

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