



# Children and Problems Concerning Children: Maternal Deprivation

Pattamaporn Busapathumrong

Associate Fellow of the Royal Institute, Academy of Moral and Political Sciences.

Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Asian University.

## *Abstract*

The paper discusses children and their problems, particularly focusing on the problem of maternal deprivation, when it manifests itself in the form of child neglect and the less evident problems associated with children who live with their mother but still face the problem of maternal deprivation.

Children who face problems of maternal deprivation may be helped by government and non-governmental organizations. In Thailand, the assistance for children facing the problem of maternal deprivation has been addressed but should be further supported by social institutions, the government and non-government organizations.

**Key words:** maternal deprivation, children and family, problems of children and family

## **I. Introduction**

As members of society, children with appropriate care will become healthy adults. If they are not taken care of appropriately, these children may cause problems for themselves and society. This paper will focus on children problems concerning children; children's rights and also maternal deprivation. The main reason why this problem has been chosen is because maternal deprivation is one of the urgent issues, which is in need of assistance by the government and non-government organizations. Children who face the problem of maternal deprivation may cause serious problems harmful to society when they become adults.

## **II. Definition of 'child' and 'youth'**

### **II (a). Definition of 'child'**

The meaning of 'child', according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, means 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under



the law applicable to the child ...” ( United Nations 1989, article 1). Similarly, according to the **Revolutionary Party Proclamation** Number 294, the definition of a child refers to a person who is younger than 18 years old and unmarried. (Revolutionary Party, 1972, article 1). In some cases the definition of children is different from the above definition. For example, in the **Fifth Economic and Social Development National Plan** it specifies that a child refers to a person aged 0 to 14 years old. No matter how different these definitions may be, it is essential that the child is in need of care as this will affect the personality and their behaviour in the future.

## **II (b). Definition of ‘youth’**

The ad hoc committee on the analysis of non-government organizations on children and youth provides the definition of a youth as a person aged between 15 - 25 years old. The age of 15 - 25 years old is important because of the development in four areas. Among them are physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. If these four areas have been developed appropriately, they will become healthy adults in society. (Government of Thailand, The Office of National Youth Promotion and Coordination, 1986: 13 - 14).

## **III. Problems concerning children on family and child welfare**

The complexity of the problems concerning children and family deals with many factors. Therefore, it is not easy to categorize the kind of problems concerning children. However, professional workers dealing with these issues such as psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers focus on the causes of the problems which can result in negative behaviour including students missing classes. In general, the problems concerning children may be divided into four categories: 1) physical problems, 2) emotional problems, 3) environmental problems, and 4) special problems such as child abuse, drug addiction. Among the concerns previously mentioned, maternal deprivation will be the main focus of the article (Sooamphan, 1987: 67; Delfos, 2004: 79 - 85). Maternal deprivation concerns the lack of child nurturing at an early age. If one lacks psychological support with the appropriate care at an early age, an individual can possibly cause harmful behaviour in society in the future.

### **III (a). Definition of ‘maternal deprivation’**

The essential needs of children are love, care, a nurturing, secure and caring environment which should be provided by the parents or a caretaker, especially a



natural mother. If an unmet need arises, a negative effect on the process of child development may be the results. For example, maternal deprivation may be one of them. If the need of the child is fulfilled, the chances that the child will be appropriately nurtured is high. Dr. Wanpen Boonprakob, a psychiatrist, states that “If a child is nurtured appropriately with a mutually loving relationship, the needs of the child will be fulfilled and therefore the child will be happy. His/her personality will be appropriately developed, for example, the person will be confident and well-mannered. The relationship with family and friends will be positive and the person will be able to adjust himself/herself within society very well.” (Limsoowan, 1977: 54).

John Bowlby, a psychiatrist, explains the meaning of maternal deprivation as the inadequate condition a child may face without enough care and love from his/her mother or caretaker (Bowlby, 1966: 13 - 14). Basically, the principle of being in healthy relationship between the child and the mother is that the infant or child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his/her mother. Both the mother and the child experience rewarding, satisfaction and enjoyment in the relationship. For any reason, if the child does not experience this relationship, it will be termed ‘maternal deprivation’. This term covers many situations. For example, lacking a natural mother, who is substituted by foster mother or caretaker, the child may experience partial maternal deprivation. The range of maternal deprivation varies from mild, partial to extreme cases such as the urgent placement of a child in residential nurseries and hospitals, where nobody cares for him/her in an individual and caring way resulting in psychological insecurity (Bowlby, 1952: 11 - 12).

The following cases demonstrate the problems of maternal deprivation.

1. The case of infants or children at an early age staying with their mothers with inadequate nurturing and also not developing a positive relationship with their mothers.

2. The case of infants or children in the institutions such as childcare centres, hospitals with a lack of caretakers and positive relationships with the caretakers who are supposed to perform the role of a mother-figure (Sooamphan, 1987: 65). In addition, there may be a situation of a mother-child separation. In this case, the maternal deprivation may become a problem if one cannot find a caretaker and appropriate nurturing (Bowlby, 1966: 191 - 192).



### **III (b). Possible causes of maternal deprivation**

Possible causes of maternal deprivation may be due to the following conditions:

1. The absence of the mother due to some causes such as death;
2. Neglected children resulting from an unwanted pregnancy;
3. Children living with their mother(s) but not having a chance to develop a personal relationship;
4. Children nurtured in low-income families such as families with economic deprivation, unemployed fathers; or parents with chronic diseases;
5. Children nurtured in broken families in addition to violent behaviour in the families; divorced parents and parents not spending free time with their children.

However, the above situation may not result in maternal deprivation. Maternal deprivation may be the problem when the child has inadequate nurturing from the mother or caretaker. In some cases, families with chronic diseases may not have children with maternal deprivation if their relatives can provide adequate nurturing for the children (Bowlby, 1966: 86 - 88).

### **III (c). Examples of children facing the problem of maternal deprivation**

Based on previous research studies, findings on children in early childhood reveal that the children facing the problem of maternal deprivation because of mother-child separation may face the following situations.

#### **1) Mother-child separation**

##### **Phase 1. Resistance**

The child needs to have the mother to stay with him/her all the time.

##### **Phase 2. Depression**

If the mother does not stay with the child, he/she will face the following situations including depression, isolation and no food intake as well as sleeping problems.

##### **Phase 3. Adjustment**

The child recovers from depression and brings, for example, playing with friends, but refuses to further engage in a relationship with the mother.

#### **2) Maternal deprivation**

In general maternal deprivation will arise if there are no caretakers to offer nurturing care. The child will be depressed and in need of love and in need of being nurtured (Sooamphan, 1987: 66 - 67).



### III (d). The effects of maternal deprivation on children

The effects of maternal deprivation on children are as follows: (Panitpan, 1989: 10 - 16; Bowlby, 1952: 17 - 19).

#### 1). On children

As one of the most serious problems on children, the most serious effect can be mortality. Dr. Spitz, a psychiatrist, mentioned in his research several years ago that a large number of children died in hospitals because of the problem of maternal deprivation. Dr. Spitz explained the symptoms of children facing problems of maternal deprivation as follows:

Phase 1. Children with maternal deprivation have been brought to shelters for care, they cry and feel agitated.

Phase 2. Children refuse food; (experience) weight loss; do not want to contact anybody, lack emotional expression.

Phase 3. Isolation from peer groups; sleeping disorder, not playing with toys;

Phase 4. Further isolation, depression, self-stimulation such as moving around, hitting their heads on walls;

Phase 5. Weak physical appearance which may result in child mortality.(Panitpan, 1989, 64 - 65).

In addition to the effects on physical health, children who face problems of maternal deprivation may also have problems concerning their personality and other emotional difficulties. Dr. Wanpen Boonprakob states as follows, "If children do not have positive experiences with their mothers, their working experiences may be fine but they only have superficial relationships with human beings." (Boonprakob, 1977: 930 - 931).

Furthermore, Dr. Wanpen states that in the case of parents not wanting their children, the child's responses will be negative towards other people. Examples of negative behaviour are, for example, missing classes at school, aggression, agitation, anger, unhappiness, insecurity when being reprimanded, and violent behaviour (Boonprakob, 1977: 932).

Another effect of maternal deprivation is personality disorder, when the child responds to society and the environment inappropriately. For example, the child may isolate himself/herself; not express emotion; have a lack of positive emotional responses, not being able to establish human relationships in a sincere manner



(Sooamphan, 1987: 65). Similarly, Kenny Midence studied children who suffered from chronic illness. He states that one of the causes of such problems is due to deprivation. Between 10 % and 20% of children suffer from a chronic illness, which will impact on a child's personality and cause stress (Midence, 1994: 311 - 316); Price, (1994) studies the inner-city children facing the problem of maternal deprivation. He concluded that these children are facing deeply troubled problems and have had severe negative effects on their personalities due to maternal deprivation which affects their normal psycho-social development. (Price, 1994: 341 - 353).

## **2). The effects on the society**

Maternal deprivation as previously mentioned, can effect society as well. If a child experiences both maternal deprivation and becomes a neglected child, he/she may also become homeless. As shown in the Revolutionary Announcement number 294, which discusses the establishment of shelters for homeless children, in the introduction section of this announcement, it states that "The Revolutionary Party has information on the rising number of homeless children in Thailand and that if these children do not receive adequate care and protection appropriately, it may cause problems relating to society and this country." Section 9 of this announcement mentions that children in need of urgent care under this announcement would be the ones who do not have parents or are the ones being neglected or are those who have obtained inappropriate parental cares." (Chuasai, 1990: 7 - 11)

As for the effects of maternal deprivation resulting in juvenile delinquency, this issue is still being debated as to whether the real cause of delinquency is maternal deprivation. John Bowlby also conducted research in this area and found that juvenile delinquency does not result from maternal deprivation (Bowlby, 1966: 196 - 197).

## **III (e). Possible solutions on the problems of maternal deprivation**

Regarding the problem of maternal deprivation, both the government and non-government organizations attempt to seek possible solutions for this problem by providing social services to solve or to reduce the maternal deprivation issues faced by children.

It is possible to categorize the services in the following areas:

1. Social services for children living with their mothers or caretakers but who still lack quality care.



Social services to be provided are, for example, counseling for children at schools and in social service centres. The primary goal of this counseling service is to help the children to establish and develop appropriate interpersonal relationship (Kadushin, 1980: 26 - 27).

## 2. Social services for children not living with their mothers or caretakers.

Daycare centres or supplementary services are examples of services in this category. Most parents will need this kind of service because they work on weekdays and do not have enough time to take care of their children. Both supplementary and substitute services like foster parents, adoption, temporary shelters, and daycare centres are essential.

In cases where children are in need of foster care or adoption and they have obtained quality care, it is likely that the problems of maternal deprivation will be cured. If the children have poor quality foster care, it is likely that they will face the problems of maternal deprivation in the future.

One of the possible solutions to the problem of maternal deprivation is to establish shelters for children to prevent them from further psycho-social problems in the future. Professor Dr. Amphol Sooamphan states that "... Most children in childcare centres will have a poorer quality of stimulation and less often than children living with their parents. Therefore, these children will learn at slower pace than usual. Most caretakers provide essential support for the physical needs of children. What makes it difficult for children with maternal deprivation is to obtain emotional support from caretakers." (Sooamphan, 1987: 65). Bowlby also provides a similar viewpoint as mentioned above (Bowlby, 1969: 50 - 51)

### **III (f). Problem of maternal deprivation in Thailand and possible solutions**

Similar to children in foreign countries, Thai children have faced the problem of maternal deprivation, especially maternal deprivation caused by neglect. Chintana Nonthapaoraya reports that in 1985 there were 423 neglected children. Among them, 269 children were neglected at birth (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 2 - 4, 10). The report also states that many neglected children would be adopted with the opportunity to live with a family. However, a large number of children would also be in shelters (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 28 - 30). Most children in shelters also face the problem of maternal deprivation if they do not obtain adequate emotional support; quality care and develop a strong, interpersonal relationship with their caretakers.



Furthermore, Chintana also mentioned that 80% of children cared by the Sahathai Foundation in 1985 were born out of wedlock. Many of them were separated from their mothers (Mother-Child Separation) and many faced the problem of maternal deprivation (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 27 - 30). If they do not receive a caring relationship from their caretakers or are not able to establish interpersonal relationships with their caretakers, they may be left to face the tragic and vicious problems of maternal deprivation.

As for Thai children who face the problem of maternal deprivation, both the government and non-governmental organizations are involved in providing services for these children.

The following are examples of services.

a. Shelters for children provided by the government. Private shelters registered with a government organization. Also Thai temples house many needy children who are in need of assistance.

b. Foster care provided by the government (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 20, 25).

c. Childcare services provided by non-governmental organizations (Government of Thailand, 1987: 16).

d. Adoption provided by the government (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 27).

These childcare services provided by caretakers are still insufficient to meet the needs of the children facing the problem of maternal deprivation. Chintana Nonthapaoraya mentioned that “the primary option for children with maternal deprivation is still the government shelters, although it is supposed to be the last option for children in need of care. This may result in the limitation of the government social services (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 21). If needy children turn to the shelter as their primary option, the government may not be able to respond to the needs of the child appropriately, because of the large number of the children recipients in need of care (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 36 - 37). Additionally, it is not easy to obtain suitable foster parents or adoption for these children. (Nonthapaoraya, 1987: 45 - 46).

#### **IV. Children’s Rights**

The family is one of the basic social institutions providing childcare services. If the families have faced some problems and are not able to solve the problems, the child will be the one affected by the family problems. Therefore, it is essential that the child is protected to ensure healthy personal growth both physical and emotional. (League





of Nations, International Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1924, article 6).

According to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, children will be protected before and after birth. The United Nations Organization, in cooperation with several countries, is improving the living conditions of children in several countries, especially developing countries.

#### Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Plain language version)

1. All children have the right to what follows, no matter what their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, or where they were born or who they were born to.

2. You have the special right to grow up and to develop physically and spiritually in a healthy and normal way, free and with dignity.

3. You have the right to a name and to be a member of a country.

4. You have the right to special care and protection and to good food, housing and medical services.

5. You have the right to special care if handicapped in any way.

6. You have the right to love and understanding, preferably from parents and family, or from the government where these cannot help.

7. You have the right to go to school for free, to play, and to have an equal chance to develop yourself and to learn to be responsible and useful.

Your parents have special responsibilities for your education and guidance.

8. You have the right always to be among the first to get help.

9. You have the right to be protected against cruel acts or exploitation, e.g. you shall not be obliged to do work which hinders your development both physically and mentally.

You should not work before a minimum age and never when that would hinder your health, and your moral and physical development.

10. You should be taught peace, understanding, tolerance and friendship among all people.

#### V. Conclusion

This article discusses children and problems concerning children, especially the problems of maternal deprivation, both the obvious problems of neglected children and the hidden problems of children living with mothers. The government and non-



government organizations and concerned parties should provide services for children facing the problems of maternal deprivation.

Assistance for children facing the problem of maternal deprivation has been appropriately provided by many organizations nowadays. It is important to note that children are young and incapable of being responsible for the family problems not caused by themselves. Therefore, the urgent need of these children both physically and emotionally is vital need focus, to ensure that the rights of the child to have love and a warm emotional support is respected and upheld.

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