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OUR NEGLECTED CHILDREN

The feminist movement is forever bragging about the higher and higher percentage of women in the paid labor force, especially in fulltime, nontraditional jobs. "Affirmative action" for females is predicated on the notion that sex discrimination must be the villain anytime fewer than 50% of the jobs in any category are held by women.

But who will take care of the children? The feminist movement copes with this question by weaving a new mythology. "Babies don't need a mother's fulltime care. It's the quality of the time a mother spends with her babies, not the quantity."

"Child-care facilities are completely adequate for babies, at least starting at two or three months." "Being a fulltime housewife and mother is only for those who have no job skills to do anything better." All this mythology is layered with invective against "obsolete stereotypes" and the "unfairness" of society's expectation that mothers should engage in mothering at the expense of their careers.

Anyone who has been watching major newspapers and magazines in the last six months could not have escaped seeing dozens of articles in the unlikeliest places (such as Newsweek) written by surprised feminists who have discovered that babies really do need their moms for more than a half hour a day of "quality" time; and that babies adjust very poorly to a series of hired caretakers in place of a mother. The Washington Post even reported on the new public health problem called "day care diseases" -- the epidemic of contagious diseases that spread so fast through very young children in day-care centers.

The evidence is mounting to prove a simple proposition: babies need mothers, and there is no substitute for the bonding that should take place between baby and mother during its first weeks, months and years of life.

Now comes a powerful blockbuster to prove the need for this bonding which can come only from traditional, fulltime mothering by a single, self-sacrificing, loving individual. It's written from the viewpoint of the children who were deprived of that bonding, and they are crying for help with a piercing scream that will tear at your heart.

That's what it's called: "A Cry for Help" -- a new book by Dr. Mary Giffin, medical

director of the North Shore (Ill.) Mental Health Association, and Carol Felsenthal (Doubleday, 1983). It's a book about teenage suicide -- those pathetic youngsters who cried for help and, when no one heard, decided that suicide was their only course.

I didn't want to read this book; its subject is so depressing. But the book "hooked" me on the first page I opened it to, and I couldn't put it down. A child was crying for help on every page, and one would have to have a heart of stone not to hear and heed those desperate appeals.

Dr. Giffin is the director of the clinic serving the area which Time magazine called "the suicide belt" -- the affluent North Shore suburbs of Chicago, where the teen suicide rate is three times the ever-rising national average. Carol Felsenthal is a professional writer who made the individual case histories of these tragedies come to life, one after another, much as an accomplished photographer occasionally catches the most dramatic moment of a killing or the most poignant moment of the grief it causes.

"A Cry for Help" is not a series of morbid sensationalisms. The authors have expertly organized a mass of data in order to bring teen suicide out of the closet, demolish the myths, alert parents to distress signals, analyze the causes from the child's point of view (why do they do it?), provide the lessons we can learn from empirical data, and offer constructive methods to stop the teen suicide epidemic.

The common denominator of these teenage tragedies is that their mothers failed to bond with them. The suicide data show that the bonding of a baby with a constantly-present mother is the single most important key to good mental health.

"But mothers have to be in the labor force in order to make ends meet in our current economy!" No, money is not the problem. The suicidal children come from upper middle class homes where their mothers pursued careers for other than financial reasons. Most of the suicidal teenagers had all the advantages that money can buy, but they were left out in the emotional cold by mothers who had other priorities, or sometimes simply wanted to escape the "just-a-housewife" stigma.

"A Cry for Help" isn't only for parents who suspect their child might attempt suicide. It's a book for all present and future parents who want to save their children from emotional poverty and give them the best headstart in life: good mental health and the inner serenity to enable them to cope with life's problems.