

PARENTING

INFANTS

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*Copies of this booklet can be downloaded free from my website at
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(While the contents of these pages are not designed to advocate a particular religious point of view, my own faith will be reflected in some “spiritual” wording.)

PARENTING INFANTS

Introduction

Although I am more familiar with older children, it is hard to fathom anyone who doesn't experience pure joy when being close to an infant. I was stimulated to write my first column about infants on a Sunday afternoon following a service in which we had our second baptism in a month. Baptism is a ritual I particularly love, in that parents and godparents make pledges to their child in the presence of others who will be around to witness the follow through. This speaks to me not only of love for a child, but of a willingness to accept responsibility for the powerful influence exerted by parents, as well as by those who have agreed to be "godparents", an interesting designation in itself. Further, the congregation also pledges to love and support the child as he or she grows in our community, thus surrounding the new life with well-meaning commitments from three sources, to assure the best possible outcomes for an "abundant life" which was promised by Jesus to those who honor their commitments.

Writing about infants is also interesting because it's true that talking about infants is like talking about ourselves, and who doesn't like to think and talk about themselves! After all, we've all been infants.

Understanding infants has a few other benefits for us: 1. By understanding infants we are better able to parent and support parenting a baby being more thoughtful and more intentional in our actions and interactions; 2. We are better able to understand children who may no longer be infants, but who began to reveal themselves to us almost immediately, giving early clues as to who they would become. 3. We can acknowledge and appreciate our role in determining who and how children become. We know that, due to a variety of circumstances, we don't always parent each of our children the same: sometimes because they are so different, and sometimes because we are different at different

times in our lives; 4. Relatives and friends of infants can contribute to giving infants the best possible start in life by understanding the crucial features of the beginning of life; 5. We can understand ourselves better if we can match what we know of our own developmental history with who we know ourselves to be today; 6. We can use our understanding to develop empathy and compassion for children who didn't get the "start" they deserved.

PARENTING BEGINS AT CONCEPTION

Parents set the stage for the relationship between themselves and their baby from the moment of conception, as internal responses to the reality of pregnancy are experienced by the unborn child. Are the parents pleased, or upset, upon hearing the news of the pregnancy? Can it matter all that much? Will the "baby" know? I can't say for sure about the exact impact of early reactions, but I do know that the internal condition of a woman's "guts" are quite different when delighted than when anxious, frightened, angry or upset. The internal condition of a future mother's emotional system and its' impact on her womb is influenced both by her personal response to the discovery of pregnancy, and by the father's response as well. And, for good or ill, a woman's "guts" are the first home of all children.

One of the primary necessities of competent parenting is accepting responsibility for the well-being of each child. Parents provide both a physical and emotional home for their children both during pregnancy and throughout their childhood. For nine months mothers' womb is both babies physical and emotional home.

Responses to learning of pregnancy are important because very different hormones are secreted depending on whether the mother is experiencing pleasurable vs. stressful emotions. Is the fetus' home of nine months anxious, tense and grumbling, or calm, relaxed and full of laughter? Are the chemicals flowing into

the womb stress chemicals like cortisol, the stress hormone, or happy chemicals like endorphins? As it turns out, mom's chemistry matters to developing babies since both baby and mother share her chemistry.

Unfortunately, we've learned that trouble for children can begin very early. Fetal ultra sounds taken while developing babies are still in the womb reveal that unborn children exposed to stress, yelling and screaming, battering, chaos, etc. can be literally seen to exhibit trauma responses such as exaggerated startle responses and other signs of distress. On the other hand, unborn children exposed to soft sounds, laughter, music, and calm can be seen to be relaxed and at ease. I have such an image and showing it in class has always been followed by audible gasps.

External substances put into the fetal "home" also matter. Is mom ingesting good things into the feeding tube, or are drugs/ alcohol/ smoke and poor nutrition coming through? We **know** that this matters! Has the new mom been left alone, feeling abandoned and worried, or are there two loving people involved in preparing themselves for a wonderful and welcomed arrival? Truth is, when the mom is anxious, the baby becomes anxious; when mom is relaxed and happy, the baby is soothed and relaxed – from the get/go. Wanted children sit snugly inside a calm body while a parent or parents plan, imagine, form expectations and hopes for their lives together as a family.

FETAL BRAINS

Not only is technology allowing us to witness the powerful impact of caretaking on the literal development of a child's brain, but this same technology is giving us amazing new insights into developmental life before birth. While we would like to think that we have lots of time to get ready for a baby, the fact is that a fetus' life is rich and active before a woman even knows she is pregnant!

All human beings begin life as a fertilized egg, called a **zygote**, which is a single cell about one-fifth the size of the period at the end of a sentence. The human brain begins forming very early in prenatal life, just **three weeks after conception**. The same events that shape the brain during development are also responsible for storing information – new skills and memories – throughout life. In the womb, brain cells increase @ 250,000/minute. Experience during pregnancy **is** experience and will be stored in the brain in some way.

In just the **fifth week** after conception, the first synapses begin forming a fetus's spinal cord. By the **sixth week**, these early neural connections permit the first fetal movements. Many other movements soon follow – of the limbs (around **eight weeks**) and fingers (**ten weeks**) as well as some surprisingly coordinated actions (hiccupping, stretching, yawning, sucking, swallowing, grasping, and thumb-sucking). By the end of the **first trimester**, a fetus's movement repertoire is remarkably rich, even though the movement can't be felt.

When ready to be born, although only inches long, and weighing in less than some cats, a baby is, indeed, a full person: Totally human; Totally wonderful; Full of potential; and Totally vulnerable (defenseless, unprotected, susceptible). We will be talking a lot about "vulnerability" in this booklet. For now, let note that vulnerability begins from conception, with a baby having no choice over who her/his parents will be and no say in whether they will be wanted or unwanted. During pregnancy, babies have no say as to how well their mother will take care of her body - his or her "home" for almost a year! This condition continues after birth as babies lie in their crib and wait to see what happens.... totally unable to direct the course of parenting.

Competent parents accept their responsibility as parents even during pregnancy as they ponder the challenging opportunity to decide what their child will learn about themselves, the world, about relationships, and about life, starting first in the womb, and then in the crib: lessons which will influence all of a persons' life!

THE "FIRST FIVE"

Professionals in child care and child psychology are becoming newly invigorated about some old news, now supported by sophisticated technology which allows us to track the brain development of very young children. Thanks to MRI's, PET scans, CAT scans and constantly developing sophisticated equipment we can actually "see" how the very early days and years of a child's life have a profound impact on the entire life span.

Psychologists and Psychiatrists have long held that the most important years of development are the very early years. Now we have neurological **proof** that this is so. The Freud's (both Sigmund and Anna), Bowlby, Erikson, Piaget, Ainsworth, and all the other early champions of the importance of the very early years would be vindicated and very pleased with themselves that we have been able to verify that their theories are now truths.

If infants are subjected to faulty parenting they will spend the rest of their lives compromised in some ways, and in need of "repair" rather than just support. On the other hand, although competent parenting does not promise a life free of challenge, resilience can be built into a child's brain by competent parenting early on which will be helpful in navigating future hardships more successfully. Children are not always dealt a "good hand", but some will be better than others at "playing a poor hand well".

INFANT BRAINS

A reminder of why we think toddlers and young children are so cute: they all look like E.T! Young children have very big heads for their bodies – which is probably why people tend to draw aliens to look like toddlers, with big heads and little bodies, which endears them to us. By the time a child is three years old their brain will be 70% of its' adult size. By the time they are five, it will be 80% of its size. By the time they are seven, it will reach 90% of its' size, and after that they will gradually grow into their

heads (and unfortunately look a little less “cute”).

Important information from the Carnegie Foundation tells us that:

- 1) Brain development before age one is more rapid and extensive than previously realized;*
- 2) Brain development is much more vulnerable to environmental influence than was ever suspected;*
- 3) The influence of early environment on the brain is long lasting;*
- 4) The environment affects the number and pattern of connections between brain cells; and*
- 5) There is a stream of new scientific evidence for the negative impact of early maltreatment on brain development and the positive impact of competent parenting.*

The result of this massive brain activity is a pattern of understanding yourself and your relationship to other people which forms the underpinning for interpreting all future experiences.

“**Cognition**”, ways of thinking and forming ideas, which can’t be seen, will be expressed in a variety of ways. Everything that happens in the first five years of life sets the stage for a person’s adjustment to life and all future challenges.

The main difference between brain development in a child versus learning as an adult is a matter of degree: the brain is far more impressionable (neuroscientists use the term “**plastic**”) in early life than in maturity. This **plasticity** has both a positive and a negative side. On the positive side, it means that young children’s brains are more open to learning and enriching influences. On the negative side, it also means that young children’s brains are more vulnerable to developmental problems should their environment prove impoverished or un-nurturing.

Every experience becomes part of who a child is and will be, and so the degree of love and care from the very beginning, which is entirely in the hands of adults, becomes a daunting responsibility.

We can illustrate this malleability of young brains with a familiar example. Very young children growing up in bi-lingual find it very easy to learn both languages. Young children growing up in homes where two languages are spoken will easily learn to speak **both** languages without an “accent” for either language. The older a person is when learning a second language the more difficult it is to learn the second language, and there is almost always at least a hint of an accent for the second language. This is also true for children who have a deaf parent and a hearing parent. They will easily learn both sign language and spoken language and will fluidly navigate between the two.

Looking at brain images of very young children, and witnessing the startling display of neurons firing and connections being made in their brains, back us up to what seemed improbable when Freud and others were telling us about the profound impact of the earliest months and years of life. Dr. Bruce Perry and other current neuroscientists are reinforcing the sobering truth of the life-long effects of very early human experience. (Parents of the young want to become familiar with Perry and others, visiting their websites to keep track of the wonderful information that keeps informing us of the impact of parenting experiences in the actual formation of a child’s brain.)

“USE IT OR LOSE IT!”

Experience: is responsible for fine-tuning connections, helping each child adapt to the particular environment (geographical, cultural, family, school, peer-group) to which s/he belongs. As we mentioned, brain development is **“activity-dependent”** meaning that the electrical activity in every circuit (sensory, motor, emotional, cognitive) shapes the way the circuit gets put together. Like computer circuits, neural circuits process information through the flow of electricity. Unlike computer circuits, however, the circuits in our brains are not fixed structures. Every experience excites certain neural circuits and leaves others inactive. Those that are consistently “turned on”

over time will be strengthened, while those that are rarely excited may be dropped away. **Cells that fire together, wire together** (ex – someone's name). For example, we don't have any trouble remembering the names of people we either see regularly or have known for a long time, since the connections in our brain "wiring" between their face and their name has become "hard-wired" in our brain. We are also familiar with the experience of seeing someone we've met infrequently whose name we can't remember since our brain hasn't made a "trace" (hard-wired connection) from their face to their name yet.

However, "Mommy" and "Daddy", for many babies one of the first words spoken when recognizing the familiar faces of parents, are wired so thoroughly that these words come to us throughout our lifetime every time we see the face of a parent, no matter how they change.

Pruning, or selection of active neural circuits, takes place throughout life, but is far more common in early childhood, as noted at the top of the page.

There are certain windows of time during which the young are especially sensitive to their environment; these are known as "**critical periods**" in brain development. Young babies and children are most open to learning and **literal "wiring"** in the brain. Between infancy and early grade school years, the brain actually over-produces connections – some 50 percent more than will be preserved in adulthood. During the "critical period", a child's experience – sensory, motor, emotional, and intellectual – determines which of these synapses will be preserved, through pruning (eliminating) the least used connections.

Like plants that are not watered and nurtured, brain circuits that are not used will wither and die. It is the responsibility of parents to "buy up" the critical periods when young brains are craving activity by exposing children to language, music, nature, play, social activities, and all manner of stimulation to keep their brain structure active, alive and well functioning.

Babies not spoken to as infants will later find language more difficult than their peers and will fall behind. Since learning is often tied to instruction given verbally, and comprehension is also measured by language skills, such children will face difficult challenges in both pre-school and later schooling.

Babies who are not given toys to play with will literally not know what to do with a toy that is given later, and rather than manipulate it for fun will just look at it and leave it untouched. (The same thing is true for neglected pets, by the way.)

Although all of the neurons in the cortex are produced before birth, they are poorly connected. The cerebral cortex produces most of its synaptic connections ("wiring") after birth, in a massive burst of synapse formation known as the "**exuberant period**". These are the "critical periods" just discussed.

At its peak, the cerebral cortex in baby's brains creates an astonishing two million new synapses every second. So while babies are vocabulary challenged, they are not at all challenged when it comes to learning! As mentioned on page 9, for babies, the **most important learning comes from experiences**, not from language. The experiences in the crib form a knowledge base that provides the foundation for all future learning, and words, when they are learned, will only confirm or contradict what they learned from experience.

Anything that happens after the "exuberant period" has less chance of getting permanently "wired" into the brain.

THE CRIB AND THE "CORE OF THE SELF"

The first nine months of life is spent in the first "nursery" - mom's womb. As we see when reviewing the complexity of infant brains, when moved from the womb to the crib the pace of development continues at a speed both awe inspiring and a little frightening. Gone are the days when people thought of babies as

people waiting to happen. Babies are small people, but active, complex, intellectually busy people as demonstrated by the ability to see the infant brain in action with sophisticated and ever developing technology.

My favorite child development theorist, Erik Erikson, told us decades ago that the first year of life determines what he called "**the core of the self**". This "core" consists of cognitive understandings, based on experience, that tell the new person the most critical pieces of information for understanding how the world functions, and learning how to function in the world.

I think people were hoping that Erikson was being overly dramatic, but today, using PET imaging technology, neuroscientists have found dramatic changes in the level of energy use by children's brains over the first several years of life – from very low at birth, to a rapid rise and over-shoot between infancy and the early elementary school years. More and more professionals working with children are being impressed by – and challenged by – what we know about how quickly "lessons for life" occur.

Since infants have no understanding of words, their "lessons" are learned by interpreting their interactions and experiences. Babies love to be "talked to", but not because they understand what we are saying. They like it for the same reason your pets do. The content is irrelevant: the "message" – I'm looking at you, I'm smiling at you, I'm engaging with you with a very pleasant tone – is all that matters. The other reason that babies love to be talked to is that we make eye contact with them when we talk to them which allows them to feel connected. Research has proven that infants everywhere in the world prefer human stimuli – a human face, voice, touch, and even smell – over everything else. They innately orient to people's faces and would rather listen to speech or singing than any other kind of sound. So babble away – it's a person's first "lesson" about themselves: that they are worth looking at, smiling at, and engaging with. Children who do not experience direct eye contact and verbal sound as very young

infants are forever different, even if people come into their life later who try to teach them that they are, indeed, interesting, worthwhile, and worth time and attention.

In spite of the recent hype about “making your baby smarter”, scientists have not discovered any special tricks for enhancing the natural wiring phase in children’s brain development. However, the one form of stimulation that has been proven to make a difference is language. Because language is fundamental to most of the rest of cognitive development, the simple action of talking and listening to a child is one of the best ways to make the most of his or her critical brain-building years.

BONDING AND ATTACHMENT

Although it is unsettling for some people to accept the reality of the relationship between parents and babies it not as much about love as is commonly thought. Love is a very sophisticated concept/idea, and is also a complex emotion, and not anything a newborn or even young child can comprehend. (Toddlers may tell their parents that they love them, but it is not because they understand what the word means but because they get a very favorable response from the parent when it is said.)

What babies need above all else is to be kept alive. They need people more able than they are to perform the necessary life tasks – feeding, cleaning, warming, etc. Adults – usually parents – must commit themselves to providing these life sustaining functions and accept the responsibility for doing what the infant is not capable of doing. Such commitment is often associated with love, but does not require love. For the baby, love is “gravy”.

The routine tasks of “baby maintenance” are best done by someone who has made a commitment to do so with a particular infant. This commitment is tied to the initial relationship between a parent and his/her “creation” which is called **bonding**. Bonding is made easier by love.

Bonding is a one-sided relationship between parent and child that begins – or doesn't begin in some cases – while the child is alive in the womb but not able to give anything back to the parent. In the best case for both parent and child, bonding is experienced as the process of "falling in love" with the not yet born person who will be yours for the rest of your life. When parents experience those strong feelings of love for their newborn after birth it is because they have actually been in a relationship with them for nine months. Although you won't like me when I say it again, it is a one-sided relationship: Babies do not love their parents, which makes it even more important that parents love their babies. Babies do not love because they cannot love, any more than they can play the piano. As a result of competent parenting, love will come later. In the beginning, parents will give a lot more than they get.

"Claiming" is an attachment theory term for a process connected to bonding whereby parents "take ownership of" the person they have created. Claiming, like bonding, also begins during pregnancy when parents are filled with longing for the new life and begin to welcome them into their lives. They choose a name with personal meaning or significance. They pat mom's tummy and listen for signs and sounds, and start talking to the developing fetus, starting to nurture and incorporate the little one into their lives.

Part of bonding and claiming for many species is a phenomenon called "nesting". Different creatures create different kinds of "nests": in humans, the nest is often referred to as "the nursery", or whatever portion of the living quarters will be occupied by the new baby. Although visitors may not share the new parents' exuberance about the design and contents of the nursery, this nesting process is important as a claiming ritual.

Parents lie when they say they are getting the nursery ready for the baby. The truth is, the baby will be completely disinterested in the contents and appearance of the nursery. A baby can be

just as happy in a dresser drawer lined with soft comfortable towels as in an FAO Swartz crib. Preparing the space for the baby is a way new parents prepare for the welcoming of and commitment to the life they have created. It's nice when parents have the money to put together a nicely decorated space, but it isn't necessary. The "mental and financial preparation" and making a commitment to have space, clothes, blankets, cozy toys, is the necessary nest. It can come from the Salvation Army and the baby will find it perfectly acceptable.

Claiming continues after the baby is born as the parents make him/her their own by nuzzling and learning their smell, by fingering their fingers and toes, memorizing the sound of their cries, gazing into their eyes. Babies who are "claimed" from the beginning have very different lives than children who may not be claimed initially but are lucky enough to be "claimed" later in life. Some children are never claimed and have very unhappy lives.

The newborn will instinctively look for and notice signs of bonding almost immediately, since they know that their survival depends on such a relationship. When held horizontally, a newborn reflexively turns their head toward the person holding them. When a tender gaze is experienced the new life is quickly comforted and years (decades) later will enjoy songs about gazing into someone else's eyes. This is the beginning of intimacy and the realization that you have been "claimed".

ATTACHMENT

Most parents have heard or read about the importance of allowing their babies to "**attach**" to them. This is true not only for humans but for all vulnerable species. Attachment is a much more primitive relationship than love and is necessary for survival. Parents do not attach to their babies because babies cannot keep parents alive. **Parents bond with their babies; babies attach to their parent(s).**

Being bonded will enhance our willingness to have them attach (cling, suck, grab, need, etc.).

What is often referred to as the “**attachment cycle**” is also part of the stress and stress relief cycle. In simple terms it looks like this:

- Baby experiences the stress of unmet needs
- Baby realizes that they are completely unable to meet these needs (experiences helplessness) on their own and become distressed
- Baby signals their distress and call out for help (fussing, crying, screaming)
- Baby waits to see how “the world” outside of the crib responds (there is no other option for an infant)
- Baby experiences either positive results from their cries for help when an adult shows up to 1. Determine what is causing the stress; and 2. Provides relief (changing, feeding, warming, holding etc.), or, Baby experiences negative results when no adult attends to them.
- Baby decides either to continue calling for help in a desperate attempt to get relief or gives up asking for help and settles into being stressed and uncomfortable.

Erikson says that the “core of the self” is most influenced by what the infant learns to expect while s/he is “waiting”, based on her/his experience during the cycle.

This cycle continues until a child can crawl or walk and reach things on their own to meet their needs without the assistance of others. The consistency of either the “positive” or “negative” outcome pattern will determine what kind of “core”, or “**internal working model**” will develop.

How the infant mind makes sense of their place in the world and their relationship to others is formed and hard-wired during this time of helplessness and total dependency on others.

Although it is possible to provide interventions later to form a more positive view of whether others can be trusted, and whether one is “worth” taking care of, a child will never be the same as they would if their early life gave them experiences that said:

- Life is not always easy and sometimes you will be uncomfortable
- When you are distressed call out and someone will come to help you
- You are too precious to leave in misery
- You can learn to relax and wait a while even when stressed and unhappy, because others value you and can be trusted to come to your aid
- It’s okay to depend on others because they can be trusted to take care of you
- When someone comes to help you, let them know you appreciate it (stop crying, snuggle, go back to sleep) and they will be more willing to come and help you again

WHAT INFANTS LEARN

The earliest “lessons” in life are threefold: about others; about oneself; about the process of living outside the womb.

Since there is no one way to experience life, different babies will learn different lessons.

As we’ve seen, the earliest and most powerful lessons are learned based on the complete **vulnerability** of infants and their total dependency on the behavior of others in their world. It is not possible to understand infants without understanding the condition of vulnerability (being defenseless) since it is the primary condition of newborns. People whose early experiences of vulnerability did not work out well may spend the rest of their lives trying to avoid such vulnerable feelings ever again.

All parents of infants have witnessed the dramatic display when an infant realizes their plight (vulnerability). Waking alone, small, wet, hungry, with **NO** personal resources is enraging, and we've witnessed all the signs of rage: hyperventilating, screaming, turning blue, hands and feet balled up - getting so tense they almost levitate off the crib! I want my womb! Get in here *now!*

This is rage can later be seen when untended children become enraged adults, whose long standing feelings of rage remain connected to feeling vulnerable and powerless. It's quite frightening to witness this display of rage - which look exactly like an infant - when someone is no longer 18" long. Ask any battered woman or a driver who innocently pushed another driver into "road rage" and is "stalked" while driving.

TRUST

We acknowledge that the thoughts of babies in the crib are not "simplistic", as was once thought, but are in fact quite complex and long lasting. When discussing the vulnerability of infants based on their complete dependence on others to meet their needs we considered how one of the first "ideas" babies incorporated into their brains was whether they should "trust" others to respond to their cries and come to their aid. Trust, of course, is not a simple, but a rather deep/complex form of thought. Erik Erikson said that the basic "task" of infants was to solve the dilemma of "**trust vs. mistrust**". This, he said, gets decided in the first year of life.

Inability to tolerate vulnerability and the subsequent inability to trust others will result in a lonely life without love, since it is not possible to love without feeling vulnerable.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Another “lesson for life” learned from the call-and-response experience is the notion of **“cause and effect” connections**, and understanding who is responsible for outcomes, or consequences. This “lesson” will be essential in developing a conscience and sense of responsibility.

When responses to distress calls are consistent, children learn to acknowledge their role in consequences, and see themselves as directly connected to what happens to them. The reason you came is because I called. In other words, I have something to do about what happens to me. If a baby cries, screams, turns blue, and still is unsuccessful in getting their needs met they learn that what happens to them does not, in fact, have anything to do with what they did! When lack of a predictable response continues, a child can have trouble understanding why things happen as they do, and will always see others, and not themselves, as the cause for consequences. This will cause both children – and later adults – to flounder socially and have serious problems in social adjustment.

Learning about cause and effect inform our decisions about behavior and the consequences of behavior for our entire life. It begins in the crib.

When we encounter children and adults who do not hold themselves responsible for the consequences of their behavior it is important to remember that, if this was their experience during their early years of being dependent on others, this is a reflection of their **actual experience**. It was **true** that adults responded when they felt like it, not when they were called by the baby! This explains why it is so hard to change this irresponsible thinking in older children and adults.

SELF-CONCEPT-SELF-WORTH-SELF-CONFIDENCE

Interestingly, the “self” is a kind of trinity, with three distinct parts: self-concept; self-esteem/worth; and self-awareness. I will be going into much more detail on each of these in the booklet on *Parenting Young Children* (which will be written about the time your infant has become a young child, but hopefully before they become a teenager). For now we’ll explore how the development of these three aspects of the “self” occurs in infants.

People like me who have spent a career working with abused and neglected children and teens get involved with children when something has gone awry in the development of the self, most often due to carelessness or harmfulness at the hands of adults who are supposed to care for them. Even when working with very young children it is disheartening to realize that we are often “too late” to reverse some of the damage that has been done. It doesn’t take long to get “off track” in terms of the development of a healthy self. Getting back on track is often surprisingly tedious.

While it is frequently dismaying to look back at things we wish we either had done, hadn’t done, or had done differently, we are always faced with the reason for the dismay: what’s done, is done. We can’t go back and do things again. However, with regard to the “self”, there is less reason for despair. The self is always in process, and can always be repaired. Not necessarily rebuilt, but definitely repaired. We can indeed change who we are – at any age. Not easily, and almost never without help. But as we look at how an individual’s thoughts and feelings about themselves develop, we can also reflect on ourselves and gain a better understanding of how we came to be who we are.

SELF-CONCEPT

Self-concept is learned, largely from believing or interpreting what others say about us; how others treat us; and how we think others feel about us based on their behavior toward us.

One's self-concept affects perceptions and attitudes, colors interactions with the environment and with other people, and affects behavior, as we tend to act (behave) as we think we are. This is true even for very young babies as it is frequently observed that babies who grow accustomed to being ignored often stop crying or making noise altogether and will continue this pattern after being placed with caring, responsive adults. I've seen babies at 6-7 months old who have decided that they are not worth looking at, because they will not look at anyone. They have decided that they are not worth feeding, as they never cry when they are hungry. They believe they are not worth keeping clean as they never ask to have a diaper changed or cry when they spit up. They seem to have decided that they deserve to be lonely as they will not cry when they wake up to let us know they're available for company.

Our ideas about ourselves begin to form the minute we are born! How we think about who we are is a result of our relationships with other people and how they treat us. Babies form their ideas based on the **behavior** of other people toward them, including **how** others talk to them, since language to a baby is only sound, not words. Babies are aware not of the words we use, but of the look on our face when we are talking to them, and by the tone of our voice and whether it is soothing, or harsh, or scary. As children grow and develop spoken language, the combination of what is said, and how it is said, work together to give them their ideas about themselves. But for babies, it is not the content, but the manner of speaking to them that lets them know how they "should" be treated. Being treated kindly, or unkindly, give us our very first clues to the mystery of who we are, as well as what we can expect from others. Again, this is not based on what **is** true, but on what a baby decides is true. All babies are fabulous, but different babies get very different ideas about how fabulous they are.

Self-Image: Like pets, babies do not know how they look. Watch even the ugliest pet wag his tail when you smile and tell him what a good boy he is. Take him for a walk and he will

approach other dogs assuming they want to meet him: he knows he is wonderful because you told him he is wonderful by the way you treat him. The same is true for children. Tell even the homeliest little girl that she is your little Princess and watch her look in the mirror and **see** a beautiful Princess. We are our babies first "mirror" so we want to be sure to reflect how we want them to see themselves. From their earliest interactions they will respond in ways that let us know they think they are adorable. The lesson that "beauty is from the inside" starts being taught Day 1.

SELF-WORTH

When an infant cries, someone comes and tries to figure out what's wrong, and then fixes it, the child begins to learn that s/he is worth something and must be quite special. Here s/he, is only 18 inches long, and this huge person responds. Aren't I something, they decide!! I call, and they come. It's okay not be able to do for myself because I have capable others who value me and will meet my needs. Like a cat cries or a dog wags his tail when you come home because they know you love them and will take care of them, your baby shivers with delight and giggles when they see you on approach because they know the same thing. "I'm fabulous and you know it too"!

The degree to which babies get relief from their distress because others come and feed them, change them, pick them up, etc., and whether people do it happily and with smiles, or angrily and with indifference or unpleasantness, give them their "ideas" about both their worth to other people; whether they are a delight or a bother. These earliest ideas contribute to the internal "template" about who they are and what they're worth. Later, words become crucial to what we decide about who we are, but from the beginning, our ideas are linked directly to the behavior of other people toward us.

Remember a "concept" is an idea. Self-concept is your ideas about you. Since self-esteem and self-worth stem from one's ideas, and babies will learn to think of themselves in ways reflected by how others think of them, how "valuable" they are becomes another idea they begin to hold.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

How many of you parents remember the day you responded to your screaming baby and had the experience of having them stop crying the minute they saw you in the doorway and then start laughing? So what was that all about? Well, two things actually. First, as just discussed, you had taught them that you would be delighted to see them so they just smiled in advanced. At the same time, they were delighted with themselves. That's right! They were "jacking you around", testing their ability to cause things to happen. And it worked. Again. They realized that you came because they called! Ha. You don't have to be big, you don't have to have money, you are so fabulous that all you have to do is call out and "they" (whoever "they" happen to be) come running to your aid. Again, as with the other crucial principles of healthy living - Self-confidence and self-esteem both begin in the crib.

When the call-response pattern is repeated consistently, not only are babies figuring out "cause and effect", they are also learning to feel **confident** in themselves and their ability to influence the behavior of others. They become willing to send out signals because they have learned to develop hope (trust) that these signals will be effective in getting a response and thus getting their needs met. This pattern of signaling distress and counting on others to respond with help, when hard wired, will continue until death. Witness the distressing calls of the elderly in nursing homes as they cry out "Nurse", "Nurse" - I need help; or the cry of the soldier fallen in battle calling into the darkness for a comrade in arms. When gravely wounded some can even be heard calling for their mothers: hard wiring.

The self-confidence that forms from having predictable responses and relief from distress assures a child that “telling” someone when something is wrong will be helpful. This is a crucial underpinning of their well-being as they grow and gain language. We want them to have learned to tell us when they hurt, when someone else is hurting them, when they are facing a problem they can’t solve by themselves. Babies who learn not to expect a response stop crying, and later stop sharing. And if you think crying babies are hard to be around, they don’t bother us nearly as much as being around a baby who has learned not to cry. So when your child cries, thank them. They are doing what all of us need to do when we are hurting: tell someone that you know cares about you!

It can be hard sometimes when parents are frazzled and sleep deprived, but it is important to hear the cries of your baby as a very wonderful sign that they have learned to depend on you for comfort and survival; they have learned to believe that they are worth being taken care of; and they have confidence in their ability to bring about a positive outcome with their own behavior.

IT’S OKAY TO FEEL

One doesn’t have to be alive very long (seconds) before the awareness of emotions sets in. Emotional feelings begin soon after conception and continue until death. A central feature of emotional wellness is the ability and willingness to experience what is called **sentience** – the capacity for sensation or feeling.

When an infants’ experience is that their unpleasant feelings are often followed by more pleasant feelings because of help from others, they grow into a well-balanced individual capable of experiencing the wide variety of emotions available to humans.

There are simple categories of feelings with a wide variety of intensities within each category – and babies are able to experience the entire gamut. For example, under the category of

MAD we can have: irritated, annoyed, angry, furious, upset; under the category of **SAD** we have unhappy, disappointed, despondent, blue, hurt, lonely, grieving, “down”; under the category of **GLAD** we have pleased, happy, joyful, blissful, delighted, effervescent, comfortable, excited, “up”; under the category of **SCARED** we have anxious, worried, fearful, terrified, concerned, nervous, uncertain. And of course there are what are sometimes referred to as “combination” feelings: guilty, jealous, frustrated, embarrassed, uncomfortable, confused, perplexed, torn, etc.

What we know from studying babies who are in situations where they do not experience relief from their distressing feelings that many of them either move into a constant state of anger and upset, or, learn to “shut down” their feelings altogether. Shutting down works well in terms of not having to experience unrelenting negative emotions, but it also means the loss of feeling joy and contentment, which is a very high price to pay.

MRI brain scans can reveal that neurons in the emotional parts of the brain are sometimes “pruned” (as we discussed earlier) and no longer register appropriate emotions. This pruning will mean that later these children will not be able to feel “empathy” for other people’s feelings since they no longer feel their own feelings.

ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

There are many wonderful features of infants and one of my personal favorites is that babies have **very low standards**.

Infants don’t care what we look like; they don’t care how we dress; they don’t care if we use deodorant or comb our hair. The only thing that interests babies is: “If I call, will you come?” You don’t have to be fabulous for a baby to think you’re fabulous!

This is wonderful news for even modestly competent parents because even as adults children will love parents who took only moderately good care of them. In psychology the term is often called "a good enough parent", and in truth good enough is good enough. Babies do not set the bar very high so if a parent is willing to bond, willing to claim, and willing to respond and meet a baby's basic needs - that's good enough!

In the beginning, babies are not particular about who takes care of them. While it can be hard on new parents to learn that the baby is not particularly choosy about **who** responds - just that someone comes, the good news is that any person who loves a baby can participate in these early lessons which will last a lifetime. Parents, grandparents, friends, foster parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, hired caretakers - all can provide exactly what babies need in terms of protection, nurturing, and lessons in how life with other people "works". Of course the opposite is also true: when babies are left to cry with no response they learn not to count on any other people to help them and will begin to distance themselves emotionally from needing other people. In other words, when babies are not well parented they will not ask for what they need from anyone, even if other people are willing to help them.

We want infants to know that comfort can be found in the arms of other people. Initially these will be the arms of your parents and close relatives. But even when you're grown, the world can seem lonely sometimes. We want them to have learned that they are not alone and it's okay to need other people. I'm guessing that many of you reading this have had the experience of hugging someone in need that you didn't know or barely knew. Or perhaps you've been hugged by someone who didn't know or barely knew you. Thank your parent(s) for the lesson learned.

Expanding the circle of comfort safely. As infants grow they will become more discriminating about who they want to tend to them. They will begin to find comfort in familiar faces, people they have learned to depend on. All people, including infants,

want to “belong”, or feel part of a group of safe “others”. For this reason, parents will provide the most safety and comfort for their infant by surrounding him or her with consistent caregivers, whose face and presence will reinforce the vulnerable infants’ sense of safety and well-being.

We have found that when infants are cared for by random and unpredictable people they become “indiscriminate” in their affections and give themselves over to whoever is offering to meet a need. While it may give the appearance of being comfortable and friendly, it is actually a dangerous trait. Not everyone is safe, and it is the parents’ job to provide lessons in personal safety from the very beginning. I am not in favor of forcing an infant to go to a person they are having a strong negative reaction to and with whom they are not familiar. (If an infant fusses about going to someone they know only because they want to hang onto the parent that’s different.) It’s okay for even very young children to let us know who they are comfortable with.

As long as we’re talking about this, I’m also very much against making young children hug or kiss people they don’t know or don’t want to. Like all of us, they should hug or kiss who they want to, not who we want them to. Getting used to giving affection “on demand” can set the stage for later abuse by people who take advantage of young children who have learned that they “have to” give affection to people “on demand”.

Another important lesson about relationships seems to be almost instinctive when babies become accustomed to having their needs met predictably. Without a textbook, babies seem to know about the importance of **reciprocity**. Relationships are two sided: I do something (cry, fuss, reach).....and then you do something (sooth, comfort, fix problem). And hey, if you do something, I’ll pay you back! So if I wake you in the night because I’m hungry, or cold, or wet, and you come and meet my need by feeding me, or covering me, or changing me, then I’ll do something for you, like stop crying, or go back to sleep. If I’m good about showing

my appreciation, by relaxing, smiling and cuddling into your arms, then you'll be more likely to show up again next time. This early learning about relationships and reciprocity will carry over into the entire life span of the person. In a competent parent-infant relationship, lack of reciprocity usually means something is wrong with the baby.

When relationship lessons are well learned parents can get ready to have their hearts hurt when their child becomes an adolescent. Lessons learned in infancy as well as in childhood will make the transition from adult/child to peer/peer relationships comfortable.

Having learned that comfort is provided by other people teenagers will stop bringing their "hurts" to their parents and will instead bring them to their peers. This often hurts parents' feelings but it is the only way to stay safe in the world. Babies don't know it, but teens know that their parents will not always be around for them. Hopefully they have learned, ever their days in the crib, that distress in life does not have to be borne alone. Tell others and they will come and help you through. This pattern will also set an important "internal working model" for coupling and enduring the vulnerability of love with trust and self-confidence.

Brain research now proves that the process of experiencing relief from personal distress in the arms of others in response to feelings of distress is hard-wired into one's brain. An example discussed earlier, that grown men wounded in battle will often call out for their mother's as they lay in agony demonstrates the long lasting impact of these earlier beliefs. For a less dramatic example, think of how when one stubs their toe or does something else to hurt themselves they will cry out "Oh Mama! that hurts".

Think for a minute of how, when you experience a very distressing situation away from home, you either want to call your beloved right away to tell them, or how you can't wait to get

home to tell them and have them hold you and comfort you. You can thank your “mother” (whoever parented you) for that!

Without the “template” of trust, and willingness to share your pain, you live life believing that you are on your own, having to solve all your problems yourself, believing there is no balm for your wounds, and taking a cynical approach to relationships where you “use” people in a selfish way but do not form emotional bonds with others. And this template, or “internal working model”, forms in the crib! Learning not to count on others can begin at two months and still be seen at age fifty-two. Learning that you can count on others can also begin at two months and still exist at 72.

HOW THE WORLD WORKS

Because babies are capable of making decisions, we know that babies can think. Because of the building up of experiences we also know that these decisions are not only made for a particular situation, but become part of a “template” for how things work. When adults “think”, they often talk to themselves, thus making a connection between thinking and language. However, cognition – thought – does not require the ability to speak or to understand language as illustrated by species capable of decision making and habit forming without “language” as we know it.

Decision making (a cognitive process) is based on **experience**.

Babies make decisions the way pets do – based on their experience. Can other people be trusted? Is it okay to experience distressing feelings because I know that relief can be found? Why do things happen? Do things happen because of me or regardless of me? Should I keep crying because people seem to care and someone will come, or should I not bother crying because no one seems to care and no one is taking care of me? When the cat comes into the kitchen and cries for something to eat it’s not because he is talking to himself and reviewing his

dinner options. He cries because in the past crying has gotten him something to eat.

Adults who are not functioning as parents from the beginning of a child's life - Step parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, parents who were not "ready" to be parents when their children were born - all know that "something" happens really early in a person's life that is not possible to "undo" later. We outlined the step by step "attachment process" earlier. Knowledge of the process and of its' importance allows us to be intentional in our interactions with our children, grandchildren, small friends and relatives in giving them the best possible start in life. We can also use this understanding to develop empathy and compassion for children who didn't get the "start" they deserved and thus don't behave the way others think they "should".

LIFE CAN BE LUBRICATED WITH HUMOR

No baby has to be taught how to laugh. Like getting a device with batteries included, a sense of humor comes with the package in an infant! When parents nuzzle their baby and blow on their tummies, tickle their baby, hold the baby up in the air and laugh or make funny sounds, make the spider crawl with their fingers, or any other gesture that evokes laughter they are bringing out a trait that the Creator has instilled into all living humans: the tendency to make life easier to bear by using humor.

Humor is a universal, trans-cultural phenomenon which is manifest before cognitive thought process. Laughter is a uniquely human characteristic and all humans are endowed with the ability and tendency to laugh. And we all laugh in the same "language".

Smiling has been clinically shown to lower blood pressure, boost immunity, and release natural painkillers just as laughter does. Both smiling and laughing lower stress, boost happiness, and improve physical and emotional health.

Teaching our children to incorporate laughter into their lives is a gift that will keep on giving. It is a gift not only for a child but for everyone around them. Very young infants demonstrate a yearning for smiling and laughing and will always join in if their systems are healthy. Infants who don't laugh are telling us that something is not right with them: Inability or unwillingness to smile and laugh is a symptom of either physical or emotional distress. Not laughing goes against our nature, and the ability to laugh is a gift that can be taken away. Mistreated children stop laughing.

Even though parenting infants can be exhausting, don't let your weariness interfere with your good nature. Laughter is a gift we give ourselves so that we can share it with our children for our mutual benefit.

Final Exam! And you thought going to college was hard! There is no "crash course" in the world to equal that of infancy. By age one an infant has learned: whether or not to trust other; cause (behavior) and effect (consequences); self-concept; self-worth; self-confidence; whether to have and how to manage feelings; about relationships with other people; how the world works; and about how to use humor to lubricate the rough spots in living.

TEACHING CHILDREN TO COPE WITH STRESS: THE LESSONS START DAY ONE – and BEFORE!

Stress is the first experience humans have upon leaving the womb – leaving the darkness, closeness and security of the womb and splashing out into a bright, cold, immense world over which they have no control. Infants leave the dark womb and emerge not only into the light, but into bright hospital lights which hurt the eyes, with no sun glasses provided. Infants come out of the nice, cozy, temperature controlled (98.6) warm environment into a cold room, with no blanket. Infants emerge from the nice, floating, rocking water sack and onto a hard table! And then, the nerve! they cut the feeding tube, and the baby who

ate on demand for nine months is completely cut off from meals. This is their introduction to "Stress 101".

Hopefully adults provide immediate stress-relief by quickly wrapping the newborn tightly and warmly and putting them immediately into a set of cuddling arms. But the second lesson in Stress 101 comes quickly: the realization that stress relief is not permanent. Without the protective environment of the womb baby soon gets hungry, baby gets cold, baby gets wet, and baby gets lonely. This is followed by the most challenging stressor of all which we have been discussing at length, because it is the primary characteristic of "babyhood": baby realizes that they are at the complete mercy of others – slapped in the face with **complete vulnerability and inability to help themselves.**

Of course when we refer to the **initial** stress of birth, we are referring to those fortunate children who did not grow in the wombs of worried women, battered women, addicted women, destitute women, or other mothers who introduce their babies to stress even before they are born. From the very beginning of life outside the womb, experiences of pregnancy either continue or end, depending on your life as a fetus. When babies have known nothing but stress they assume "that's life" and expect nothing else. In other words, for some babies, the experience of birth only adds insult to present injury. But when babies are fortunate enough to experience a pleasant introduction to life in the womb they are startled to experience such a different world when they emerge into it!

STRESS AND HEALTH

When bodies (human or animal) experience a "stress response" it is both a physical and psychological/emotional experience. The stress response involves a quite dramatic change in our physiology, designed by the Creator to enable us to function in ways that ensure our survival when our well-being is threatened.

In primitive times, this biological response to short-term stress was key to our species survival, as it is for all species. If a saber-toothed tiger bounded out of the bush, our ancestors' experienced the chemical changes in the body known as "fight-or-flight" response. Adrenaline and cortisol flooded the bloodstream, speeding up heart rate, raising blood sugar levels to provide instant energy, and pumping blood to the large muscles of the arms and legs to increase strength, all-the better to hurl a spear – or run for the hills! An interesting note: this increased strength explains why battering men and physically abusive parents cause so much physical damage to their victims. When we no longer need the "fight or flight" response to survive, because the threat is over, body chemistry returns to normal.

Threats to well-being are not meant to be frequent and if they are, body chemistry remains permanently altered. In our world "threats" are more likely to be presented by harmful adults than by saber-toothed tigers but the physical response is the same. Adopting a previously traumatized child, or previously traumatized pet, reveals the long term consequences of compromised physical systems. Traumatized infants, children, and adults have permanently altered body chemistry including chronically higher heart rate and higher levels of stress hormones.

Today, the stress response remains helpful for short-term crises by keeping us on our toes when we need to react quickly when a child reaches for a hot teakettle or runs into the street. Our bodies cannot afford to remain awash in "fight or flight" hormones, so if your infant is exposed to a crisis situation, parents want to take care to provide a calm environment so the baby's chemistry can return to normal.

We need a chance to refresh, recuperate and restore our natural balance. It's like a dome light inside a car. If it's late at night and you need to read a map, the car light is helpful. But if you leave the light on all night the battery dies. In the same way, unrelenting stress wears down our bodies and perpetual stress

can adversely affect everything from how long a wound takes to heal to how quickly your hair turns gray. Without a plan and coping tools to minimize the impact of stress, our overall physical and mental health will suffer. This is equally true for children and adults.

Babies will develop physical and mental systems to cope with whatever circumstances they encounter, beginning in the womb. As we discussed earlier, there is clear evidence that babies can actually be born with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder! Babies can also be born with less dramatic symptoms, but with abnormal levels of stress hormones in their systems. If a pregnant mother was exposed to unusual stress during pregnancy, and did not employ effective coping strategies to keep her system from being overwhelmed by stress, she will pass along an out-of-balance system to her unborn baby.

We talked earlier about how “parenting” begins at conception and people who decide to create a child owe that child a peaceful environment in which to develop. Moms and dads want to begin to nurture their relationship during pregnancy so that “things” are good between them. When parenting partners take care of each other, they are also taking care of their baby – even before the baby is born! Building in the mind-set that taking care of your own stress will be one of the primary ways you can teach children to deal successfully with their own stress will get parents off to a very good start with this very important task.

Some degree of stress is unavoidable. Whether during pregnancy or in the crib, when babies experience periodic stress, followed by relief from the stress, they are learning to tolerate short periods of stress in good faith that relief is on the way. When stress is prolonged with no relief provided the ability to tolerate even mild or temporary stress can be compromised.

Most child development specialists believe that the very first year of life is the most important in terms of determining how well a child learns to tolerate life’s inevitable stresses in a healthy way.

Part of this mental and physical health is tied to the development of trust in others, believing that others can be counted on to provide relief. Loving parents will also provide an environment in which a child, even a baby, can begin to learn to cope with stress in a healthy way, not only by calling out to others when in distress, and not only by trusting others to provide relief, but by having such consistent responses that they can begin to “predict” the behavior of caretakers and thus learn to calm themselves when waiting for the relief to arrive.

“Self-regulation”, based on confidence in one’s value and in one’s ability to cause others to respond in positive ways, actually develops a child’s neuro-physiological control system. This system allows the child to bring themselves back to a calm state. It is through this parent-child relationship that we as humans learn how to self-regulate in order to stay balanced, and easily shift from a state of stress back to a state of calm. This regulatory mechanism within us is not “online” at birth, but takes up to thirty months before this part of the brain is fully developed. Within this thirty-month timeframe, a well-attuned parent has connected with the child to calm his/her stress response thousands, if not millions, of times. This internal regulatory system then sets the foundation for the child’s neurological, physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social development.

By now it is clear that it is actually a little unnerving to grasp how crucial the first few years of life are for so many life skills – intimacy and trust with others, self-confidence in one’s ability to participate in help seeking, ideas about one’s worth to others based on whether and how they respond, along with the ability to tolerate stress and regulate one’s internal stress response system during temporary stress.

Thus, babies can learn to quiet their natural “fight or flight” reactions by calming themselves based on an optimistic hope of aid and relief from stress symptoms, based on previous experience. Although only months old, a young baby begins to

learn to tolerate “delayed gratification” and develops the ability to “wait” quietly, a skill that will be crucial later in getting along with others in a group (siblings, day care, and later school) where waiting is often required.

STRIKING A BALANCE

Over the years I have had many questions from new parents or foster parents about the struggle to find a healthy balance between “spoiling” a baby and being or feeling like a non-responsive (i.e. “bad”) parent. Since this is my writing, I’ll give you my opinion.

I don’t think it is necessary, or even a good idea, to pick up a baby every time a baby cries. In fact, based on the above discussion I hope it is obvious that such a practice will interfere with the task of learning “self-regulation”. I do worry, however, about some of the advice that is given about leaving babies alone to scream in their cribs so they can learn to self-soothe. Here is my compromise.

Remembering that the way babies are responded to in their earliest years forms a template, or “**internal working model**” about how things are, I think we need to be careful to strike a balance for them between feeling cared for and being able to care for themselves. We don’t want babies to think that their cries of distress are uninteresting to us and that we don’t care if they’re miserable. We also don’t want them to think that stress should never be experienced and that immediate relief is always available. So, I’m in favor of always checking to see if everything is okay. Let the baby see you come, check their diaper, see if they’re cold, see if they’re hungry, see if they’re caught on something, etc. If something’s wrong, fix it. If not, it’s okay to let them fuss a while. They know you’re close by; they know you care. So yes, I think it’s okay to let an infant wait a few minutes for relief. They will learn that sometimes we have to help ourselves, as well as counting on others to help us. The ability to

count on others, as well as the ability to help ourselves, are skills that serve us well throughout life. Skills in self-soothing and patience, as well as the ability and confidence to ask for help, will not only last a lifetime but in a variety of situations, and thus make future interpersonal relationships much healthier.

USING HUMOR TO ALLIEVIATE STRESS

Being a “good” mother, Mother Nature has designed human with many gifts that are inborn and built into our systems to both promote survival and enhance the quality of life. We just considered how the inborn “stress response”, when used sparingly, allows us to respond to crisis situations in ways that preserve our well-being until a threat has passed. We also noted that the stress response involves the release of “stress hormones” like cortisol, which are closely related to steroids. While useful on a temporary basis these have the potential to cause harm when released too frequently leading to disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Mother Nature has also provided in-built remedies for stress management, such as the ability to “self-regulate” which we’ve just talked about. Another “built in” remedy for stress is the ability to laugh – an affordable, easy to obtain stress reliever for families at all income levels.

Research has shown that smiling reduces cortisol levels by 17 percent. Laughter releases chemicals into the bloodstream – endorphins and enkephalins – which have been proven to counteract cortisol. Laughter reduces built-up tension and energy and provides almost instant relief. We can’t promise our babies that they will never experience stressful events, but we can introduce them from the beginning to the wonderful benefits of joy and laughter, even in hard times. The time to start laughing with your baby is when you first meet them!

USE YOUR TIME WELL

Your baby will become the sum total of all of his or her experiences – alone, with their parent(s), and with others. Parents have a lot to say about what their children will experience and thus who they will become. This is both a daunting and awesome privilege and responsibility.

Hold your baby close to your skin and let them experience the closeness (attachment) and warmth. Play music for your baby and sing to them (remember their 'low standards' – they don't care how you sound); inspire intelligence and grace; introduce them to wonder. Talk to babies; tell them about yourself and the world; it doesn't matter how much they understand. Spend time on the floor with babies to see the world from their perspective. Let babies be where the people are; include them in activities; let them know that they are welcome. Leave babies out of activities sometimes; let them know they can survive without you for a while, and that you'll be back. Stand in awe and wonder as you contemplate the strange and wonderful things they do. Watch them unfold, and learn who they are. Clap for them and laugh with them. Provide safety and structure (crib bars, pillows, protection from harmful household items and harmful people) so they know they are worth keeping whole and secure. Build in routines, even from the first days, so that they world will seem safe and predictable and they'll know that there are some things they can count on. Since they don't understand words find different ways to tell them how much you love them.

Delight in your children as our Creator and heavenly parent delights in us, even though God knows – if anybody knows - we are sometimes less than delightful. Scripture tells us that God "delights" in us **and** knows us. Let God show us how to parent as we are parented by our Creator.

Only reptiles, fish and insects can raise themselves; other vulnerable newborns need parenting. Despite how surprised some people act when discovering they are pregnant no one

forces parents to be parents. Don't apply for a job if you don't want the job. Unhappily, unlike other responsibilities, parenting is not a job one can quit – it can only be done well, minimally, or badly. The job is both simple and the most challenging in the world.

The parent job description falls under three headings:

***Protector**

Everything will be okay because I'm going to take care of you and keep you safe.

***Provider**

I will be your source of food, love, shelter, soothing, play, excitement, socialization

***Guide**

I will show you who you are and who I am. I will show you how the world works and how you can live well.

Buy up the moments. Blink and they will be gone and your baby will no longer be a baby. There are no do-overs.

**I WISH YOU WELL IN THE MOST IMPORTANT JOB YOU
WILL EVER HAVE, and HOPEFULLY LOVE.**

Lorraine