



THE HUMAN FAMILY  
RESEARCH CENTER

*Every Human Being  
Leaves a Fingerprint on the Universe*

**Mommy Brain, How Motherhood Makes Us Smarter**

**by Katherine Ellison, Basic Books, 2005**

“Mommy Brain”, by Katherine Ellison, seeks to prove how the myth that motherhood dims intelligence is a profound misunderstanding of the biological change that takes place in a woman’s brain. On the contrary, Ellison shows that there is a massive restructuring that takes place which enables the changed mother to be more alert, focused and tuned into her baby. Ellison also explains how this restructuring takes place, though to a much smaller degree, in fathers and caregivers when they are around or taking care of children. Ellison explains this change through descriptions of scientific experiments and personal stories throughout most of the book while also showing how the natural gifts acquired as a woman becomes a mother can be used in the wider world. The final chapters discuss the women’s movement, politics and tips on how to use these gifts to their greatest advantage.

Having a Mommy Brain gives women more confidence and a sense of power at being able to create and defend a new life. They undergo new and powerful emotions due to hormones such as oxytocin, which assist women in feeling empathy and bonding with their infant. Mothers will use these hormones as they learn new techniques and how to be assertive in handling their newborns and the obstacles they bring. When a mother gives her baby love and attention early on it helps them both to have the best chance of success in the challenging years to come. Breastfeeding in the early part of infancy bonds mothers with their children by allowing them to study their baby’s reactions in order to understand their needs. This is a delicate and important time when there is a kind of temporary breakdown of identity for both mother and child that powerfully affects both of their brains. The baby and mother are unified while breastfeeding and that contributes to a mother’s confidence and idea of herself. A mother learns how her peace of mind is greatly affected by the health and happiness of her infant, a fact that motivates her to understand and cope with her child’s feelings. As a mother learns how to handle her infant’s needs, she begins to understand her own capacities as well as her infants and begins to have a broader perspective and understanding of what she can accomplish. A mother will find she doesn’t know everything and has more patience and empathy. Being a mom changes a woman’s brain by giving her a very strong attentional focus, allowing her to be extraordinarily tuned into her baby. The biological restructuring that takes place increases neurological connections in the brain, improves memory, intensifies empathy and enables a mother to be a more complex problem solver. Motherhood makes mothers more responsible people who are aware of the outside world because they see dangers from the point of a potential victim in their baby. Heightened empathy allows mothers to be more tuned into their children’s needs and gives them a new sense of identity as their child’s protector. Together with the hormones naturally given to help women adapt, these new responsibilities make mothers more focused and able to screen out distractions while they care for their child, a purpose which gives them greater self-esteem and more maturity.

There are many new skills a mother develops while learning about her infant. Mothers become experts at multitasking and knowing how to help their children get along with others because so much is expected of them. Mothers become effective at managing doctor appointments, playmate visits and caregiving duties. These responsibilities make a mom more organized and used to changing situations. Children are unpredictable and don't always listen so a mother must be resilient to stress while knowing how to make their lives run as smoothly as possible. Mothers become accustomed to learning quickly, paying attention and being efficient in responding to the changing needs of her child, since not doing so could cause serious injury or danger. A mom learns to be sensitive and emotionally responsive to conflicts that arise and people who need help. Children are highly impressionable and their mothers must pay more attention to the moral weight of their actions because their children are absorbing everything they do. Raising a child makes mothers work at maximum capacity which increases their endurance and gives them a more intense level of functioning.

Fatherhood also allows men to see themselves in a new light while helping their children. Fathers feel unconditional love from their children that enables them to feel safe enough to reveal their own flaws and vulnerabilities. Being around their children forces fathers to deal with various personal and relationship issues. A father will see the same tendencies they have in their children and work with them to overcome difficulties, thereby working on their own self improvement.

Although the hormones accompanying motherhood which help to keep mothers and their children linked may only last awhile, mothers find themselves for the rest of their lives to be more disciplined, fearless and in new ways ambitious. When their children no longer need such intensive care, mothers may miss the sense of having a mission and purpose in life. With all the skills and newfound focus they've acquired, there are many things women can contribute to the wider world. Motherhood is a training ground for leadership. Mothers have the ability to coordinate a variety of tasks under pressure and are used to being dependable and putting others' needs ahead of their own. Mothers don't have to micromanage people they work with because they are already used to their children setting limits with them. A mother will be skilled at delegating tasks, knowing when to back away and what steps to take to accomplish something. Mothers intensive practice at conflict resolution has changed the way they think and therefore has changed their behavior in positive ways that employers or organizers will appreciate. Women will also have a stronger motivation to make the world a better place for their children and will have a feeling of confidence in being able to do it. A mother's concern for the welfare of her child can result in a feistiness that makes her more willing to stand up against society and authority, a good quality in work that advocates for social change.

There is evidence that prejudice exists towards women who are mothers. Some feel that mothers unwittingly make a trade – perceived warmth for perceived competence, a perception which can cost them professional credibility and hinder them from being hired, promoted and supported in the workplace. This is an unjust claim that robs the wider world of very intuitive and highly trained workers. Since society would benefit from these workers and more humane working conditions, companies would do well to promote flexible strategies that both male and female employees can use. Giving both parents more flexibility to assist in family duties would encourage their peace of mind and lead to better productivity and more employee loyalty. Mothers themselves have to be realistic about what they can and want to take on and be assertive in asking their employers for it. The practice of helping others is among the strongest predictors of health and longevity which means mothers have many years, even after their children are grown, to help in the wider world. Though it's not a proven fact, there is belief that people who make the work of caring for children an ongoing and serious part of their working lives may acquire ways of thinking and acting that help to create and sustain a culture of peace.