

MOTHER SURROGATE

Authored by
mohammad looti

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MOTHER SURROGATE

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Developmental Psychology, Ethology, Sociology, Family Studies

1. Core Definition

The **mother surrogate**, or surrogate caregiver, is a fundamental concept in developmental psychology and sociology, defined as an individual who assumes the primary caregiving responsibilities and performs the emotional and developmental functions typically associated with a biological mother, despite lacking a direct genetic relationship with the child or dependent individual. This role transcends biological linkage, focusing instead on the functional provision of care, security, and responsive interaction necessary for healthy development. The surrogate relationship often arises out of necessity--such as maternal absence, death, or incapacity--but it is also integral to diverse social structures, including adoption, foster care, and complex tribal or extended family systems.

Crucially, the identity of the mother surrogate is not confined by gender. While the term suggests a maternal role, the duties and emotional responsivity can be provided by males (allopaternal care) or females (allomaternal care). The essence of the role lies in the consistent provision of a secure base and reliable emotional connection, which facilitates the dependent individual's exploration of the environment and development of social competence. The distinction between the surrogate mother and the biological mother is often blurred in functional terms, as research consistently demonstrates that the quality of the attachment bond, rather than the genetic link, determines long-term developmental outcomes.

The concept emphasizes the critical psychological requirements of the young--specifically the need for warmth, tactile comfort, and emotional accessibility--over purely physiological needs such as nourishment. This distinction was rigorously established through experimental psychology, fundamentally altering the understanding of infant motivation and attachment formation. The effectiveness of the mother surrogate system, whether temporary or permanent, relies entirely on its capacity to meet these profound psychological needs, thereby substituting the biological relationship with a functional, nurturing bond.

2. Historical Context: The Work of Harry Harlow

The rigorous scientific validation of the importance of the mother surrogate role is intrinsically linked to the experimental research conducted by American psychologist Harry Harlow beginning in the late 1950s. Prior to Harlow's investigations, prevailing psychological paradigms, notably psychoanalytic and behaviorist theories, often adhered to the belief that the infant-mother bond was primarily utilitarian--a theory commonly dubbed "cupboard love." This theory posited that infants became attached to mothers because they provided necessary sustenance (milk) and relief

from hunger, linking affection to the secondary reinforcement of feeding.

Harlow challenged this prevailing wisdom using Rhesus monkeys, which share complex social and attachment behaviors with humans. His definitive experiments involved separating infant monkeys from their biological mothers shortly after birth and rearing them in environments containing two types of artificial surrogates. One surrogate mother was constructed solely of rigid wire mesh but was equipped with a functional feeding bottle, providing the necessary nourishment. The second surrogate mother was built identically but was covered in soft terry cloth, offering warmth and tactile comfort without providing food.

The results of the Harlow experiments were revolutionary and unequivocal. The infant monkeys exhibited a profound and overwhelming preference for the soft, cloth-covered surrogate, spending the vast majority of their time clinging to it, particularly when frightened or stressed, regardless of which mother provided the milk. They would only approach the wire mother briefly for feeding before immediately returning to the cloth mother for security. This evidence empirically dismantled the "cupboard love" hypothesis and provided concrete proof that **contact comfort**--the tactile, emotional, and psychological security offered by the surrogate--is a powerful, innate, and essential drive, superseding the need for food in the formation of the primary attachment bond.

3. The Primacy of Contact Comfort

The central lesson derived from the study of the mother surrogate system is the critical importance of **contact comfort**. Harlow defined contact comfort as the emotional reassurance provided through physical contact with a soft, warm, and responsive surface or figure. This finding shifted the focus of attachment research away from purely physiological reinforcement (like feeding) toward socio-emotional interaction and physical security. The cloth surrogate served as a "secure base" from which the infant monkeys could venture out to explore their environment, and to which they could quickly retreat when faced with novel or frightening stimuli. This cyclical behavior--exploration followed by retreat to the secure base--is vital for developing confidence and cognitive mapping of the environment.

The deprivation studies that followed Harlow's initial findings further underscored the necessity of contact comfort. Monkeys raised solely with the wire surrogates, despite being adequately nourished, demonstrated severe psychological disturbances, including social apathy, rocking behavior, and an inability to form normal relationships later in life. This indicated that the surrogate mother provides more than just temporary comfort; she is crucial for the establishment of fundamental social competencies and emotional regulation systems.

In human terms, the role of contact comfort provided by the mother surrogate is manifested in behaviors such as rocking, cuddling, skin-to-skin contact, and consistent responsiveness to distress signals. These actions fulfill the infant's need for warmth and security, contributing directly

to the proper neurological development of stress response systems. The ability of a surrogate to provide reliable, non-contingent comfort is therefore the primary mechanism by which the psychological function of the mother is successfully replaced or assumed.

4. Ethological and Cross-Species Manifestations

The phenomenon of the mother surrogate system is not unique to human social arrangements or experimental psychology; it represents a wide-ranging strategy for offspring rearing observed across the **animal kingdom**. In ethology (the study of animal behavior), this process is often classified under the broader terms of alloparenting or **allocare**. Allocare involves care provided by individuals other than the biological parents, a cooperative breeding strategy that offers evolutionary advantages by sharing the immense energy costs associated with raising young.

Examples of surrogate systems vary dramatically in complexity. On one end of the spectrum is brood parasitism, such as practiced by the Kingfisher or the Cuckoo, where one species places its eggs in the nest of another. The host species unknowingly acts as a mother surrogate, dedicating resources and time to raising genetically unrelated offspring. While often detrimental to the host's own reproductive success, this biological strategy highlights the inherent drive in many species to respond to caregiving cues, regardless of genetic relationship.

In social mammals, particularly primates and certain communal carnivores, allocare is a standard component of group dynamics. Juvenile females, older siblings, and even unrelated males often act as mother surrogates, aiding in feeding, grooming, and protecting the young. This shared responsibility increases the survival rates of the offspring and provides younger caregivers with valuable experience necessary for their own future parenting roles. These natural observations reinforce the psychological conclusion that the ability to bond and provide nurturing care is a flexible social and biological adaptation.

5. Societal Applications: Formal Surrogate Systems

In human society, the concept of the mother surrogate is formalized and institutionalized in numerous ways, addressing the necessity of care when biological parents are absent or unable to perform their duties. The most prominent formal systems include **foster families** and adoptive parents. In these contexts, carefully screened individuals assume the complete functional role of the parent, providing the necessary emotional, physical, and developmental support required by the child.

The lessons learned from attachment research, heavily influenced by the findings on the mother surrogate, have fundamentally shaped modern social welfare and child protection policies. Modern foster care training emphasizes the importance of secure attachment, consistency, and trauma-informed care--recognizing that the stability and responsiveness of the surrogate relationship are

paramount for mitigating the effects of early separation or neglect. The success of foster or adoptive arrangements is often directly correlated with the surrogate's ability to establish a strong, responsive, and secure attachment bond with the child, demonstrating that love and security are functional outputs rather than merely biological prerequisites.

Furthermore, in extended family structures, particularly in cultures emphasizing communal rearing, grandparents, aunts, and uncles frequently serve as natural mother surrogates. These informal systems provide crucial continuity and emotional security, often acting as primary attachment figures, especially during times of parental transition or stress. The societal acceptance and reliance upon mother surrogates highlight humanity's inherent capacity for alloparenting and cooperation in the demanding task of raising dependent offspring.

6. Psychological Implications for Attachment

The conceptual validation of the mother surrogate played a crucial role in the development of Attachment Theory, primarily formulated by John Bowlby and further refined by Mary Ainsworth. Harlow's work provided the empirical foundation that the infant's need for security (contact comfort) is an independent primary drive, separate from hunger, and is rooted in an evolutionary imperative to maintain proximity to a protective figure. This biological necessity ensures survival by keeping the vulnerable young near a competent caregiver.

The quality of care provided by the mother surrogate directly determines the child's attachment style. If the surrogate is consistently available, responsive, and sensitive to the child's needs, the child is likely to develop a **secure attachment**. This secure base allows the child to explore the world with confidence, knowing they can rely on the caregiver for comfort. Conversely, inconsistent or neglectful surrogate care can lead to insecure attachment styles (avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, or disorganized), which can have lasting impacts on the individual's ability to form stable relationships and regulate emotions throughout their life.

Therefore, the concept of the mother surrogate provides a powerful lens through which to view developmental outcomes, emphasizing that psychological health is fundamentally dependent upon the nature of the earliest interpersonal relationships. The effectiveness of a surrogate relationship underscores the remarkable plasticity of human attachment mechanisms, affirming that profound emotional bonds are forged through interactive experience, not exclusively through genetic programming.

7. Further Reading

[Harry Harlow \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Attachment Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Kingfisher (Wikipedia - Example of Brood Parasitism)

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