

# ***Prison, Parenting and the Teaching of Mothercraft in the Mid-Twentieth Century***

***By Dr Rachel Bennett***

*“Slowly it became clear that the women were getting their first glimpse of what a home could really mean.”*



*The ‘Convict Nursery’ at Brixton prison, c. mid-nineteenth century. Image taken from Henry Mayhew and John Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London* (London: 1862)*

When reflecting upon her experiences as the Governor of Holloway women’s prison between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Joanna Kelley stated that *“our problems were quite different: problems of mothers and babies, problems of family visits impinged more on us, and we didn’t have the problems of escapes and very violent prisoners.”*

With the creation of female-only prisons, and the more definitive separation of men and women in mixed prisons from the mid-nineteenth century, there were some acknowledgements of the distinct female responses to prison and their specific social, moral and medical needs.

A notable distinction in the female prison was the presence of pregnant women and young infants. There were specific spaces that had to be incorporated into the physical structure of the prison such as nurseries and lying-in wards in the prison hospital but also, crucially, their daily needs had to be incorporated into the prison’s routines and regulations.

Despite their status as penal institutions, there were contemporary voices that acknowledged the potential benefits of the prison setting to pregnant women and new mothers and their babies. In their exploration of conditions in English prisons in 1922 Hobhouse and Brockway remarked that the presence of babies *“brought a touch of something human”* to everyone in the prison.

In addition, despite the debates over its standard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the argument was made by several contemporaries that access to medical care during pregnancy and in the perinatal period was

better for women in prison than the care some women in the community would receive, especially those from the poorest and most marginalised backgrounds.

Furthermore, historically, there were some acknowledgements that a prison sentence was potentially an opportunity to educate women on the values of motherhood and domesticity. Though, this education was often centred around moral as opposed to medical concerns. Efforts by middle-class Lady Visitors and other prison officials to reclaim these women by offering a moral example of ideal femininity can be situated within a longer history of fears that female criminality damaged the fabric of domestic life and threatened to contaminate future generations, so they too would be destined to walk the same path to criminality.



*Mothers and their children in the exercise yard at Tothill Fields prison, c. late nineteenth century. Image taken from Henry Mayhew and John Binny, The Criminal Prisons of London (London: 1862)*

By the early twentieth century, certain prisons, such as Holloway and Durham, had introduced more instructional classes in the care of babies for pregnant women and new mothers. However, these educational efforts were not part of a centrally driven policy regarding parenting in the prison setting.

The mid-twentieth century, especially the immediate post-war years, witnessed the introduction of more comprehensive educational courses on mothercraft into several women's prisons in England.

When writing about the introduction of the courses in Birmingham prison in 1952, Mary Steel remarked that *"this is the first time that it has officially been recognised that depriving a bad mother of her liberty does not automatically make her into a good one."*

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War the incarcerated female population in England had increased to the point that the Prison Commission deemed it to be *"well above danger level"* and thus could not be ignored. A particular concern dwelled upon by prison officials, as well as by organisations including the N.S.P.C.C, was the increase in women who had been convicted of child neglect. Of course, the wartime circumstances were a crucial factor that had placed immense pressure upon women trying to provide for their families

at home and it is likely that many of these cases were prompted by poverty as opposed to deliberate neglect. However, this increase in convictions led to a desire within several women's prisons to more properly educate women in the care of their children. The courses were attended by all women committed for child neglect and all expectant mothers. There were also women who volunteered to attend.

The courses differed slightly in composition in different prisons but there was a notable sharing of ideas, experiences and good practice between prison officials, organisations such as the N.S.P.C.C and the Women's Voluntary Services (WVS) but also, crucially, with the Ministry of Health, local medical authorities, including health visitors, and local maternity and child welfare services.

The courses were taught by a variety of people including health visitors, nurses, midwives and local education authorities and covered a range of topics such as bathing a baby, clothing and bedding requirements, food and feeding young children, accidents in the home and simple first aid and the importance of cleanliness and hygiene.

In Birmingham prison the courses were taught in a red-brick house which was on the prison grounds but set apart from the main prison building. In Manchester (Strangeways) the courses were taught in a domestic science room which included a kitchen and a gas cooker for practical training. Demonstration materials were borrowed from local health authorities and posters offering more medical advice were brought into the prison as visual aids.



*Birmingham prison, 1952. The National Archives*

In addition to the practical training in home care and mothercraft, these courses also offered more advanced medical advice and education and can be situated within the broader professionalisation and medicalisation of maternity care in the late 1940s. They offered information on the stages of pregnancy, foetal development, childbirth, breastfeeding and early child development, with some lectures and training given by doctors.

One contemporary remarked that understanding the “*how and why*” of certain aspects of motherhood that were taught by the doctor was of crucial importance in educating the women. Again, this is perhaps an acknowledgment of the value of medical, as opposed to solely moral, education in the rehabilitative process.



*Birmingham prison, 1952. The National Archives*

The attempts to educate women in prison in domesticity and motherhood were not new to the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the association of female criminality with negative ramifications for hearth, home and child have a history stretching beyond the last half a century as do attempts to use motherhood as a method of reform. However, the introduction of more comprehensive courses in mothercraft to women in prison in this period was a major step in this longer-term

history. These courses marked a shift away from the more moral attempts to reclaim, though moral instruction, these women towards acknowledgements that prison was, and is, a space for medical, as well as penal, intervention.

Birth Companions, an organisation who has been working with pregnant women and women with babies in prison since 1996, developed and published ‘*The Birth Charter*’ in 2016. It is based upon the experiences of members who have worked and supported women in several prisons and argues for the need for a Prison Service Order for women in the perinatal period. The charter highlights the work that is already being done but calls for more consistency to ensure that women in prison are given the “*same opportunities and support to nurture and bond with their baby as women in the community.*” This includes providing women accommodated on Mother Baby Units with training and education in baby care, nutrition, communication and breastfeeding.

The mothercraft courses of the mid-twentieth century can perhaps be viewed as marking something of a beginning to these ongoing attempts in prisons to offer women, especially pregnant women and those who have their babies in prison, opportunities to develop parenting skills and provide them with support, both medical and emotional, when caring for their infants in prison.

**ENDS**