

## CAN ONE INFLUENCE AN UNBORN CHILD?

Every human being has within him two essential materials; first, the kind of life-stuff called "body cells" which go to make up the various members and organs of the human body; and second, the kind of life-stuff called "germ cells," which have nothing to do with making the body and whose sole function is to pass on the family and racial life streams from one generation to the next. Thus, not even out of his parents' flesh and blood, but out of their hereditary germ cells the baby comes.

Every father ought to understand this fact, because it will increase his realization of his importance to his children. No mother can any longer think of herself as overwhelmed by the task of "making" her child; she is the trustee of something far finer than she could pos-

sibly make single-handed. This means that while the mother can no longer hope to produce a preacher by reading sermons, she need no longer fear that if frightened by a mouse or what not she will deposit a "birthmark" in the shape of a mouse upon the child.

By the time the baby sees the light of day he has already been influenced by three different prenatal currents. He has received from the family germ cell his racial characteristics, such as the general body type, the form of face and head, and capacities or aptitudes for certain mental and temperamental developments. He has, in the second place, been affected by the physical characteristics transmitted by both his parents to these germ cells to which his parents' bodies are hosts. The germ cells are not

easily affected by any of the ordinary ups and downs of the parents' well-being. But long continued abuse of the human body may injure them. The germ cells may be poisoned by alcohol, phosphorus, lead, and certain chemicals, or by the toxins of certain diseases — most serious of all by syphilis. The influence of nutrition upon the germ cells is probably greater than has been realized until very lately. It is thus essential that every man, as well as every woman, who hopes to see his family line continue strong and healthy, should do his part to preserve his racial inheritance conveyed by the germ cells.

In both these types of influence the parents have an equal share because they act upon the single germ cell itself and not upon the child who has already begun a new life out of the union of two cells, one of which comes from each parent. From that point on whatever good comes to the child is its mother's gift, for at the moment of conception the influences that can touch the cells while independent have completed their work

and all other gates of gifts, save the mother's, are closed.

And yet there is no other phase of human life in relation to which so many fallacies have existed and still persist. It is true that the mother can influence the well-being of her unborn child, but it has taken humanity multitudes of generations to find out how and why.

There is just one channel through which the mother can reach the child, and that is through her blood. Science has never discovered any nervous connection, for nature has surrounded the child with a protective mechanism which is a perfect and complete as anything in life. The mother's whole task is one of nurture and nutrition. Her duty is to supply the child with food and to carry off waste products. Both of these come and go through the blood. Through this channel, too, in spite of its protective mechanism, the unborn child may actually be poisoned by certain chemicals, including alcohol, lead and others, and by the toxins of certain diseases.

But the cases in which such poisoning occurs are proportionately exceedingly few; the great source of maternal influence is through nutrition. Most mothers have been told by physicians that they must eat plenty of vegetables and milk, and that they must guard their diet. But not all of them know that, since there is no nervous connection whatever, it is practically their only way of meeting their responsibilities. For there is nothing but the two blood streams and even these do not actually meet, as they are carried along in systems of tubes.

The mother's job begins and ends with safeguarding her own and the child's nutrition. And yet credence in so-called "maternal impressions" is so much a part of folk-belief that it is hard to cast it entirely aside. A graduate student in a great university reported that she had known a case in which a mother, frightened by a circus elephant, gave birth shortly after to a child with a long trunk-like nose; and another, in which a little girl was born with her right hand

gone at the wrist five months after her mother's brother had lost his right hand at that point.

These are typical of the sort of "true stories" we still hear. But science proves such things cannot be done. Peculiarities of structure occur so early in prenatal life that the mother could not influence them, for she doesn't know anything about what is happening. And, since there is no nervous connection there is no conceivable way for such impressions to reach the child anyway. The greatest specialists of today agree with the observation made more than a half century ago by Darwin's father, who was an exceptionally observant and shrewd physician. He was in the habit of asking the women in his hospital to record before the baby's birth any experience of their own which might influence the child. As a result of hundreds of these records he reported, "Absolutely not one case (of maternal impressions) came right."

"But," someone says, "how would you explain the case of the mother who studied counterpoint while her baby was

on the way and whose son grew up to be a talented musician; or of the mother who took up Italian, and whose child early developed an astonishing skill at languages?"

Science would explain these and similar cases not by mysterious "psychic" maternal impressions, but by two very well known influences — heredity and environment. The son of a woman who studied the technique of music not only received an hereditary musical endowment from the same ancestral source from which his mother received hers, but grew up in as atmosphere of musical culture, his every aptitude encouraged and trained. And, so with the linguistic prodigy.

But though the mother has no more chance of telepathy with her child than

have "his uncles and his cousins and his aunts," it is not true to say that her emotions cannot affect her child in any way. Any grief or worry or fright sufficient to affect her own health will react on her child, just as any other detrimental influence will react upon it, through her blood.

To sum up them: In the mother's care lies the preservation of something greater than herself. Hers is the last and greatest of the three sources of the gifts of life — from the racial inheritance, from the influence of both parents upon the germ cells, and finally from the mother's care, which should be as sane, and thoughtful, and happy before the child is born as after. — *Dr. Thomas D. Wood and Zilpha Caruthers, condensed from the Parents' Magazine, September, 1930.*