

MOTHER STEPS DOWN

by Elsie Locke

THE psychologists at the moment are very kind to us mothers. Self-effacing creatures that we are, mere Jills-of-all-trades in a world where experts top the daily headlines, we have for long been accustomed to laying our own judgment aside in deference to those who know better. Who are we, to ask questions of Sir This or Dr. That, M.B., Ch.B., M.R.C.P., or whatever?

When science first invaded the sphere of child rearing and brought down the infant-mortality rate with such resounding success, we stood and marvelled. Obviously "Plunket" advice must be correct. We extended ourselves to maintain in our humble homes a hospital standard of aseptis, routine and balanced feeding. We fed, bathed, aired and bedded down our babies to exact timetables, and we measured out the correct dose of "mothering" as we would medicine, to avoid over-stimulation. As for our grandmothers who made sentimental remarks about following our mother-instincts, we dismissed them as old-fashioned. Perhaps we were secretly afraid to listen: for the strain of applying the official teaching was already great.

Today all that is changed. Plunket has discarded the strictness, and many authorities go far beyond Plunket in advice that would make great-grandmother smile. It's a glorious time for the mothers. All the things we wanted in our hearts to do, turn out to be the right things. That dreadful feeling of having been robbed that overcame us as Nurse bore our babe from the ward after twenty-minutes' feeding time, was right: we are entitled to "rooming-in" systems, where the baby's cot is beside our bed. That urge to comfort a night-crying baby from the breast, was right: "self-demand feeding" gives baby assurance and he can settle down to routine later when he is ready for it. That desire to talk baby-talk, to dandle him, to hear his burbling chuckle, was right: he responds to our play and affection with a happy temperament. Even the horrors we might have felt when he discovered a half-chewed crust and started going again, need not beset us. They are mostly his own germs and won't hurt him. We can be happy, relaxed and loving, and the child born healthy will remain healthy.

THE psychologist goes still further. Baby's first and most important relationship, he tells us, is with his mother; and if she be torn from him he will suffer "maternal deprivation" with all sorts of emotional and physical complications. Recalling that occasion when we left our child in the hospital for his tonsillitis operation, and walked down the ward with his cries ringing out to charge us with abandoning him in a den of strange wild animals, we realise that our impulse was sound and we should have insisted that we stay with him. He needs Mother beside him when he takes his anaesthetic and when he comes out of it. If in hospital for any reason he should have Mother come to see him daily, to help look after him, to make friends with the nurses and see that he feels at home.

"Maternal deprivation" resulting from the shock of separation from his mother

is shown to have serious consequences to the sensitive child. Whether it be through his hospitalisation or hers, through her death, through a broken home, through his adoption by new parents when he is more than a tiny baby, the shock is lasting.

In the light of these teachings, which are current today in numerous books, reports and periodicals, Mother goes up in the social scale. She puts her shoulders back and lifts her head and looks the experts straighter in the eye. They may have letters to their names, but she has instincts! And the following of those instincts, reinforced by trained skill and science, is the right thing for her child.

It all sounds fine—until a small, protesting voice pipes up from the dim background, "What about me?"

It's Dad, of course.

In the main the psychologists have forgotten him. If they have so much as spoken respectfully of him, they have usually assigned him to a lesser place to that reserved for Mother. Only rarely does the voice of science champion his rights. He's only the fellow who brings home the wages and gives aid and comfort to the Head of the Family.

Fortunately for Dad, in his new battle for his domestic rights, the experts have already undermined their own case. They have warned us not to mistrust our instincts. Father has instincts, too. Moreover, the wife in a happy home has a natural desire to share the children equally with her husband. Where once the most enlightened men had to champion women's rights, now the most enlightened women come forward to champion men's rights.

WE can start from the plain biological fact that nature provides every one of us with a father and a mother. Presumably, then, both are equally necessary to the child's well-being. Society, not nature, has imposed the conditions wherein most fathers go from home for long hours daily to earn the family's bread. In more primitive communities the parents together might labour in their field with the babe or toddler alongside them. With us, the mother has the advantage that she is constantly with the child, and she gets a head-start in his affections by her monopoly of the ability to feed him with her own milk. Yet as soon as baby is able to recognise more than one face, Father soon catches up and other members of the family gain their share of his smiles.

Fully speaking, the child is not born to the mother at all. He is born into the family. If there are elder brothers or sisters, or adults who share the home, an intimate relationship grows up with them all. Soon he finds that different members contribute to his needs and his pleasures. Father may give him his porridge, or bath him and tuck him into bed. His sister takes him out in his pram, his brother plays jolly games with him. He blossoms and becomes an "outgoing" little citizen. If in one of his tumblers he hurts his knees, it doesn't have to be Mother who runs to his aid; any of the group who is handy will pick him up and comfort him.

This state of affairs comes naturally to most of our younger families. The

time when Father was an awesome creature whose main role in family affairs was chastisement for major offences, when every household chore was done for him and even his boots were not blackened by his own hands, are long behind us. The newly-married husband takes it as a matter of course that he helps with the dishes and other duties, especially when, as often happens, both partners continue to go to work for some time after the wedding. To help with the children is a natural and pleasant extension.

What happens when this normal relationship is lacking? Have we such a thing as "paternal deprivation"?

It is time the psychologists made some observations on this score. Surely where the father is excluded from his fair share in the family life—whether from physical separation, from his own deficiencies, from the mother's too-great possessiveness, or from any other cause—the child must suffer? Is it not possible that the mother who takes too seriously the psychologists' warnings about "maternal deprivation," who will not relax with her child or make room for other members of the family circle to take a part in him, is setting up a fresh chain of uncertainties which will react upon the child?

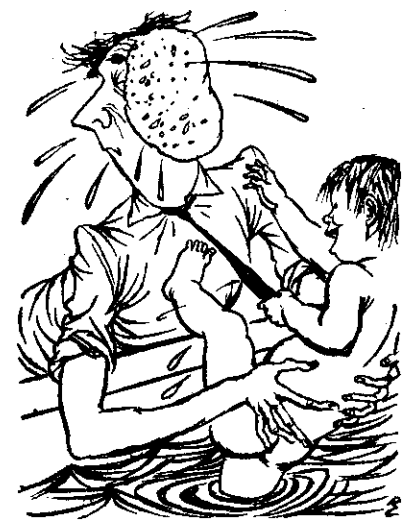
Innumerable case-histories have been assembled where children have been emotionally disturbed and have grown up neurotic, unstable or even delinquent, through "maternal deprivation," or the shock caused by sudden and prolonged breaking of this special intimacy. On the other hand, the child accustomed very early to being handled by other relatives and neighbours is less affected if such separation overtakes him. And case histories can also be assembled—could be advanced by many of us from our own range of acquaintances—where the same sad results have followed the destruction of a child's faith and reliance in his father. Further, as the "maternal deprivation" cases are read and studied, the heresy presents itself: surely many of these situations could be more readily summed up in the more shopworn but more comprehensive tag, "Insecurity"?

SECURITY and love are the foundations for sound family life, and these can continue, though not without difficulties, when one partner is removed. If the mother dies when her children are tiny, they are not forever damned because of "maternal deprivation," if the father and other close relatives are able to fill the void. If the marriage breaks up, is there no hope for the child's normal development? We all know cases where children have suffered terribly, and also others where the wisdom and devotion of those around them (often including both of the separation parents) have cushioned the shocks and brought the developing characters triumphantly through.

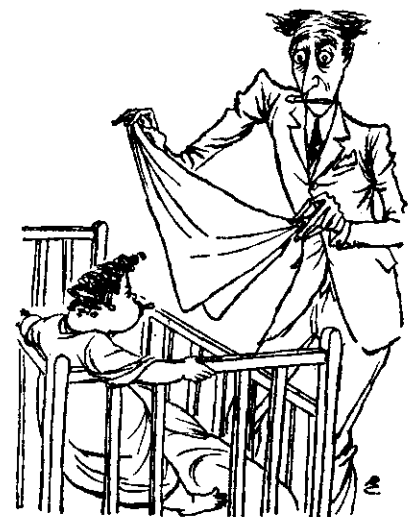
The more we think of it, the more sure we become that the current emphasis on the relationship of two people only (mother-child) is faulty. The child



"Father may give him his porridge,"



... or bath him ...



... or tuck him into bed"

rapidly acquires many relationships. It is in the healthy development of them all that he can best unfold and grow. He is of the family and the family is of the community. Disharmony anywhere will affect him. Of course, since nothing is perfect, he will certainly encounter such disharmonies, but he will learn to cope with them if he has a sufficient measure of the old-fashioned essentials.

And for that, he needs a full share of his Dad.