the motherhood myth

Lee Comer

THE EMPHASIS on the class struggle in revolutionary thinking has obscured the significance of traditional sex roles and nowhere is this more apparent than in the mistaken belief that child rearing is, of necessity, the responsibility of women. In fact, other than the optional first few weeks or months of breast feeding, there is no biological connection between the bearing of children and their rearing. Women both in and outside the Women's Liberation movement are busily mouthing this radical idea, but it is evident that as far as their own lives are concerned, and in their attitudes to others, it remains an empty ideal.

The fact that women everywhere are oppressed is not here in question. Many women have come to terms with their oppression by internalising it; they do not know that they are oppressed. Others knowingly embrace it. Thus a woman will be pleased if she's whistled at in the street and, more seriously, will defend her right to make a man, her man, happy at the expense of her own happiness. This is more than sacrifice; when she projects her ambitions and aspirations on to her children and her husband and when their achievements are embraced as her own, she is signing away her life, suspending it on an illusion which the first puff of wind will blow away. She is living vicariously, her personality atrophies and ultimately she suffers total loss of identity. Women who recognise this state of affairs for what it is and who therefore attempt, however feebly, to reject it in their own lives, are almost certainly doomed to failure for the simple reason that it is impossible to escape the ideal of motherhood.

Childless women who see no need for Women's Liberation are living in cloud cuckoo land, first because their notions about their autonomy are as illusory as the married women's who believe that sharing the housework and the decision-making means liberation, and secondly, because they feel they ought, one day, to have a baby.

Motherhood is society's golden carrot. It is a super-human woman who can live her life without a backward glance, wondering whether she can really be fulfilled or satisfied with only relationships, a satisfying job and whatever else she wants out of life, without having a child somewhere along the line. And why? Because of this one central assumption which underlines everything that pertains to women, that a woman's true purpose in life and the pinnacle of her fulfilment is motherhood. The professional planners of industrial society — the psychologists, educationalists, doctors, sociologists, advertisers and the media, using the different means at their disposal, magnify and elevate the importance of the mother/child relationship. And the amateurs who tread reverentially in their wake translate these assumptions, prejudices and dubious findings into conventional wisdom, so that no-one will be allowed to miss the point. Thus we arrive at this supposedly self-evident truth; a child needs its mother and, by implication, a mother needs her child.

In actual practice, of course, a mother is not regarded highly. If she were all the special things that these people would have us believe, then surely they would take her needs into account. But this is not the case. The mother with prams and push-chairs isn't in the forefront of the planners' minds when they design every new building with flights of narrow steps. Even in what is regarded as the woman's domain, like department stores, high rise flats, etc., women with young children are simply not catered for. In fact, every aspect of our environment is designed with one thing in mind, the adult healthy male; mothers, along with the physically disabled and the very old are ignored. This is just another of the ways in which society operates a double standard. But this one has perhaps some of the most far-reaching implications, the burden of which has to be borne by the mothers.

Caring for children is a difficult and important job of work but considered in the commodity producing terms that we are conditioned to value, the mother contributes nothing of market value and as a result is not recognised economically. It must not be forgotten that it is cheaper for the establishment to recognise the woman's job in spiritual rather than economic terms and for this reason, if for no other, it is in the establishment's interest that the status quo be maintained. The most damaging way in which this is illustrated is in the desperate lack of day nursery and pre-school nursery facilities. It is worth noting here that the 1967 Plowden Report on Primary Education recommended that one of the major priorities for the Ministry of Education was the setting up of state run nursery schools for three to five-year-olds. That was four years ago and very little has been done. The most effective way of saving the state's money, of keeping children at home with mothers until they are five, is to emphasise over and over again the exclusivity and significance of the mother/child relationship. We are bombarded with this stuff from every corner and no woman is immune to it. From Bowlby to Woman's Own, it is

Lee Comer is a militant of the Women's Liberation Movement, in Leeds. This article is reprinted from The Spokesman, No. 15-16, 1971.
everyone’s prerogative to state with absolute certainty that a child needs its mother, and, deprived of her constant and exclusive care and attention, the child will suffer unmentionable difficulties and will probably turn out to be a delinquent.

Dr. John Bowlby is the arch perpetrator of this. In his own words:

'It appears that there is a very strong case indeed for believing that prolonged separation of a child from his mother (or mother substitute) during the first five years of life stands foremost among the causes of delinquent character development and persistent misbehaviour. Bowlby 1947.

What is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment. 1952

Partial deprivation brings in its train acute anxiety, excessive need for love, powerful feelings of revenge and, arising from these last, guilt and depression ... Complete deprivation ... has even more far-reaching effects on character development and may entirely cripple the capacity to make relationships. 1952

He admitted in 1956 that he may have overstated his case, but this was only in relation to the long term effects of institutionalisation (or, what he called ‘maternal deprivation’). However, in 1958, in a letter to the Lancet he asserted that, contrary to general professional opinion, his position remained unchanged.

Several writers have attested to the widespread influence of Bowlby’s views. In the words of Professor Yudkin and Anthea Holme, in their book, Working Mothers and Their Children:

There can be little doubt that among the major contributing factors to the general disapproval which our society extends to mothers of young children who work outside the home, and the corresponding guilt of the mothers themselves, are the theses of Dr. John Bowlby.

Bowlby’s hypotheses continue even now to provide both official and unofficial bodies with supposedly irrefutable evidence in favour of such money saving projects as closing day nurseries.

Grygier et al., in their work Parental Deprivation: A Study of Delinquent Children, state:

The responsibility for the emphasis on the mother belongs to John Bowlby, a leading authority on the results of maternal deprivation who has had a powerful influence on lay and professional people.

In view of the vested interest in keeping mothers at home, we begin to understand why it is that Bowlby’s views attract world-wide attention while his many detractors, who have presented a wealth of evidence which does not support his thesis, remain in relative obscurity. These investigators are only read by other investigators; they are certainly not read by those people who popularise scientific findings. If these findings were published in glee at yet another example of maternal deprivation, might be better employed at critically examining the pre-separation experiences of the child.

These social scientists might also be better employed if they turn their attention to fathers. Margaret Mead stands alone in recognising that the separation and insignificance of fathers is not biologically ordered but is a direct result of industrialisation. At the third meeting of the World Health Organisation Study Group on Child Development, she said:

In very simple societies, such as the Australian aborigines, many South Sea island societies, and some African societies, the male takes a great deal of care of the young infant. But with every society that we have any record of, with the onset of what you call civilisation, division of labour, class structure, hierarchies of authority etc., one of the first things that has happened has been the separation of the human male from his own baby until any point up to two years, four years, six years, twelve years. I think one of the things that we may want to discuss here is whether this is not a condition of civilisation, and whether one of the origins of creativity in males has not been this preventing them from having anything to do with babies.

Such subversive views about the role of fathers will not be found in the conventional literature on child care. As can be imagined, Bowlby has very wholeheartedly that it is they themselves who constantly reinforce it. If really pushed, they would admit that their children could do without their fathers, grandmothers, school, peer group, etc., but, deprived of their mothers, the children would fall apart. If we are to believe that women yearn for security, then they must go some way towards satisfying this need in making themselves indispensable in this way. The most pathetic way in which this is demonstrated is when a mother is ill. She staggers on relentlessly, often refusing offers of help. She might otherwise discover that her children can manage perfectly well without her. Similarly, it frequently happens, when a child falls over and is comforted by whoever happens to be there at the time, that the mother rushes up, whips the child out of that person’s arms and says, “There, there, Mummy’s here”. Such women are reinforcing the child’s mother-dependence and are thereby postponing the realisation that they are, in effect, dispensable as mothers.

The end result, of course, is what is known in all the text books as the normal small child, that is, a child neurotically dependent on its mother. She, being the model mother, has brought this perfect child into being by constantly reinforcing every sign of dependence on her that it displays, first its physical needs and then for its emotional needs. She puts it to bed at 6.30 p.m. so that it only sees its father for half an hour a day, she rarely, if ever, leaves it with anyone for more than an hour or so, and she reserves her ultimate contempt for any mother who does not conform to this ideal pattern.

When a child brought up in these conditions is parted from its mother and suffers distress, the social scientists, instead of throwing up their hands in contempt for any mother who does not conform to this ideal pattern, might be better employed at critically examining the pre-separation experiences of the child.
different views. This is what he had to say about fathers:

In the young child's eyes father plays second fiddle and his value increases only as the child's vulnerability to deprivation decreases. Nevertheless, as the legitimate child knows, fathers have their uses even in infancy. Not only do they provide for their wives to enable them to devote themselves unreservedly to the care of the infant and toddler, but, by providing love and companionship, they support her emotionally and help her maintain that harmonious contented mood in the aura of which the infant thrives. In what follows, therefore while continual reference will be made to the mother-child relation, little will be said of the father-child relation; his value as the economic and emotional support of the mother will be assumed.

What Bowlby gives us is a beautiful woman's magazine image of the contented mother dispensing harmony to her thriving infant with father coming home on Friday night and smiling as he hands over the economic support and if by chance he kisses his wife, he is not demonstrating his affection but only providing her with emotional support so that the child can continue to thrive. Like Bowlby's views on motherhood, this image of the paternal role has filtered down into popular mythology. It is not difficult to see why this has happened. Just as it is in the establishment's economic interest to keep the mother of young children isolated at home, so it is to keep the father alienated at work. The system needs his labour, which is of course his time, and he needs the money he earns by that labour to buy the goods he makes, so he is advised only to participate in parenthood. He is not essential, like the mother, but useful in an also-ran kind of way. None of the lay books on baby care that I have consulted make any reference to father although I am told that one does have a 'note to fathers' at the end which suggests that he persuade his wife to bath the baby in the evening when he is at home so that he can watch. Some of the professional books on child care deny the father's role completely; when he is referred to, he is seen only as an occasional substitute mother. Dr. Spock makes a valiant effort when he addresses himself to 'parents' at the beginning of his book Baby and Child Care, but he does not keep it up, and all subsequent references are to 'mother'. Thus, in all the serious and popular literature the father's role as a parent, in contrast to the mother's, is drastically under-emphasised.

To turn now to the evidence for and against maternal deprivation. In the first place, all the original work was done on children in institutions and the reason is only too obvious; it is virtually impossible to find children brought up in motherless families, so that the evidence, such as it is, had to be gathered from the very extreme cases where the children were totally removed from their own homes. In other words, these children were deprived of many things besides their mothers, not least their fathers and love. This fact alone should be sufficient to dismiss Bowlby's evidence. As Grygier et al, have pointed out, what Bowlby and his followers were studying was not the effects of maternal deprivation but the effects of institutionalisation. These effects can be, but are not always, harmful.

It must not be forgotten that every child in an institution is there for a reason, such as death of a parent, break up of a home, or simply that the child is not wanted. Not one of these reasons can be regarded as being conducive to the child's healthy development. None of Bowlby's findings takes any of these points into account. The only criticism he does anticipate is the one least likely to be thought of. That is that the children he observed in institutions may have come from 'poor stock, physically and mentally', so that heredity alone might account for their backward development. He goes on to refute this with devastating logic, by citing the case of twin goats, one of which was separated from its mother and became 'psychologically frozen' when lights were flashed on and off. He concludes this with the following statement:

This is ample demonstration of the adverse effects on maternal deprivation on the mammalian young, and disposes finally of the argument that all the observed effects are due to heredity.

Bowlby is full of such glaring errors of judgment, gross oversimplification and dogged single-mindedness. For instance, he warns observers not to be taken in by children in institutions who are, in his own words, "quiet, easy to manage, well mannered and even appear happy" because their adjustment can only be "hollow". In view of what he has to say about goats and fathers, I hope I have demonstrated that his writings do not warrant serious consideration, except insofar as they affect general attitudes.

Before turning to the other evidence it is worthwhile to refer to what Grygier et al. have to say about the workability of hypotheses in an area as emotionally loaded as maternal deprivation. These authors stand alone in questioning the validity of employing scientific method on human beings:

To determine the effects of parental deprivation a workable scientific model must be used and at the present stage of scientific development this would be an experimental model. Assumed causes must be manipulated experimentally to see how often they produce the hypothesised effects, otherwise the preconceived cause may be merely an association . . . The obstacles to the use of the experimental model on human beings weaken the predictive power of hypotheses in the social sciences, which, when compared with those of the physical sciences rank less as laws than as educated guesses . . . An hypothesis may be confirmed because it has been stated, not because it is true.

A perfect example of a hypothesis being confirmed because it has been stated is found in a widely quoted study entitled Working Mothers and Delinquency by Glueck and Glueck, who are prolific workers in this field. The subject was 500 delinquent boys matched pair by pair with non-delinquent boys of similar age, cultural background, etc. The employed mothers were divided into two groups, those regularly employed and those sporadically employed, in similar types of work (cleaning, shop work, etc.). Of the delinquent boys 54% had mothers who were full time
housewives, compared to 46% whose mothers worked, so a slightly higher proportion of the delinquent boys had full-time mothers. However, when the authors turned to the sporadically employed mothers, many of whom had themselves been delinquents, and whose husbands were frequently unemployed and where both parents were lacking in "self-respect", they found a higher proportion of delinquents. With the singlemindedness of a scientist intent on finding causal relationships between maternal employment and delinquency, and thereby proving the hypothesis, the authors disregard the other potent factors which contribute to the waywardness of these children and conclude:

We already have sufficient evidence to permit of at least a guarded conclusion that the villain among working mothers is the one who seems to have some inner need to flit erratically from job to job probably because she finds relief thereby from the burden of homemaking.

Note that there is no mention that this "inner need" might be financial, owing to the husband being out of work. In their conclusions, the authors drop their guard to reveal the moralising assumptions and cliched attitudes which underlie their work:

As more and more enticements in the way of financial gain, excitement and independence from the husband are offered married women to lure them from their domestic duties, the problem is becoming more widespread and acute. It is a problem that should be discussed freely and frankly in all communities by mothers, fathers, clergy, psychiatrist and social worker.

When these authors use terms like "villain", "luring", "enticement", "independence from the husband", their scientific objectivity must be called to serious question. Similarly, their conclusion that there is a causal relationship between the sporadically employed mother and delinquency is highly dubious. Besides the many other factors at work in the families of these boys, the authors have studiously ignored the fact that the fathers were also sporadically employed.

Many of the studies into the effects of the working mother suffer from the same lack of detachment as the Gluecks' study. Margaret Broughton in her paper Children with Mothers at Work suggested:

... for mothers who work because they are bored or lonely probably the answer would be to provide creches or day nurseries where mothers could leave their children for a few hours so that they could take part-time jobs. An occasional morning or afternoon a week would probably keep many women mentally happy.

Despite their lack of detachment, none of the studies yet undertaken has succeeded in finding a correlation between delinquency and maternal employment. In fact, as mentioned previously, the Gluecks found a higher proportion of delinquents from homes where there were full-time mothers. So also did Ferguson and Cunnison in their study of delinquents in Glasgow.

In 1965 Warren and Palmer looked into the backgrounds of 316 juvenile offenders and found that 98% were without a father or father substi-
tute compared with a mere 17% who lacked a mother figure. As Grygier et al. pointed out:

Paternal deprivation can no more be seen in isolation than the maternal variety.

In fact, it would seem patently obvious that no study of delinquency can be undertaken without full regard of all the factors—economic, social, educational, etc—which together contribute to the child's development. The nearest that any investigator has come to admitting this is Andry who, in criticising Bowlby, remarked that he did not take account of "interacting multi-causation", which is a roundabout way of saying that delinquency has many causes.

In an exhaustive review undertaken by Lois Stolz of all the published evidence on the effects of maternal employment on children, she had this to say on the subject of delinquency:

The studies reviewed tend to deny the contention that children of working mothers are more likely to be delinquent than children of mothers who remain at home.

Nevertheless, the popular image of working mothers and consequent delinquency, latch key children, etc., still prevails. The following quotation from a pamphlet entitled Mothers at Work by Sylvia Pearson is a typical example:

The child needs the sense that there is a person who is the provider of food, comfort and general well being... without this initial foundation... the child easily develops a defiant attitude which leads to delinquency.

I recently heard it seriously suggested in a letter broadcast on the BBC programme 'You and Yours' that married women should not be given jobs in view of the widespread delinquency which results from mothers going out to work. It is clear that the mother who goes out to work has been seized on and been made into a scapegoat for the many social and environmental factors which contribute to delinquency, as that term is understood.

In all the studies reviewed, there is an implicit assumption that maternal employment and maternal neglect are synonymous. Of course there is no connection, just as there is no connection between maternal presence and what Prof. Yudkin calls 'loving attention'. It hardly seems worth saying that the harassed mother who stays at home only out of a sense of duty to her children is as much of a threat to their well being as the mother who reluctantly goes out to work and is dissatisfied in her job. If the investigators want to continue in this field, they might try assessing the effects on the children of the dissatisfied working mother. Another area for research might also be the effects on children of fathers going out to work. Such a study might yield very interesting results; but as the function of most studies is to confirm prevailing ideologies rather than to further the cause of scientific research a study on the effects of paternal employment will not be forthcoming.

Despite all these points, the doubt will still linger that the mother who works outside the
home, particularly while her children are small, is causing them irreparable damage. A typical example of the kind of statements that abound in the media is this one by the actress Prunella Scales, reported in the Guardian:

'It's a physical fact that a mother ought to be with her children for the first five years of their lives.'

This is stated as though it were an immutable law of nature. One wonders what magical thing overtakes the child on its fifth birthday that it can go to school and do without its mother for six hours a day five days a week.

What is the basis for this 'physical fact'? In fact, very few studies of note have been undertaken on the effects of maternal employment on the under-fives. Lois Stolz suggested, in her review that the reason for this is that it is generally assumed that mothers with infants do not work. One study which she and several other writers refer to was undertaken during the war when the need for women's labour in the munitions factories and elsewhere resulted in a rapid increase in the numbers of young children attending day nurseries. The study is tortuously entitled The Eating, Sleeping and Elimination Habits in Children attending Day Nurseries and Children cared for in the Home by their Mothers, by Netta Glass. This is the only study I have found which used a control group who were cared for at home rather than an institutionalised group. Again, unlike other studies, the author investigated home environmental factors, personality and attitudes of the mother, marital situations, etc. When she studied the habit disturbances she found that 29 of the home children were affected compared to 33 of the day nursery children. The difference is not significant. However, the author states that the mothers of the day nursery children who presented problems themselves had 'difficult personalities', fathers were more frequently absent among the nursery children and living conditions were generally worse. The problem children were, in fact, associated with certain parental attitudes and types of personality and not with whether the children did or did not attend day nursery. The author concludes that:

There was no evidence to suggest that children cared for in a day nursery are more likely by reasons of communal care to present developmental problems than are children cared for at home by their mothers. There was in addition no confirmation of the belief that nursery care for children under two is especially harmful.

A study was undertaken by Perry in 1961 in Washington and dealt with children aged three to five years, of 104 employed mothers. These children were cared for during their mothers' absence by relatives, child minders with formal training and the like. The children's adjustment, as measured by nervous symptoms, anti-social and withdrawing tendencies showed no correlation with any of these factors, and Perry concludes that:

results failed to support the views of those who oppose the separation of children from their mothers.

Another study was undertaken by Heinicke in 1956. This was a small explorative study. It dealt with thirteen two-year-olds, seven of whom attended day nursery while the rest were temporarily placed in residential nurseries while their mothers were in hospital. The author found that the residential children, after the first two days of initial adjustment to the new routine, did present disturbed behaviour, such as seeking affection, frequent crying, loss of bowel control, etc., while the children who returned home each evening presented no problems. The only point that was brought in connection with the day nursery children was that they more frequently wet themselves, although the author admits that they indulged in more water play than the residential children. The author draws no conclusion from this study as it was so small and only covered a period of nineteen days. However, Prof. Yudkin suggested that Heinicke's results:

...suggest that young children may fairly quickly adjust themselves to a new routine and to maintain a close relationship with mother during the parts of the day when they are together.

Bowlby unwittingly provided his opponents with valuable evidence when he quoted a study by Simonsen:

Simonsen compared a group of 113 children aged between one and four years almost all of whom had spent their whole lives in one of some 12 different institutions, with a comparable group who lived at home and attended day nurseries. The mothers of these children were working and the homes often very unsatisfactory. Even so, the average developmental quotient of the family children was normal — 102 — while that of the institution children retarded was only 93.

Now Bowlby gives no indication that he has appreciated the full implications of this evidence. In a paper designed to stress the harmful consequences of maternal deprivation he makes no attempt to account for the normal development of the day nursery children who were deprived of their mothers for eight or more hours a day.

The emphasis in all these studies, much as their findings support my case, is always biased towards the possible harmful effects of partial separation of the child from its parents. I would have been greatly relieved to have come across a study which set out to investigate the benefits of partial separation for the under-fives. No less important would be a study of the effects of maternal over-protection. An interesting point to consider here is mentioned in Professor Edward Strecker's book, Their Mothers Sons. He stated that the percentage of mother-fixated neurotic G.I.'s in the last war was 'catastrophic'. A study into the effects of maternal over-protection should prove as interesting as one on the effects of working fathers. Myrdal and Klein, in their book, Woman's Two Roles, had this to say:

So much has been written and said in recent years about the vital needs of children for maternal affection, and about the dangers of neglect, that many parents, in particular those who take an intelligent interest in the emotional development of their children are becoming over-
anxious on this score. Very little attention has, in comparison, been paid to the effects of over-protection, though these may also cripple the psychological development of the child.

I don't feel that, in the present climate of opinion, much research will be done either in the direction of maternal over-protection or the benefits of day nurseries, nursery schools, etc., although concessions are gradually being made towards the idea of nursery schools for deprived children. No-one in authority has yet reconciled the idea that partial separation from the mother is beneficial to the deprived child while it is harmful to the 'normal' child.

In reviewing the evidence for and against maternal deprivation, I have referred to the major works published. Most of the work was done in the late 'forties and throughout the 'fifties, when the subject was 'hot', but so effective was the dissemination of the case for maternal deprivation that it moved out of the realm of controversy into the realm of acknowledged fact; as a result very little work has since been done.

Before moving on to a statement of my own position, I will refer to Margaret Mead's study entitled, Some Theoretical Considerations on the Problem of Mother Child Separation. Unlike other workers she is able to look at the subject dispassionately and brings it admirably into perspective:

At present the specific biological situation of the continuing relationship of the child to its biological mother and its need, for care by human beings are being hopelessly confused in the growing insistence that child and biological mother or mother surrogate, must never be separated, that all separation even for a few days is inevitably damaging and that if long enough it does irreversible damage. This . . . is a new and subtle form of anti-feminism in which men - under the guise of exalting the importance of maternity - are tying women more tightly to their babies, or indeed anyone who loves them with whispering sweet nothings to her picture book. Mothers are no more primates, it is often the father who defends the child.

This article began with the statement that there was no biological connection between having babies and rearing them. Mothers are no more essential to their children than are fathers, grandmothers, or indeed anyone who loves them with the right kind of care and understanding. By the term 'love' I don't, of course, mean 'mother love', a sentiment which masquerades as the most pure and ideal form that love can take and is so ably characterised in the media by the young mother.
This method of child-rearing is not an empty and unattainable ideal. It is practised unconsciously in many families and in its mildest form has been described as 'healthy neglect'. As the term suggests, it consists more of what it is not than what it is. The essential point about it is that it avoids all the dangers of an excessive mother/child attachment. The child is thus freed from many of the burdens that a supposedly well brought up child has to bear — the responsibility of fulfilling its parents' expectations, of returning their love and sacrifice and of compensating them for their inadequacies. Instead of being bullied into being a credit to its parents the child is allowed to be a credit to itself.

For those essentially middle-class parents who have eagerly embraced the whole mythology—the strong attachment to the mother, the child's yearning for love and security, its need for constant understanding and guidance—to be told that they give too much attention to their children would be intolerable. Similarly, these people will defend to the last the myth that the basic requirement for the child's healthy development is security.

The pursuit of security must in part explain the strange behaviour that afflicts previously enlightened people when their first child is born. They no longer live in the present, taking from each day as much as it can offer; they start planning for something called the future. They buy a house, build a solid wall of insurance around it, they start thinking about a second child, not necessarily because they want one but to provide a companion for the first, and in order to keep this unwieldy edifice in repair the father's job and the prospects that go with it begin to assume an inordinate importance. In the name of providing their children with security these parents are denying them the raw material on which our experience is based, namely the unpredictability of it. In fact, security is another of the tools manipulated by society to make you stay where you are and work hard.

Security is commonly believed to be strengthened by consistency. In dealing with children many parents are preoccupied with presenting a consistent and rational front. This is characterised by those inane conversations where the adult is conscientiously explaining the reasons for his actions, treating the child as though it were a miniature adult, capable of fullreasoned thought. This is the modern equivalent of 'not in front of the children, dear', our parents hissed at each other when they should have a row. Their belief in doing everything nicely and respectably matches the present belief in the efficacy of reason. Both types of parents could learn something from the one who gets cross with the kids simply because they are being naughty. That parent does not dress himself up in special clothes whenever he deals with his kids.

The respectable and the consistent parents are disguising their real selves in order to present their children with an idealised version.

The following quotation from the World Child Welfare Congress of 1958 exemplifies the attitude to child rearing which should be strenuously rejected:

... our most important task in regard to every child with whom we are concerned is to give him maternal and personal love ... we must be there for them. In fact, if we are not the visible and tangible centre of their world and if we are not the stable hub of every change all our efforts are in vain.

Is it loving a child to make yourself the centre of its universe? And is it really love that compels parents to protect and defend the child against all the minor upsets it encounters outside the home instead of allowing it to come to terms with them in its way? Most of what goes under the guise of good parental care is an elaborate rationalisation of gross possessiveness. It attempts to bind the child to the mother and provides a manipulative object whereby the parents rationalise their personal dissatisfaction. This is often consciously expressed by well-meaning parents who boast that they are giving their children what they themselves lacked. What is understood as 'loving' children is, in fact, using them.

Laing, in his book The Politics of Experience expressed this point very forcefully:

From the moment of birth . . . the baby is subjected to these forces of violence, called love, as its mother and father have been and their parents and their parents before them. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities. This enterprise is on the whole successful. By the time the new human being is fifteen or so we are left with a being like ourselves. A half-crazed creature more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality in our present age. Love and violence, properly speaking, are polar opposites. Love lets the other be, but with affection and concern. Violence attempts to constrain the other's freedom to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's existence or destiny. We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love. (my emphasis)

So love lets the child be with affection and concern. A mother isn't letting her child be when she makes herself indispensable in its eyes, neither is she when she concentrates all the care in herself instead of sharing it with others. And she isn't letting it be when she projects her concern for its welfare on to it, making it feel responsible for her feelings when it 'fails' to fulfil her expectations. The woman who cuts and trims her poodle into a travesty of a dog, takes it proudly out on a leash to show off to the neighbours, only allows it to play with other poodles, is not a far cry from the mother who professes to 'love' her child.

When we have learnt to disengage ourselves from the children that we care for, liberating them from the pressure to conform to our image of them, we will be loving them without violence. In the process we will be going some way towards liberating ourselves.