so rapidly in these years.

Martha Harris, 1969 (extract)



Chapter 1: Parenthood

Becoming a parent

Becoming a parent in one sense happens overnight, but in another it is a role which one has to grow into through experience and through making many mistakes. Our childhood experience with our own parents provides the basic reservoir from which we draw unconsciously; our own children can also be of the greatest help in letting us know when we are helping them to thrive. But children differ enormously in this respect, in their capacity to love and to enjoy life and to appreciate the parents who gave them life.

Because of his individual quality, we have to be prepared to learn with every new child how to understand him, and to interpret his needs aright. This is one of the great pleasures in bringing up children and in working with children; to enjoy it we must, however busy we may be, allow a little time, a little space, to be attentive to and to communicate with the individual child.

A closer look at the way in which any child grows up within his family makes one realise that none does this without conflicts with parents, and brothers and sisters, but that these struggles with the outer world can help him to face the conflicts

within himself. From being able to struggle with the problems posed at every stage in life comes the confidence that enables us to enjoy it.

Conflict can, however, be too sharp, too stressful at times. We would be greatly lacking in our duty as parents did we not worry and try to understand a little better when we felt that a child of ours was unduly unhappy and failing to thrive in important respects. Examination of our own attitudes, of the effect that they seem to have on him, and of the attitudes and emotions that are aroused in us by that particular child, can sometimes help us to see a little more clearly.

But it seems to me important to bear in mind - and this can save us from over-weening pride and also from unrealistic and unhelpful guilt - that in trying to bring up our children as best we can, we are dealing from the beginning with separate human beings with a potential we may cherish and gradually help them to realise, but never with creations of our own who can be moulded as we will. The help we can give them is contingent upon our own resources: upon the limits of our circumstances and personalities, and can be best employed if we take some stock of these.

Motherhood

There is no more responsible task than that of being a mother, of having charge of a new life which depends so much upon one for its physical and mental well-being.

The weight of responsibility for the baby, for the way he feels, can be so heavy that it will make some mothers quite insensitive in many ways in the early days. They may concentrate excessively on the physical care and deny that the baby has any feelings, is other than a bundle of reflexes, who when he cries is "just exercising his lungs".

It takes an effort of imagination and love which is the special, if not the unique, prerogative of mothers to experience that feeling. So it guides us in learning how to protect the baby's sensitivity and to provide the conditions for his strong potential for life to unfold.

For in order to understand a baby one has to feel like a baby. We have all been babies and theoretically this understanding should be within the emotional grasp of us all. But the vulnerability and acute sensibility of the baby and of the young child is something which most of us use our adult experience and competence to avoid feeling any more.

It's not so hard, perhaps, to make oneself acquainted with the physical necessities

of food, warmth, sleep and cleanliness, and in theory, not so hard to provide these. But in practice we have to find what is the most necessary thing for him at a given moment. We may make the wrong approach and it can be disconcerting when the baby is not ready to accept what we are giving him. He needs understanding.

The quality of devotion and understanding which he can get potentially from his mother is better than he is likely to get from anyone else; but sometimes she does need to be encouraged and shown that this is so. When a mother begins to feel more certain of herself, when she finds that her baby thrives and responds - for babies are on the whole surprisingly resilient - she can often then allow herself to become more open to him, closer and more responsive to his moods and needs.

Reactions to birth

Your first baby may very likely be born in hospital and the physical care and attention which you receive there is likely to be good.

It's more difficult for the hospital to meet the varying psychological needs of every mother with her new baby. Hospital staff vary enormously in their capacity to do this, although it is becoming increasingly recognised that this is an especially vulnerable time in a woman's life, and that the beginning of her relationship with her newly born baby is important for both of them.

Some mothers do enjoy the care and attention of the hospital, knowing that somebody else has charge of the baby, fitting in with the hospital framework, being told what to do. They can call Sister if the baby, for instance, doesn't seem to know how to feed and she will show them what to do. They can enjoy for a while being babied or organised themselves. They may enjoy learning from the nurse how to feed or how to bath the baby.

Others, however, can hardly wait until they can go home and have the baby to themselves; they find the framework of the hospital and the attention of the nurses and doctors an interference in what is, for them, an intensely involving and novel experience which evokes emotions which they need privacy to allow themselves to feel.

Giving birth is a remarkable, unique experience. Holding her baby for the first time can be an extraordinary moving experience for the mother and there is often a great need to share this. She may not want to know how to put it in words in any direct way, but it's usually most important to her to feel that her husband does