# A must-read for couples with young children

To Have and to Hold: Motherhood, Marriage, and the Modern Dilemma.

Molly Millwood, Harper Wave, 2019.

In this compassionate, intelligent book, Millwood argues that motherhood changes women profoundly, a change that deeply affects the marital happiness even of loving heterosexual couples who had previously assumed their partnership was solid. A clinical psychologist with specialty in marital therapy and the mother of two children, Millwood understands the strain of new parenthood professionally and personally. She also knows that the strain gets little attention. Pregnant women have long been reassured by "What to Expect When You're Expecting," and there are many how-to books on mothering; but once a woman has a baby, there is next to no literature that enables her and her husband to understand what is happening to *her*—and thus to them. Millwood has written this book to fill that gap. It's spectacular.

**One-Minute Book Reviews**

*Laura Stevenson*

The first five chapters discuss the "slow and silent toll of motherhood"— the gradual pileup of moments in which despite her deep love for her baby, a new mother often finds that her maternal feelings are … wait for it … ambivalent. She is exhausted, sleep-deprived, unable to comfort her colicky baby, unable to find time even to take a shower, and she is also dealing with a radical change of identity. And yet, her mourning for her lost freedom, her frightening moments of anger at her baby, her boredom with baby-tending—these unexpected emotions are so unacceptable that they fill her with guilt and shame. Her suffering, Millwood says, is not post-partum depression, now fortunately a recognized state. On the contrary, she is feeling perfectly normal emotions that attend new motherhood. Hiding them leads only to further distress; they need to be recognized, understood, and discussed with a sympathetic, supportive listener. Some new moms can find that supportive listener in a friend (face-to-face: competitively cute posts on Facebook and Instagram increase guilt by implying that other moms are doing just fine). But most of them have difficulty in finding time for such friends, and except for the few with supportive, on-the-spot multigenerational families, they face their changes and frustrations in isolation from all but one person. Dad.

Millwood's central chapters make short work of the assumption that children draw couples closer together. As she puts it, babies "threaten the connection from which they come." Husband and wife are affected very differently by the baby, a situation that easily leads to misunderstandings. When he says "What can I do to help?" she snaps, because what she hears is an assertion that she's responsible for the baby and he just lends a hand now and then. Hurt, he stops asking. She then feels deserted and makes what psychologists call a "fundamental attribution error": He's not helping because he's selfish about everything. Thus each partner loses confidence in the other, and they become adversarial. Millwood's excellent discussion of increasingly adversarial marriages draws on attachment theory, which asserts that human beings never outgrow their dependency needs, especially in times of stress. She points out that potentially adversarial questions ("Can't you do the dishes just this once?" "Why didn't you ask me to go to the baby's checkup?) have a subtext: are you there for me? If the marriage is to survive, both partners need to be confident that despite inevitable slip-ups, the answer is yes. Building that yes by listening to subtexts in the midst of fatigue, change, and stress is one of the greatest unrecognized challenges of parenting. This book, by recognizing the challenge, does a great service to all new moms and dads who want their babies to grow up in a loving, supportive atmosphere.

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