

A PRIMER FOR AND ABOUT PARENTS

# *Parents can be People*

By DOROTHY W. BARUCH



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# Chapter I

## MAKING PARENTHOOD EASIER

**F**OR EACH AND EVERY one of us, as we have children, parenthood becomes a separate and unique kind of adventure. Each of us has his own distinctive thoughts and feelings and reactions. Each of us takes the ups and downs of family living in the measure of his own stride.

In anticipation, many of us believe that raising a family will be an easy, simple thing. In actuality, it is not. It can never be.

If we are serious and thoughtful about the kind of job that confronts us, we see parenthood as a complex adventure. On the other hand, we may give it no especial thought. We may think of it as the most happy, natural state on earth. And yet, as we go on living, we find that it has its difficult phases. As parents, we cannot escape moments of uncertainty, moments of anxiousness, moments of disappointment. These are a part of the picture as well as moments of eagerness and joy and fulfilment. Such facts are true, of necessity, in this day of our lives, with a world of turmoil around us. We do not know what kind of conditions will confront us and our children. We do not know what their lives and what our lives will bring. Moments of tremulousness and doubt are natural with unrest and strain and struggle pervading the current scene; with war, and post-

war problems upon us and the problems of solving a lasting peace; with echo of unrest inescapably inside our hearts and our minds.

Traditional "thoughts on having children" obscure the matter. The good and enriching aspects have been highlighted. The curtain has been pulled down on the very aspects that call for a clean, fine facing of reality, for straightforward honesty, and for impulse toward strength. We have been brought up to think of having children as a rosy and beautiful business. Children are "a mother's jewels." They are the "greatest blessing." They are a "comfort to old age," a parent's "sustenance and succor," a woman's "crowning glory."

All of these descriptions can be true. But they are incomplete and one-sided. They not only leave the minor chords mute, they distort them. They make it difficult for us to be honest. They make it difficult for us to face the inevitable problems in family living with ears that hear and eyes that see and a heart that dares to understand.

Most of us have had fostered in us a lifelong concept of children as the ultimately soul-satisfying achievement. Such build-up may make it difficult for us to admit freely that moments enter which are not lovely and serene. It may make it difficult for us to realize fully that our relationship with our children cannot always be harmonious and sweet. It may make us blame ourselves unduly for the unhappy scenes that normally arise in the course of any family's ongoing days.

As one man put it, "You're supposed to think of having children as life's most joyous adventure. When you find some quite-other moments, you begin to wonder. You wonder if there's something wrong with you; if you're perhaps

not quite normal. You're ashamed to admit that you get doggone tired of the whole thing at times."

Parents invariably expect a Fra Angelican, dreamy-eyed cherub. Instead they are confronted with a small, red-faced, frog-like creature. They hear of the "difficult adolescent." And yet they are disappointed when their own youngsters do not turn out to be the glowing exceptions. They laugh charitably and with glad sympathy at the Peck's-bad-boys and the Huckleberry Finns in the abstract. But they no longer burst into chortles of amusement when the Peck's-bad-boys are their own.

The down-to-earth earthiness of being a parent is strengthening and good. But it inevitably has its bitter as well as its better moments.

Some people are more sensitive than others. The more sensitive they happen to be, the more reactive they are to various kinds of stresses and strains. The stresses implicit in family living are no exception. By very virtue of their sensitivity, they are apt to find themselves more upset than many of their neighbors by whatever small or large difficulties arise. Simultaneously, also by virtue of their sensitivity, they are more eager in wanting things to be right. Admitting difficulties is apt to be a hard task.

One woman whose child was caught "stealing" in school, could even then not admit the difficulties that had piled up. She kept reiterating, "I can't understand it. She's always been a nice child. I'm sure she has no bad intentions. There must be some mistake."

To a lesser degree, many of us who have been brought up to regard having children as a beautiful experience shove the unbeautiful aspects behind a curtain. We chorus: "They aren't really present. There must be some error."

When a child, with eyes smoldering, shouts, "I hate you," we cover up. He doesn't mean what he says. There must be some error. When an adolescent groans, "I wish I'd never been born," again we make excuses. There must be some error. . . . We feel that such things are not to be looked at. They are to be ignored and passed over. They are not the things that really *are*. They are not really meant.

Actually, however, they are as real a part of the whole as the more solacing events. We do ourselves an injustice when we dismiss the thought of them in order to escape its application to ourselves. If we can bring ourselves to a place of honesty, we will be better parents. We will be able to say: "There are humps in my family living, too; times when I want to cry and do; times when I'm disappointed and afraid and uncertain." It is healthy to be able to admit the "downs" along with the "ups"; the drab spots along with the bright ones. It is healthy to be able to say, as one girl did, "I love them dearly. But, boy, they can drive me wild."

We need to admit, with honesty, that difficulties do exist. We need to meet them with openness when they come. But we need not make them greater than they are. We need not *create* difficulties because of understanding too little and expecting too much.

Much trouble comes from overexpectation. We expect the whole adventure of having a family to be consistently more perfect than it can possibly be. This is one kind of overexpecting. We expect our children, little and big, to live up to all sorts of standards which are many times far beyond them. But, above all—and most devastating—we expect ourselves to be model parents. Creatures of quiet and calm. Actually not people but the nice glassy dolls.

The unfluttering, unflaring species. Like manikins, all-poised-forever, that stare benignly from store-windows. We are disappointed in ourselves when we find ourselves flesh and blood, beautiful and nasty, human and full of hearty reactions. We have, we tell ourselves, expected "so much more."

We need desperately to understand ourselves a great deal better. To know and accept deeply that we as *parents can also be people*. That we *are* people, with frailties and weaknesses as well as staunchness and strength. Why should we expect ourselves to be inhumanly perfect in the pursuit of parenthood? We need to replace overexpectation with understanding. Only in this way can we make parenthood easier.

Many books have been written for us on how to understand our children as children. But it is difficult to unearth anything on how to understand ourselves as parents. It is hard to find any *thoughts on parents for and about parents* which can help parents—both as parents and as people—to feel easier within themselves.

Look, for instance, at the question: Why does Johnnie react violently to his mother's dictatorial whims?

We can, with a little searching, discover answers aplenty written in books for parents.

But take the other side of the question: Why does mother react violently to Johnnie's dictatorial whims?

This is a horse of another color! And yet, it should not be. The everyday experiences in family living have their effect on parent as well as on child. They matter to the parent as much as to the child. Perhaps even more. They weigh more on the parent's mind. Most parents want sincerely to look into their reactions. They yearn for the search-



light that can make things clearer. They want to know more of why they are as they are in their closest relationships. That is why the present book has been written. The chapters that follow deal with parental reactions from before the first child arrives to where children are grown. They deal with some of the ever-common matters which countless parents have brought up and have wanted to talk about. They attempt to view these matters against a backdrop of a world at war and emerging out of war. A world of uncertainty and change.

The chapters all through the book are mutually dependent. Although a chapter focuses on matters which are of primary concern to the parents of an infant, or of an adolescent, even so the parents of children in-between may discover themselves in it. Thus, the parent whose children are adolescent will get far more out of those chapters which deal with his reactions to this age child if he reads from the beginning, from where a parent's reactions to his children before birth are under focus. Many important general reactions, true of parents of any age children, are interwoven throughout the pages. Many psychological considerations concerning parents as people are scattered here and there. Those who read a cohesive whole will therefore come out with more cohesive and whole understandings.

We admit that knowing some of the answers concerning the why's of Johnnie's behavior can help us to handle Johnnie more wisely. This has become an axiom in wide acceptance today. Tersely it can be stated: *Know the cause and you will have uncovered a first step toward cure.*

It follows that knowing the why's of our own behavior should help us to handle ourselves more wisely. It should help us to cure within ourselves at least some of the worries

that beset us as people who happen also to be parents. It should help us to make parenthood a more gallant as well as an easier thing.

If we turn to books on the rearing of children, we will notice many sentiments such as the following:

Behind every unhappy child, you will discover an unhappy parent.

. . .

Children reflect their parents' conflicts.

. . .

A problem child means a problem parent.

. . .

Children absorb the uneasiness, the anxiety, the fears of their parents.

. . .

Children get what their parents *are*, not what they do or say to cover up.

Such statements are apt to give parents the feeling that they are being blamed for all evil and mischance in their children's lives. Only as a parent begins to see beyond and behind such statements *without* a sense of blame, can he find any helpfulness in them.

One parent accosted a psychologist with the question: "Are *all* parents *problem* parents?"

The answer came quietly. "No. But *all* parents have *problems*. If they didn't, they wouldn't be human and they'd be pretty miserable specimens to bring up any child." Living, automatically, spells having problems. It is usually when problems are ignored and hidden and neglected that they grow to appalling dimensions.

When a child has a serious problem, the best sort of treatment available today takes the parent's problems very seriously into the picture. But the seriousness might readily have been avoided had the parent taken himself into the picture sooner. Parents do not need to let their problems make them into problem parents. The ounce of prevention is again worth the pound of cure. Understanding is the key. It opens the door through the maze and out into the clear.

The "care and feeding of children" is not the only important thing. The care and feeding of parents is even more pivotal.

We influence our children by the way we ourselves feel. We are glad, filled with a kind of inner glow and contentment, and the mood is reflected. We hold bitterness and turbulence within, and, no matter how we may try to hide it, those around us, who are sensitive to us, feel how we feel. This is not a mystic, supernatural phenomenon. It is not even a matter of mental telepathy. It is a fact grounded on a good, sound physical basis. It is this simple: We give ourselves away by muscular cues. The small constriction of muscles around the eyes and mouth. The stiffening of shoulders. The wrinkling of brows. All these, and more, serve as indicators of our inner state of being. Those who are close to us learn to read their meaning without even realizing it. Our children become uncannily adept early. They understand what our muscles tell them apparently long before they understand what our tongues say.

This does not mean that we must go through life trying to keep our muscles from betraying us when we are worried or sad or irritable or concerned. Nor does it mean that we should be ashamed of being worried or sad or irritable or

concerned, and of showing how we feel. Our feelings are not necessarily detrimental to those who are close. Our children actually need to see and know such feelings in us. They need to learn that such feelings are a part of the range of emotions that belong to human beings. Otherwise they will have a far more difficult time tolerating such feelings in themselves. They will have a far more difficult time understanding them in others whom they meet along the way. They will be less attuned to catching variations of mood; less comprehending of the troubles that others express. We do not need to eliminate variations and range in the emotions which are a part of us. What we do want to eliminate is the crushing, overpowering sense of wrongness that pervades so many normal and natural parental and personal reactions. What we want is to eliminate feelings which crush and cripple us and make us enemy to ourselves and to others.

We want to live our lives with vital and spontaneous responsiveness, cherishing the ability to feel and react with varying moods; not hiding it. The elimination of feelings of wrongness and shame and guilt frees people. It augments vitality and vigor and full-flowing energy.

In a world of turmoil, as has been brought out, we cannot escape from strain and tension—not if we are reactive and vitally alive. What we can do, though, is to eliminate at least some of those tensions which arise out of inner conflicts where shame and guilt and a sense of wrongdoing lurk under cover.

Parents are prone to blame themselves unnecessarily for actions and feelings which—if they only knew it—are perfectly sound and natural. They frequently condemn themselves for reactions over which there is no need to feel un-

comfortable or wrong. They worry over some of the things they do, or do not do, when worry is totally uncalled for. And so, in a variety of ways, they augment inner strain to a degree that could well be avoided.

It is startling to know how many of us do this. Conversely, it is helpful to look into some of the emotions which so frequently make us feel ashamed and guilty. It is helpful to see them in perspective; to realize that we need not condemn ourselves because of them. When we have come to see how usual they are; and when we have come to realize some of the elements that have brought them into being, we often find ourselves worrying less.

We find ourselves suddenly shedding at least some of the shame and self-condemnation. We find ourselves growing more comfortable and secure and certain. We become more at one with ourselves in how we feel. We dare be freer. We dare discover that we as parents can also be people—fine and vigorous and vital. We are able to face the days and their problems with heightened courage.

Achievement of such values makes us richer, fuller, more acceptant; less tense and pickish. Less condemnatory. Fortified by them, we are able to help our children become a sturdier part of the future. We are able to help them develop generous and wise understandings to use in shaping their world.

## FOR US WHO ARE PARENTS

*Today's world of upheaval brings stress and turmoil so close to our everyday lives that no sensitive person can escape.*

*Tomorrow's world will depend in great part on how we, in our families, handle today's.*

*The way we react to others within the family frequently augments strain and makes life harder, not only for us but for our children—the citizens of tomorrow.*

*We owe it to ourselves and our children to eliminate unnecessary stresses insofar as we can, so that we may be stronger to withstand those stresses which are inescapable.*

*Seeing into and understanding our reactions often helps us to be easier and more secure.*

UNDERSTANDING CAN ENABLE US  
TO MAKE LIFE BETTER  
FOR  
OUR CHILDREN  
AND  
OURSELVES

## Chapter 2

### PRENATAL IMPRESSIONS

**T**HERE IS A KIND of overall adherence in our culture to the sentiment that having a baby is an event which must be looked forward to with eager anticipation.

"Did you know that Betty and Bob are going to have a baby?"

"No! My dear, isn't that just wonderful."

"How lovely!"

"They must be thrilled."

The oh's and ah's and gurgles of appreciation that ensue are common to many gatherings.

As long as Betty and Bob are living in respectable marital estate, they are supposed to be undeviatingly overjoyed at the coming event. Anything short of sheer happiness is considered somehow "not quite normal."

In actuality, however, various individuals vary greatly in their reactions to pregnancy and birth. A number of variations are normal. A serious and thoughtful couple explain their attitude: "In a world like this, you don't know what's going to happen. Until we get this fight settled, and until we know that we can give a child a decent set of conditions to live under, we don't think it's fair to have one. . . ."

Another couple confesses: "We don't care too much for

children. Neither of us ever has. It's hard to admit. But it's true." They begin to apologize for a variation which they feel departs from the norm.

Some people like music passionately; some like it mildly; some do not like it at all. Some love modern paintings, or modern architecture. Others are completely unresponsive to both. Some people like dancing; some do not. Some people like children immeasurably. Some like them passively. Some simply do not like them. Some are overjoyed beyond measure when they know a child is on its way. Some are not. If a hundred people were asked about their reactions to having children, and if their reactions—their honest reactions—were charted, many different kinds would show up.

To some people, having children spells fruition. They feel expansiveness. They feel a deepened sense of their own life's importance and their own essential worth.

"Won't it be great," says John to Jane, "to see how the baby turns out like one or the other of us?"

"I hope he looks like you."

"I hope he has your disposition."

Increased tenderness fills both John and Jane. And curiosity over what the baby will be like.

But even such bliss does not stay undiluted.

Jane suddenly looks serious. "Do you think I'll be a good mother?"

Wonderings and doubts have entered. "Will I be able to take care of him properly? . . . Will I know what to do when he cries? . . . Will I know how to handle him when he's naughty? . . . Will I be able to bring him up so that John will be proud?"

John, also, has his hesitations, although he perhaps does not say as much. Men, after all, are supposed to be "strong"



creatures! They are not supposed to be heir to misgivings and doubts. Actually, however, they, too, have their own brand of questions to bring to bear on the scene.

"Will I be able to do right by my baby? . . . Will I be able to hold him without dropping him? . . . Will I be able to make him mind me? . . . Will I be able to keep him from being a spoiled brat?"

Such wonderings mixed with doubt are quite normal. Even where a child is gladly anticipated they are apt to enter. They add up to one ultimate question: "Will I be able to fulfill my role of parenthood with ableness and assurance?"

The more uncertain a person has been all the length of his life, the more uncertain will he be concerning his ability to cope with the trials of parenthood.

A dark-haired woman leans forward. "You know," she says, "when I was little I felt terribly clumsy next to my older brother. He was so completely competent. Sturdy and well-built and agile. You knew, didn't you, that he was one of the finest athletes in the city? Well, I was never good at athletics. And my younger sister was the brain of the family. So where was I? Not very good in any line. I remember wondering at times if I'd ever be able to do anything at all well. And then, when I knew I was going to have a baby, I wanted, more than I'd ever wanted anything else, to bring him up just right. To do a super job with him. I tried to talk myself into believing that I would. But, you know, as I think back now, I realize that underneath I was always afraid I couldn't."

Many more people than we ever suspect have similar reactions. And no wonder. Self-doubt is a frequent companion to the upbringing many of us have had. It generated