**Parent-Child Relationships in *Little Fires Everywhere*: The Importance of Perinatal Mental Health Intervention**

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*Little Fires Everywhere*, the Hulu original limited television show adapted from the eponymous Celeste Ng’s novel covers topics related with race, identity, motherhood, and pregnancy, among others. The show tells the stories of two families, Mia Warren (played by Kerri Washington) and Elena Richardson (played by Reese Witherspoon) in the 1990s planned town of Shaker Heights, Ohio. Mia and her teenage daughter, Pearl (Lexi Underwood), live a nomadic lifestyle; Mia is an artist; they have a limited income, at times live in their car, and move often, possibly as a result of Mia’s search for artistic inspiration. Mia and Pearl move to Shaker and are temporarily living in their car. Elena, a journalist, discovers the car in a parking lot and an African-American woman living in the car. Elena, then calls the police to report the African American woman living in her car. Later, Elena formally meets Mia and Pearl at a showing for her rental property which they are interested in occupying. Elena offers Mia and Pearl the apartment and an additional job as her housekeeper out of her feelings of white-guilt. The Richardson’s are a white upper-class family, including Elena’s husband and her four children. On top of expectable familial frictions, Elena and her youngest daughter, Izzy (Megan Stott), are in constant conflict over Izzy’s nickname, her hair, how she dresses, her sexual orientation, and so on.

The relationship that develops between Mia and Elena is conflictual as well. Their differences ignite in a parental rights trial (episodes 4-8) in which Mia’s coworker Bebe Chow, a Chinese immigrant, sought to regain custody of her daughter, whom she left at a fire station shortly after she was born due to extenuating circumstances. Bebe’s daughter is in the care of Elena’s friend Linda McCullough (Rosemarie DeWitt) who—after years of tentatives and miscarriages—intends to adopt her. Elena’s core belief is that both Bebe and Mia are bad mothers who did not make the ‘right’ choices for their
children. Elena dedicates time to helping her friend win the custody trial. Elena’s behaviors in assisting Linda, reveal her own fragility and difficulties coping with motherhood despite her self-righteous lifestyle. Her desire to defeat Mia and help her friend win the trial results in uncovering her antagonist’s secretive family history. Through her research, Elena discovers that Mia had agreed to be a surrogate mother for a family in New York; however, after a traumatic event, she ran away and kept the baby as her own, telling the parents that she miscarried. Elena decides to inform Pearl of the true history behind her conception, fueling the already existing conflict between Pearl and Mia. Meanwhile, the feud between Elena and Izzy results in the former telling the latter that she never wanted her, causing Izzy to run away.

In both fictional cases, the conflictual relationships between mother and daughter can be analyzed delving into the mechanisms of infant attachment and its consequences on the development A Benoit study found that mothers’ perceptions of and relationships with their infants are related to infant attachment behavior at 1-year old (1997b). Another study found a relationship between infant attachment behavior and adolescent emotional development (Warren, et al, 1997). Throughout the series, the spectator can observe that Elena struggles to balance her desire to move forward in her career with her expectations as a mother. In a flashback taking the story back to when she discovered to be pregnant of Izzy, Elena argues with her own mother, as she reveals being pro-choice and states that she did not want to carry the baby to term. She is ultimately pressured by her mother and her husband to avoid abortion and give birth to Izzy.

A standardized interview protocol, administered by mental health professionals to mothers during pregnancy to understand the parents’ representations of their relationship with their unborn child, allows to classify mothers as either balanced, disengaged, or distorted. When this interview is re-administered a year after the birth of the child, the mothers’ classifications resulted in an 85% stability in maintaining the same perception, testing prior to the birth (Benoit, et al, 1997a). This indicates that mothers who have distorted representation of their unborn child, maintain their distorted representation of the child even at 1-year postnatally. Elena may have been classified in the distorted category, as she was more preoccupied with her concerns about her career when she was pregnant and, later on, often acted in insensitive ways towards Izzy. Elena blames her pregnancy and birth of Izzy for not achieving her career goals, which builds the foundation of their tumultuous relationship.

Among studies on the matter, Suh et al., found that women with unwanted pregnancies were more likely to experience severe post-partum depression (2016). Saleem and Surkan found that children born from unwanted pregnancies demonstrate lower social-emotional developmental scores by kindergarten (2014). The conflictual relational pattern between Izzy and Elena continues into her teenage years. Izzy struggles emotionally with questioning her sexuality, bullying, and feeling outcast; however,
she does not have a secure base or attachment to her mother and therefore is unable to utilize her mother for comfort and support. When Izzy ultimately runs away, it is because she feels she cannot be comforted, loved, or supported suitably in her home.

Mia’s relationship with Pearl was an intentional pregnancy, although she did not intend to keep Pearl as she was acting as surrogate mother. Later into the pregnancy, after experiencing a traumatic event, an emotionally charged Mia chose to keep Pearl. The show does not indicate Mia having post-partum depression, though it is likely. Post-partum depression is not identified as readily for black women, possibly due to diagnostic biases (Suh, et al, 2016). Since Mia was also on the run and in hiding, she may have also had even less access to healthcare or support. Though Mia may have been initially classified as disengaged, she also entered the distorted classification after giving birth to Pearl. Mia’s obsession with Pearl’s protection stems from her fear of rejection if Pearl learns her true origins. Mia feels she needs to protect herself and Pearl from being discovered which requires keeping family history and details private. Mia became entrenched in her desire to protect Pearl as she believed Pearl belonged to her, demonstrating an unhealthy feeling of ownership over Pearl and often failing to recognize that her daughter is an individual. This kind of behavior is, in fact, characteristic of the distorted classification (Benoit, et al, 1997a). Even though predicated on falsehood, Mia and Pearl demonstrate a positive relationship and attachment to each other possibly due to the hardship they have endured together; nonetheless, when Pearl’s identity is exposed, she loses trust in her mother. Pearl, like Izzy, begins to move to individuate from Mia. Individuation is expected in teenagers; however, both Izzy and Pearl seem to be motivated by anger and mistrust. Since a positive relationship was already established between Mia and Pearl, at the end of the narrative arc Pearl was eventually able to return to her mother and seek comfort.

Unfortunately, Izzy, unlike Pearl, is not able to return to her mother and seek comfort. Izzy, distraught from the news of Bebe losing in court and recently seeing Mia and Pearl move away, attempts to set her house on fire. In the television series, she is able to be stopped by her siblings and her mother. Elena, in a dysregulated rage screams to Izzy, “I never wanted you in the first place.” This results in Izzy running away from home and the siblings eventually finishing the proverbial job of burning down the house. In the opening scene of the first episode, the viewer hears how blame is placed on Izzy for burning down the house for revenge. In the conclusion of the final episode, the viewer watches as Elena, understanding the impact of her parenting, finally assumes the parental protective role of Izzy and takes responsibility in from the police for starting the fire in her home.

Distorted parental perceptions of their infants can last through childhood and adolescence. The importance of continued monitoring of maternal mental health is paramount. Though initial classifications of parent-child relationships can have lasting im-

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pacts, these classifications can change through increased parental support, family involvement, and mental health services. Individual therapies and dyadic therapies such as Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) demonstrate lasting positive effects (Lieberman, et al, 2006). Though one cannot accurately predict outcomes, especially for a television show, one can ponder how the fictional relationship between Elena and Izzy could change if intervention was implemented. This is not to say there were no other issues contributing to their tumultuous relationship. It does suggest, though, that an improved relational bond between Elena and Izzy could have prevented their house burning down.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES**


