

MIDWIVES' UNION SECTION

Mothercraft

Notes of a lecture given at Government Hobart School, Royapettah, Madras.

The rearing of healthy children in a tropical climate is of tremendous importance not only to every mother—but of future mothers and of the nation. The infantile death rate is very high—from diseases many of which are preventable, because they are results of bad management.

The Indian mothers are very fond of their babies—but unfortunately, owing to the fact that the large numbers of these mothers are entirely lacking in education and in discipline—the love which is bestowed on their children and the resultant care is “ignorant love and care”—often harmful to the child, though carried out with the very best intentions in the world.

Mothercraft comprises many parts:—For instance, cleanliness of body of the child—cleanliness of its home—its food—warmth—fresh air—sunlight—its clothing—its exercise—its regularity of habits—its bathing—its rest and sleep, and last but by no means the least—its discipline.

A wise mother will never be led by an ayah—however reliable she may appear to be. The life at stake is hers to preserve and hers alone is the responsibility for finding the conditions most favourable for her child.

An infant requires an abundance of fresh air—by day and by night. It is a great mistake to close up windows at night—because the air in the room then lacks the oxygen necessary for the purification of the blood of the occupants of the room. As long as the infant is warm, it will benefit from pure fresh air.

A baby should be bathed once every day from its birth—preferably in the morning—and sponged in the evening. The temperature of the water should be 102° F. Soiled napkins should be changed immediately—but a wise mother will commence to teach her baby regular habits from birth.

It is not an exaggeration to say that a child can be taught to control its bowels and bladder from being about 3 weeks old. This requires much patience and care on the part of the mother at first—but it is a tremendous saving of linen and labour—and a clean child is a great joy to all round it.

A baby requires exercise—You must all have noticed baby stretching and kicking its legs about. That is the exercise by which it grows and gains strong muscles,—therefore it is a good plan to lay a baby down about twice a day for 15–20 minutes in a safe place protected from draughts—entirely unrestricted by clothes and you will notice how it loves to kick about. When a baby is in its cot, it should not have tight coverings over it for that reason. A baby should never sleep with its parents, because by doing so it is breathing impure air which emanates from their bodies.

A baby requires sunlight—but should not be put in the direct rays of the sun. The sunlight has a very stimulating power on the general growth and development of the child and lack of sunlight is thought to be a definite factor in causing the disease of childhood known as “Rickets.”

The food of the infant is all-important.

There is not the slightest doubt that the mother's milk is the best food for her child since Nature has provided it. The only contra-indication against breast-feeding is when the mother is suffering from such diseases as Consumption—when the disease can be conveyed through the milk to the child, children seldom get T.B. of lungs, but of bones, joints, glands, etc.

Healthy babies should be fed regularly every 3 hours during the day—and no feeds during the night. There is a tendency to feed a baby every time it cries but this is wrong, because there are other reasons for crying, for instance, discomfort, thirst, exert will power, pain. Regularity of feeding develops the digestive organs to work systematically and like every thing else—a baby's stomach needs rest in order to make it strong and healthy. The mother's breasts must be carefully cleansed before and after each feed, otherwise the germs which are on the skin will be sucked into the baby's body and indigestion and green diarrhoea—a most serious disease of infants will result.

Always remember that it is better to underfeed a baby than to overfeed him. A baby should gain 4 to 6 ozs. in weight each week, and this gain together with the normal action of the bowels and contentment denote a healthy child. Weight doubled at 5-months, trebled at 1 year. $2\frac{1}{2}$ ozs. of water per lb. body weight per day is required.

A useful time table for baby's feeds are :—

6 a.m.—9 a.m.—12 noon—3 p.m.—6 p.m.—10 p.m. Water should be given in plenty, and always between feeds. Babies get thirsty just as much as adults do—and pure water is necessary for a baby to thrive well.

Needless to say—in India—the water should be boiled and allowed to cool in a clean and well-covered vessel.

If, for any reason artificial feeding has to be carried out, diluted cow's milk can be used—but very great care needs to be exercised to purify the milk and modify it to equal—as nearly as possible—human milk. If dried milks such as Glaxo, Cow and Gate, Lactogen, etc., are used follow closely the directions given on the tin and do not forget to give the baby orange or other fruit juice in addition.

Now just a few words about discipline.

There is a saying that "Unless a mother rules her baby—the baby will rule the household" and I do not know of any axiom which is more true.

Babies are tiny atoms of humanity, but it is amazing how quickly they know that if they cry they will be picked up and nursed. Once this becomes a habit there is no peace, day or night in the household. A baby should be bathed and fed, then laid comfortably in its cot and allowed to go to sleep. If it lies awake and cries, we must make sure that it is warm and dry—but let it lie and get used to lying awake. When it finds that crying is no use—it will soon cease and become happy and contented watching the movements of those around it. A baby disciplined in its early life is disciplined through life and recognises its parents as those who are directing and leading it into right paths. An undisciplined child grows up to disobey its parents and to be spoilt and wayward—often bringing much sadness upon those who would give their life for him.

Babies must be protected against mosquitoes in India—since there is the danger of contracting Malaria and other diseases by mosquito bites.

Babies require firm but gentle handling. They instinctively know when a nervous person is holding them—and the nervousness is conveyed into the baby. Mothering is essential—loving care is essential—but we must guard against spoiling—so that a child will grow up to be dependent on its own efforts and not those of other people, and thus make life a happy and successful venture.