AIMS For a better birth...

Letters

AIMS Journal, 2008, Vol 20, No 1

Thoughts of Hurting the Baby

I really wanted to express my responses to this article. I'm writing as a retired midwife and psychotherapist and the mother of two sons born at home.

After my first son was born I had a lot of mad thoughts. If I was out in the street with him in a sling on my front I used to imagine somebody rushing towards him with the intention of sticking an axe in his head. There were certain circumstances when my partner was out when I used to be convinced that he would die and never come home: there was one particular meeting he used to attend during which I would inevitably have diarrhoea as a result of this fear.

I believe that first-time mothers especially, but possibly all mothers, relive their own childhoods in parallel with that of their child so if their own experiences have included difficulties or traumas they will be re-evoked. In my case my much loved father died when I was eight and when I became a mother my much loved partner became a father and therefore the irrational childlike part of myself assumed that he, like my father, would leave one day and never come back.

I never went near any health professionals. This was not because I feared my child would be taken into care. That thought never occurred to me. But I was critical of the medical model of mental illness (as well as the medical model of childbirth) and I had an intellectual framework within which I could understand my distress. I didn't want to be diagnosed as experiencing postnatal mental illness and having it recommended that I should take serious psychotropic drugs and stop breast-feeding my baby. I do think realistically that this was a serious possibility.

Things became gradually better as we all survived this event.

Speaking psychotherapeutically I think that we all have 'mad thoughts' though some of us are more aware of and receptive to them than others. I think that new motherhood is a particularly intense time, both physiologically and emotionally. I do not believe that 'postnatal depression' is a hormonally determined 'illness'. I think that for each woman it would be understandable in terms of her personal history and for all women in those circumstances it is understandable hormonally: all mammals with young are lethally dangerous if they feel their young are threatened. For human women undergoing the routine medically driven experience of childbirth, their young have been threatened but this is not an admissible fact and it cannot be legitimately expressed. Also, if one is to look out for the well-being and safety of another, as all-new mothers do, one has to imagine the hazards and in this particular case the

major hazard is that one's baby will be harmed.

So when mothers fear that they will harm their baby I often think that it is an expression of concern rather than an intention.

I do find the AIMS Journal a refreshing expression of sanity.

Meg Taylor

Is there a Father in the House?

While James Torr's book 'Is there a Father in the House?' sounds most interesting, I do hope it doesn't perpetuate the myth that children are automatically deprived without a Father. The first few years of my life were hell, with a cruel, manipulative father, of whom I was terrified. When he left home I went on to have a very happy childhood, with a kind, caring, single Mum.

As a child minder, I've met many children with desperately unhappy lives who happen to have Fathers, and, conversely, many children with single Mums who have very happy well-adjusted childhoods.

Again and again, I've seen unnecessary suffering caused to both women and children by the fashionable insistence that children must always have contact with their father, regardless of what he is like, how much he contributes or how he behaves.

Children must be believed when they try to report cruelty or abuse. One of my first memories was of my mother sobbing hysterically, while my father made a bonfire of all the love letters she was keeping, but one of the most terrible things was that he pulled the wool over so many people's eyes, I wasn't believed until too late.

Likewise, with the obsession for equal rights in parenthood, I feel what women often go through in pregnancy and birth is often belittled, and not taken into account when making arrangements for children in divorce cases.

There is a big biological difference between men and women. Because men are able to produce many children in a lifetime, well into old age, without having the pain, risks and discomforts of pregnancy and birth, I do feel that mothers are closer to their children. I realise, of course, that this is an 'unfashionable' point of view.

Abusive people are often very clever at covering up and putting on a very charming manner to the outside world. I'm not exaggerating to say I have been deeply affected by the abuse and cruelty that I suffered from my father as a child - I still have nightmares, and feel if only I'd been brought up by just my Mum, I'd have been a much happier, more well-adjusted person.

Chrissie Haines