

## Chapter One

### Cultural Transformations in Parenting

We consider the child to be a full-fledged subject. He is a being with his own emotional life, his own desires, goals and choices; he owns his life; it belongs to him. *his own life, his own rights.*

Whereas today we take that recognition for granted, that was not always the case. It evolved out of modern beliefs developed by Western culture as part of a long historical process. Children always had rights, but those rights derived from the children's belonging to their father or master. The father was the subject and the child was his property. Violation of the child was violation of the father's property. One illustration of that principle was the institution of "patria potestas," the institute of paternal authority in ancient Rome, which gave fathers the right to kill their sons or daughters.

The recognition of the child as a subject did not develop overnight but rather in a prolonged process. the attitude towards children hardly changed Until the Enlightenment (18th century). The change that started during that time is reflected in Molière's masterpiece, "The Miser". It is an illuminating 18th-century text that tells of the attempt by a brother and sister, children of the "miser," to claim they are subjects with their own emotions, goals and love, who deserve to exist despite their father's wish. "The miser" *represents both the father* and the man of means who negates a subjectivity that exists outside of the boundaries of himself. Molière's message of enlightenment is expressed in the optimistic ending of the comic play, when "the miser" is unable to impose his will on his children and is forced to *accept* their *Independent* selfhood and desires.

During that period, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), in his book "Emile," laid the foundations of modern pedagogical thought. Rousseau's point of departure was that the child is born inherently good and that the goal of education is to allow the individual's good nature to develop freely, without being authoritative and

oppressive. Rousseau's educational philosophy negated the prevailing educational approach of his day, whose implicit goal was to adjust the child to the world of the adults. The revolutionary idea that it is the child who needs protection from the "corrupting" influence of the adult world outraged his contemporaries and Rousseau's books were burned in Paris and Geneva.

This process continued and intensified at the beginning of the 20th century and was reflected in the development of modern pedagogical thought. The Italian educational philosopher Maria Montessori (1870-1952) made a noteworthy contribution in this area. Montessori was a physician, an educational researcher, a philosopher, a feminist and a dissident against the Italian fascist regime. She introduced to education the perception that the child is a whole being (what we would presently call a "subject") from the outset. Montessori's child sets out as a being with creative capacities and moral tendencies (such as love). In her view, adults often tend to suppress the child's personality and force on him a maladjusted environment with unnatural "rhythms." The child's natural freedom of inquiry was a guiding principle for Montessori. She believed the child's ability to have meaning and regulate himself was a product or natural outcome of the educator's ability to grant the child the freedom to exercise his need to explore and discover.

Parallel developments occurred in psychological thought. The most important of those developments was the birth of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic thought placed the child at the center: the inner child, his desires and his suffering. Over the course of the 20th century, in a gradual process, the status of the child as a subject, with his own psyche and rights, slowly penetrated awareness. In the decades after World War II that recognition became a universal cultural asset.

Psychoanalytic thought led the adult world to "discover" with amazement that the child has a psyche. The "discovery" that children are subjects had a tremendous impact on the concept of parenthood and changed it deeply. The possibility that a child could be

harmed not necessarily by external forces but by the parent's own behavior was revolutionary.

That new understanding created a new parental responsibility, with parents ready and determined to do everything possible to protect the child from themselves.

### **The "paternal model" versus the "maternal model" of parenting**

Through the cultural changes described above, the past five decades have seen the substitution of the so-called "paternal" model of parenting by the "maternal" model of parenting.

The basic position of the paternal model of parenting is the question: "What can you, the child, do for us?" Conversely, the basic question that the maternal model of parenting asks is this: "What can we, the parents, do for you, the child?"

The "paternal model" of parenting refers to parenting whose goal is to raise the child so that in his adulthood he becomes an asset for his parents, family and people: the child exists for the parent and the community. Children belong to their parents and are expected to contribute to them, to the family, the tribe and the nation. The main question that occupies the parents in raising their children is: "Will he be one of us? Will his native abilities, intelligence and capacity to work strengthen us parents, the family and the community?" According to this model, a good education aims to adjust the child to the environment and the child's value is measured by his ability to adjust himself to the environment's demands and needs. A radical example of that model existed in Sparta in ancient Greece. When a male child was born the city elders would examine him and determine whether he was fit to be a warrior. A child who did not meet those criteria would be put to death.

In the maternal model of parenting the perspective is the other way around. The question that occupies the parent in this model is: "How can I best adjust myself to the child's

needs and how can I best provide what the child wants?" The maternal model is focused on the child's needs rather than on the needs of his community.

The paternal model and the maternal model are dialectically connected. They converge to create a specific pattern for each culture. Cultures differ in the dominance of each of these models at different stages of the child's education. In some cultures there are rituals that mark the child's passage from the stage in which he is raised by the principles of the maternal model to the stage in which he is raised by the principles of the paternal model. Some Jewish communities conduct a traditional haircutting ceremony for male children on their third birthdays. The haircutting ritual signals the child's transition from the stage in which he is raised by the principles of the maternal model – parenting focused on the child's needs – to the stage in which he is raised by the paternal model – parenting becomes focused on his education and adjustment to the values of the community.

It is important to note that the paternal and maternal models are not gender-dependent. They are specific attitudes and values concerning children and how they should be raised. In contemporary culture, fathers are just as identified as mothers with the maternal model. Fathers whose priority is adjusting to their children are parenting according to the maternal model, regardless of the degree of their masculinity.

### **Limits of paternal model parenting**

There are several reasons for the transition from paternal-model to maternal-model parenting: historical, social and cultural forces, which over the last centuries made a tremendous moral transformation in the Western world, ultimately led to the rejection of the principle that the powerful have the right to rule over the powerless. That process fundamentally undermined paternal-model parenting, which relies on the right-authority of the powerful – the parent – to control the choices of the powerless – the child.

The tragedy of the two world wars, which revealed the destructive potential in the hands of authoritative, dominant leaders, contributed to the transition. The "firing of the rule of

the father" in the second half of the 20th century was caused by the children of the "baby boom" when they came of age (the children born at the end of World War II). The "1968 Revolution," the "Student's Revolution" that swept Western Europe, was a dramatic and revolutionary expression of that process. The revolution coined the dramatic slogan: "It is forbidden to forbid!" ("il est intredit d'intreDIR!"), and almost toppled the French government. Of course the change did not happen by revolutions alone but also through gradual and evolutionary changes that ultimately weakened the status of power-based leadership, and the transition from totalitarian forms of government to democratic ones. These processes were also reflected in the family microcosm and contributed to the "fall" of paternal-model parenting.

Another significant source of the crisis of paternal model-parenting was psychoanalytical thought. The development of psychoanalysis made a very important contribution to the perception of the child as a subject and a fragile being. Psychoanalysis also made a unique contribution to exposing the damage caused to the child's psyche by the normative and inevitable situation of the parent wishing to adjust the child to his expectations and the demands of the environment.

Freud believed that the child's relinquishment of the "pleasure principle" and his civilization (which from a different perspective is currently called the socialization process) inevitably come at a cost to the child. He called the prices the child pays "castration" and "guilt." He viewed mental health merely as a reduction of those prices to a reasonable level. A healthy person is one whose degree of castration and guilt are so limited that they do not prevent him from being able to work and love.

The psychoanalytic thinkers who follow Freud identified additional aspects of the damage caused to the child by the incompatibility between the parent and the child's needs, choices and tendencies. Melanie Klein described the feelings of persecution and victimhood that develop in the child whose "imperiousness" (in her words; today we might call it "difficulty in self-regulation") and natural aggression are incompatible with the parent's ability to contain them. Freud and Melanie Klein tended to view children's

negative feelings and unhealthy symptoms as the reflection of fantasies from the child's inner life and not necessarily the child's reaction to the way the parent actually treats him. Most therapists moved away from that view over the years. Fairbairn was one of the first who put an emphasis on the damage to the child's psyche in response to an inappropriate relationship between the parent and child. He focused on the feelings of alienation, lack of belonging and emotional disassociation that develop in the child who experiences rejection by his mother. Winnicott emphasized the loss of selfhood and authenticity caused by the impingement of the parent who tries to adjust the child to himself. Kohut focused on the damage to the child's ability to feel valuable and meaningful as a result of a relationship with a parent who could not feel accommodation, pleasure and satisfaction in relationship with his child.

From the perspective I propose, what unites the range of discoveries by the various psychoanalytical thinkers is the identification of the damage that might develop in the child's psyche when he is forced or required to accommodate himself to the adult world. I shall try to describe something that was not fully articulated by the psychoanalytical philosophers. Each one of them tried in his way to describe the damage that develops in the child's psyche in the absence of accord between him and the parent. I would like to add that whereas the child is incompatible with the abilities and/or conscious or unconscious expectations of the parent and the parent's environment, the parent does indeed fulfill, overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously, the role of a castrating and blaming agent (the kind of damage Freud described), or a persecuting (Klein), rejecting (Fairbairn), impinging (Winnicott) or humiliating (Kohut) agent.

What the different kinds of negative attitudes by the parent towards the child have in common is that the difficulty the parent is dealing with (the child's incompatibility with the parent or environment) is broadcast to the child as the child's own failure. Whatever does not accord with the parent's needs and expectations becomes a "flaw" of the child ("he is lazy!"). The parent addresses the child as someone who is defective and turns him into the object of invalidation in any of the variations described above (guilt, persecution, rejection, invasion, humiliation) and many others. The parent's experience

of "it doesn't suit me/is not compatible with me" turns into the message: "Something is wrong with you," directed at the child.

The invalidation of the child can come in one of two forms: in the "best" case he becomes "flawed" in the sense that he has a health-functional disability ("sensitive," "dyslexic," "ill"), and in the "worst" case he becomes "bad" in the sense that he is morally flawed ("a bad boy," "lazy," "a coward," "insolent"). In the realm of the child-parent encounter, the objective dissatisfaction or distress the parent experiences in his encounter with a child who is not "adjusted" to him is transmuted into the supposedly objective form of an encounter between a parent and a "flawed" child. The supposed flaw assumes two meanings: either a powerless ("weak") child, or a child with negative powers ("bad"). By viewing the incompatible child in one of these ways the parent invalidates him, possibly unconsciously or by necessity, and crushes him.

In the first half of the 20th century the harm and disturbances caused by parental demands and expectations for the child to accommodate himself to his parents and environment were discovered. The solution that was chosen to contend with the new information and reduce the damage was derived, naturally, from principles that had proven themselves in physical medicine during the previous century. In the second half of the 19th century physical medicine discovered, thanks to Koch, Pasteur and Semmelweis ("the madman from Budapest"), the source of infectious diseases, which at that time were the leading diseases, killing millions. It turned out that infectious diseases were caused by bacteria. The discovery generated the most significant change in the history of human health. The next stage was the idea that if we created a bacteria-free environment there would be no diseases. That simple, clever and obvious idea proved itself, and so was natural hygiene born. A healthy environment is a clean environment, a bacteria-free environment, even to the point of sterility; no dirt, no bacteria, no infections, no disease and the result is health.

The discovery that the parents' demands and expectations for the child to accommodate himself to the parent and the environment cause harm to the child's emotional

development led to the idea that creating an environment free of "expectation bacteria" would prevent the development of emotional illness. Here again the thought was simple, clever and obvious. A healthy environment means a clean and sterile environment, an environment without expectations: no expectations, no maladjustment, no invalidation (no castration-blame-attacks-rejection-domination-humiliation), no disease and the result is health.

The "hygiene of child-rearing" was born, promising the development of healthy, strong and happy children, through love, free of parental expectations and demands that might "contaminate" it.

All of those processes led to the development of the maternal model of parenting.

### **The limits of the maternal model of parenting**

It is clear that today good parenting is identified with the maternal model, but in recent years more and more of the limits of that model have come to light.

### **Distortion of the concept of "unconditional love"**

When child-rearing hygiene was born, promising the development of healthy, strong and happy children by way of love free of the parental expectations and demands that might "contaminate" it, a misleading version of the concept of "unconditional love" was born with it. According to that version, a beloved child cannot produce anything that is not beloved, anything that is harmful, hurtful or negative for those who love him. This version is responsible for the creation of unbelievable situations: parents who perform logical and emotional acrobatics to avoid seeing and feeling things they could not possibly love sanely without violating the principle of unconditional love.

A comical example appears in the French film "Tanguy" by director Etienne Chatilliez. Every time Tanguy, the son, behaves in a way that drives his parents crazy, he repeats to

them what becomes a slogan running through the plot: "I love you Dad... I love you Mom!" Each one of the parents responds the same way every time (while avoiding any expression of their shock): "Me too, my pet!" (Tanguy, the "pet," is 28). Tanguy, also ritualistically, asks: "Really? Promise?" And then each of the parents replies in turn: "I promise!" The possibility that something unlovable has happened between them is completely denied. The parents are paralyzed, captive in the belief that any expression of their dissatisfaction from their "pet's" behavior would signify the absence of unconditional love.

Unconditional love a la Tanguy's parents is light years away from the benevolent meaning of the concept. Benevolent unconditional love is connected to the lover's ability to see a harmful, painful or negative action that cannot be accepted from a child or any other beloved person, but still maintain a sense of belonging, solidarity and caring towards the unruly beloved one. An extreme example of such love might be when a loved one commits a crime and those who love him do everything they can so that he make amends and even turn himself in to the legal authorities; yet they will support him and miss him when he is serving his sentence. People engaged in that kind of unconditionally loving relationship have the ability and the capacity to see the crime without denying it, yet are still able to love.

Unfortunately, the erroneous version of unconditional love has taken root among parents, educators and therapists, and plays a central role in causing the emotional distress and behavior problems of the children who grow up with it. We see the destructive results in daily life and in the newspaper. We often see news reports about parents who support violent and disrespectful behavior at school, or parents who support violent children who have committed serious crimes, absolve them of responsibility for their actions and blame others, just so their children will not have to pay for their actions.

We mentioned the logical and emotional gymnastics parents often perform in order to avoid hurting and dealing with the painful and serious actions of their children. Such

gymnastics are often performed by distorting and abusing another important and valuable concept: "understanding."

### **The distorted use of the term "understanding"**

Today we have the will and the tools to understand the emotional life of children. This gives us a much better idea of what children need from us and enables us to give them what they need for their development and wellbeing. Along with this welcome development, we increasingly face situations in which "understanding" is used as an excuse-explanation-reason to legitimize behaviors whose justification comes at a very heavy developmental price to the child.

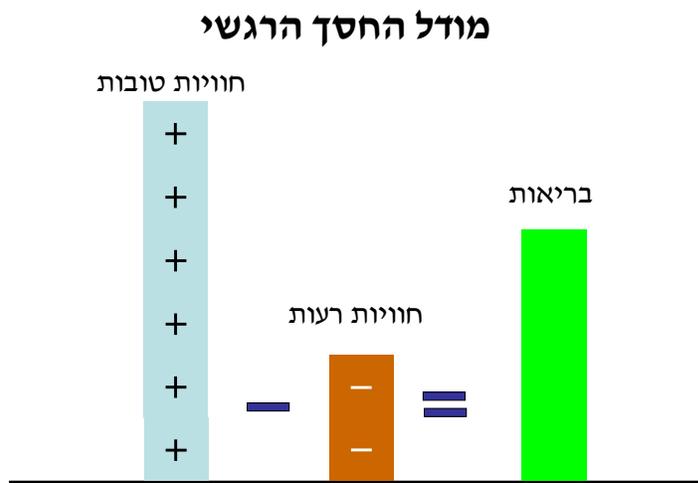
Here is a small illustration: a mother who asked me to help her with her 15-year-old son who was violent – sometimes extremely – towards family members, told me when she consulted me that she understood he was acting that way because he was unhappy. She added that she and her husband would continue doing everything they could to make him happy and asked if there was any way I could help. I answered that I thought I could and added: "When you realize that unhappiness does not justify violence I believe I will be able to help him fairly easily. Not being violent will make him much less monstrous to himself and his family. Once that is achieved, it will be much easier for him to achieve happiness."

Completely contrary to the mother's intention, her understanding covertly permitted her "unhappy" son to be violent towards his family.

### **The distortion of the emotional deficiency model**

The maternal model is also reflected in the organizing understanding most of us employ when we encounter the distress and troubles of children and adolescents. What do we understand when a child has difficulty or is not in the place we would optimally like to see him? Usually we understand that he lacks the good experiences he needs to move

forward. That answer expresses the recognition that an absolute or relative deficiency in good developmental experiences has a negative impact on the child's fortitude and mental health. That is the bare summary of what the world of clinical psychology calls the "emotional deficiency model" for the understanding and prevention of psychopathology among children and youth. The emotional deficiency model can be presented visually very simply as follows:



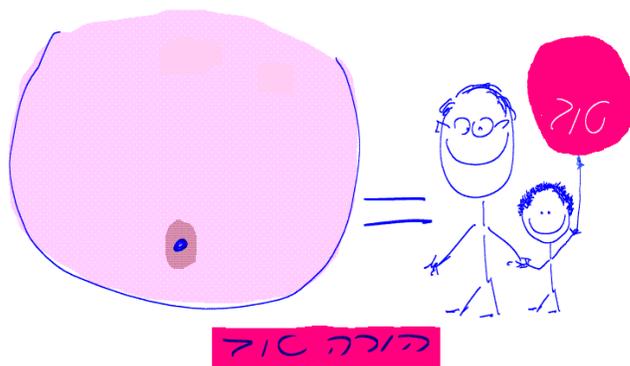
**[The emotional deficiency model**

[good experiences - bad experiences = health]

In the emotional deficiency model, an absence of mental health stems from a failure of the environment to give the child the sufficient amount of "good things" so that he develop healthfully. In terms of clinical psychology, the "good things" are identified as "good experiences." Therefore, mental anguish and behavioral and functional disturbances are the result of a deficiency of good experiences; the deficiency is relative and measured by the proportion between good experiences and bad experiences. I noted before that in the maternal model of parenting, the parent is motivated by the question of "what can I do for you, child?" or "what do you need?" If the child is unhappy, he must be suffering from a deficiency. The deficiency hurts the child. Here we can easily see the emotional deficiency model as a "clinical version" of maternal-model parenting. The emotional deficiency model is a faithful reflection in the clinical realm of the ideal of

maternal-model parenting. This ideal strives to respond to needs and provide benevolent experiences in order to bring about normal development and mental health. However, even though this is the model that presently guides parents and clinicians who do everything they can to provide children with good experiences, pathologies and suffering among children and adolescents have not diminished. Some kinds of them have even increased considerably. Inevitably, their parents – the parents of today – and the army of various "responsible adults" – teachers, educators, community leaders, policymakers – are very confused and in deep crisis.

Am I insinuating that the "emotional deficiency model" in its various permutations is irrelevant? That it is not useful? That the model has exhausted itself? Despite the dramatic suspense there is no cause for excitement: my answer is no. I believe the problem is not the model itself but the way it has been understood and the distortions that have occurred in it. I will try to explain the distortions: usually, for those who identify with the clinical philosophies that are based on the deficiency model, "the developmentally struggling self" can be illustrated by the metaphor of a hungry baby who has not eaten to satiation and is attached to a dry and shriveled breast that cannot provide him with what he needs. Of course the metaphor contains an additional and equally significant meaning, which views the "developmentally healthy self" as full and satiated, securely attached to the full and abundant breast, the good parent.



While this clinical metaphor makes a very significant contribution in certain situations, it also contains two problematic points I would like to address:

1. Health is identified with the pleasure of fullness and satiation.
2. Good parenting is identified with the fullness and abundance of a breast full of milk.

When fullness and satiation are the paradigm of health, and when fullness and abundance are the paradigm of a good environment, the emotional deficiency model inevitably becomes a quantitative model. Which is to say, if the image of the self struggling to grow is of a baby who did not get full, the parent has to be full. A good enough parent has to be: a parent full of accommodation, understanding, love, warmth, intention, attention, consideration, patience, containment, restraint, sacrifice, quality, investment, cultivation, resources, time, services, activities – full of them all.

Full, and the fuller the better. In fact, that is a distortion of the emotional deficiency model. It may represent the values of the culture of abundance and the idea of good in capitalist thought. It certainly does not represent the needs of the child. I call this the "quantitative disruption."

Distortion of the emotional deficiency model

The quantitative aspect

A good experience = when there is "much of it"

A bad experience = when there is "little of it"

The deficiency model suffers from other distortions as well. Let me go back for a minute to the metaphor of the baby, sleeping and full next to the full breast: the fact that we represent health through the delicate pleasure of the slumber of the satiated baby (in itself an enchanting image) also indicates another problem that comes from the changes in our time in the definition and meaning of the concept of "good." It is a problem that concerns the quality and nature of the good experiences that the struggling child or adolescent lacks: the question is what a good experience is and not just how many good experiences were had. The root of this problem is the fact that today the concept of

"good," as an experience of cohesion, growth and value, has lost its distinction from the concept of "good" as an experience of comfort, pleasure and relief. The Coca-Cola advertising slogan "Taste of Life" is a brilliant and piercing reflection of this new reality. A feeling of comfort and ease is identified with a unifying and productive experience and becomes an inseparable part of the "good experience." Without the feeling of comfort and ease, the experience is defined as "not good."

That too is a kind of distortion.

Distortion of the emotional deficiency model

The qualitative aspect

A good experience = when things are "easy"

A bad experience = when things are "difficult"

The quantitative distortion and the qualitative distortion have created a distorted, very popular and very common version of the deficiency model.

The distorted deficiency model

"Easy" experiences - "not easy" experiences = health

In the distorted emotional deficiency model, the good parent is one who provides an "abundance" of comfortable-pleasurable-easy experiences and manages to prevent as many as possible uncomfortable, unpleasant, not-easy experiences. When he has to deal with his son or daughter's difficulties and troubles, he becomes a very special kind of parent, a "diagonal" parent.

According to the laws of physics and the nature of things, he is bound to fall on his face in front of his child who is looking at him as if he were a bizarre alien whose strange behavior is inexplicable.

Apparently it is not enough to add "good" and keep away the "not good." And let there be no misunderstanding: there is no question that when there is a deficiency of warmth and love, providing a child with love, warmth, touch and consideration can do miracles that resemble the blossoming of a desert after the rain. But those are extreme situations.

I am talking about the difficulties, problems and sometimes, unfortunately, the tragedies that are the lot of good enough parents, who provide their children with plenty of good experiences and try to make their lives easier, yet still fail to raise emotionally healthy and happy children.

### **The "Giving Tree" distortion: maternal-model parenting as a model of sacrifice**

Another aspect of the problem of the maternal model can be seen in the story "The Giving Tree". A few years ago, Prof. Emanuel Berman analyzed that story in the journal "Sihot."<sup>1</sup> Berman writes: "The Giving Tree is a brilliant illustrated story written in 1964 by American author Shel Silverstein, which was widely distributed and touched the hearts of many readers. It is a love story between a tree and a child. The beginning describes a warm relationship that makes them both happy: the boy makes crowns out of the tree's leaves, swings on its branches, eats its apples and falls asleep in its shade. But the boy's growth upsets the balance. The boy makes recurring demands on the tree and the tree does everything it can to satisfy them and always feels happiness when it succeeds. It provides the boy with apples so he can get money, branches so he can build himself a little house. The boy who has turned into an adult wants a boat to sail far away, and the tree offers he cut its trunk to build it. And when the boy who is now an old man comes back a long time later, the tree apologizes that he has nothing more to give – neither apples nor branches nor a trunk – and feels relief when the 'boy' only wants to sit down and rest. 'Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.' And the bent 'boy' did and the tree was happy again."

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<sup>1</sup> E. Berman, Sihot, Vol. 19, Issue 1, October 2004, pp. 35-43.

This story illustrates maternal-model parenting by presenting a foretold clear default position. At every juncture the main question is: "What can I do for you, child?" No other considerations are taken into account. Berman goes on: "It seems that many readers do not realize how the enchanting story becomes increasingly morbid. To fulfill the child's needs, the tree must gradually give up its own existence." And I would add: the tree disappears. The tree is erased.

Back to Berman: "The love relationship described has sado-masochistic undertones. The concept of giving in this story is completely identified with sacrifice to the point of self-annihilation. Neither mutual consideration nor real coexistence are possible (the "boy" is described as an exploiter who does not consider the good of the tree). The story even implies that the boy is demanding and self-centered." I would add: the boy whom the giving tree denied nothing "ends his life as a lonely and bitter old man." Berman adds that this story expresses the idea that "devoted parenting means the self-annihilation of the parent."

The maternal model, therefore, does not provide satisfactory answers to the question asked in Emanuel Berman's article: "How can 'The Giving Tree' protect itself from harm without hurting the child?"

### **Distortion of the correspondence between the maternal model of parenting and the child's stages of development**

A parent fully attuned to the child's needs is a natural and necessary condition for the infant's development in the first weeks after birth. Developmentally, the maternal model characterizes the mother's normative and necessary attitude to her baby at the outset of life. The mother is attuned to anticipating the child's needs, putting them in words, interpreting the child, doing things for him without his asking, without reciprocity or consideration, as long as the child grows and develops. At the outset of life the maternal model is vital for the infant's survival, but as the child grows that model becomes a regressive cultural choice and it appears to need amendment and elaboration.

The various "distortions" that followed the transition to the maternal model of parenting extract a dear price not only from the parent but, paradoxically, mainly from the child. It appears that the generation of the "children of the dream," the children of the new breastfeeding, doting maternal model of parents, who expect nothing and sacrifice all, are not doing so well. The pathologies and suffering of children raised in the maternal model culture have changed but have not diminished. To the contrary, these children are victims of increasing rates of eating disorders, identity disorders, abuse, addiction, juvenile depression, apathy and violence towards others. Obviously their parents – the parents of today – are very confused and in deep crisis.

### **The upcoming disruption: the cultural danger**

Even though limitations, distortions and shortcomings are a natural and inseparable part of any human creation, there is a danger that instead of a process of constructive criticism, reform and progress, the maternal model of parenting will be declared a failure. Whereas neo-authoritarian voices calling for the reinstatement of the paternal model are everywhere, the maternal model is under the threat of a cultural assault, which in the long run could jeopardize its status as the leading model of parenting today. The challenge we are facing is how to progress within the maternal model without going back to the paternal model of parenting.

What are the tools parents need to protect their children and themselves from harm without hurting the child? What changes and elaboration are needed in the maternal model of parenting so that it genuinely serve the developmental needs of the child? Before we try answering these questions we must address another kind of issue that plays an important role in the development of psychological and behavioral problems in children and youth in particular, and in people in general, which we will do in the following chapter.