



# The Mother Dance

BY HARRIET LERNER, Ph. D.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO HARRIET LERNER

Harriet Lerner, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. She has written numerous professional articles and books, including the *The Dance of Anger*, *The Dance of Intimacy*, and *The Dance of Deception*. She writes children's books with her sister, and has a monthly column in *New Woman* magazine.

Lerner grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and lived on both coasts before settling down to a simple life in the Midwest. She and her husband, also a psychologist, have two sons. Lerner travels widely to lecture, consult, and present workshops on the psychology of women and family relationships.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Despite wall-to-wall books on parenting, there is a conspicuous silence about the mother's experience of mothering and how *her* life and relationships are transformed when children come along. This is a book about being a mother—what it does and what it feels like from the inside.

A mother and psychologist, Lerner combines personal tales with vivid examples to explore the complexity, truth, and turbulence surrounding motherhood. She reveals how children are the greatest teachers of life's most profound spiritual lessons, and she offers her best advice to help mothers make sense of an overwhelming experience.

With stories that run the gamut from the hilarious to the sobering, Lerner spells out what happens to a woman—and her relationships—from the time when the first baby comes along all the way to the empty nest.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Being a mother comes as naturally to me as being an astronaut. Nor do I occupy any moral high ground when I help *other* mothers to achieve clarity, objectivity, and calm.

When I started this book, I had one son in high school and another in college. I completed the project two years later from the vantage point of a newly empty nest. I've valued the opportunity to look back at my own complex experience of mothering, and I've not hesitated to share the best and worst of it.

Your kids will make you love them in a way you never thought possible. They will also confront you with all the painful and unsavory emotions that we try so hard to avoid. Children will teach you about yourself, and about what it's like *not* to be up to the demands of the most important responsibility you'll ever have.

When you become a mother, you learn that you are capable of deep compassion, and also that you're definitely not the nice, highly evolved person you fancied yourself to be before you became a mother. The novelist Fay Weldon puts it best. "*The greatest advantage of not having children must be that you can go on believing you are a good person. Once you have children, you realize how wars start.*"

Welcome to the mother dance!

## PRAISE FOR *THE MOTHER DANCE*

**"Lerner writes with charm, precision and at times almost unbearable honesty about what motherhood is. This book shows us the way."**

—Mary Pipher, Ph.D.,  
author of *Reviving Ophelia*

**"*The Mother Dance* is one of the wisest and most honest books on parenting I have read. As a parent myself, I ate up story after story, insight after insight."**

—Thomas Moore, Ph.D.,  
author of *Care of the Soul* and *The Soul of Sex*

**"I love *The Mother Dance*; it's wonderful— true, touching, practical, spiritual, sanity-saving, and I laughed out loud a number of times, with recognition, surprise and gratitude."**

—Anne Lamott,  
author of *Operating Instructions*

**"Harriet Lerner pioneers on behalf of women's whole humanity. Each chapter in *The Mother Dance* is worth the price of admission."**

—Gloria Steinem

**"In *The Mother Dance*, there are no mistakes in parenting—only learning experiences told with a great sense of humor."**

—Benjamin Spock, M.D.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are there "right" and "wrong" reasons for having kids? What are they?
2. How does *his* new life differ from *her* new life after the first baby comes along?
3. What changes (from within and without) need to occur to make shared parenting a realistic goal?
4. How is a marriage changed and challenged by the arrival of the first child?
5. What do you know about your own mother's experience of mothering throughout the lifecycle? What stage was the most difficult for her?
6. On raising daughters, Lerner says, "Your daughter is watching you." What did you learn from watching your own mother about what it means to be a wife, a mother, a single parent, a daughter, a friend, a sister, a worker, and, ultimately, a human being? What lessons do you want to pass on?
7. What is a "good mother"?
8. What is the biggest challenge of raising daughters? Of raising sons?
9. Discuss Lerner's comment, "If you're raising a mama's boy, go for it!"
10. Discuss the difference between productive and nonproductive guilt. Discuss fear and worry in a mother's experience.
11. What do you think are the most helpful messages a mother can impart to her adolescent daughter about sex? About food? Is your answer different for sons?

12. How are kids affected by the "emotional climate" between their parents, married or divorced?
13. Discuss your label, role, or "job description" in your family of origin ("the weak one," "the good one," "mother's best friend"). What roles and labels do your kids have? At what cost?
14. How can you best foster communication with kids about emotionally difficult issues (illness, suicide, divorce, job loss)?
15. Why is the role of stepmother so difficult? How can you try to avoid the usual pitfalls?
16. What are the biggest challenges a mother faces when her first or last kid leaves home? How is it different if she is single or married?

**Don't miss these other books by Harriet Lerner, Ph. D.:**

*The Dance of Anger*

0-06-091565 -X/ \$14.00

*The Dance of Intimacy*

0-06-091646-X /\$14.00

*The Dance of Deception*

0-06-092463-2 / \$14.00

*Women in Therapy*

0-06-097228-9 / \$13.50

*Life Preservers*

0-06-092835-2 / \$13.50

*Dance of Connection*

0-06-095616-X / \$13.95

*Mother Dance*

0-06-093025-X / \$14.00

*Fear and Other Uninvited Guests*

0-06-008157-0 / \$23.95

**Other Guides Available!**

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**[www.harrietlerner.com](http://www.harrietlerner.com)**