



PARENT magazine

VOLUME 10 // ISSUE 1 // NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2011

THE EARLY YEARS

In the years from birth to three, a child exhibits astonishing growth. From an infant who is totally dependent on others, who can neither walk nor communicate, the child becomes a person with an independent will who can get where he wants to go and tell others what is on his mind. In fact, the amount of change that goes on in a baby's life in these three years has no parallel in any other period in the life cycle.

We are all aware of the outward, visible changes in a child's abilities. What is less visible but no less important is the emotional growth the child experiences from the time he is a baby until he is a toddler. In these crucial years, the stage is being set for the child's future. Early experiences, including early relationships, actually influence the physical architecture of the brain, which grows to two-thirds of its adult size during this period. This has a life-long impact on the child's future: his own emotional regulation, his relationships with others, and even his ability to succeed in school and beyond.

The systematic observation of babies and toddlers is a fairly recent phenomenon. The relatively new discipline of

cognitive science has made many discoveries about how much babies and young children know and learn. And what they have discovered reinforces what parents and caregivers of young children know intuitively: the most important figures in a child's life are his primary caregivers, who influence the child's concept of self and the way he interacts with the world by their everyday behavior towards the child.

One of the more surprising findings of recent years is the degree to which newborns feel connected to their mothers, showing preference for their mother's voice and face as early as two days of age. They can sense their mother's mood and respond to it by the time they are three and one-half months old. Babies are also early imitators, sticking out

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Transitions

Many babies and toddlers have difficulty transitioning from one activity to another, or from one place to another. Regularity in the child's schedule is one way to help children ease into something different, as the child knows what to expect and, indeed, a predictable schedule is one necessary element in helping a child achieve emotional security.

It is also helpful for parents to know why it is so hard for children to accept change. An interesting discovery made by Jean Piaget, one of the first psychologists to study infant behavior, is that children only achieve what he called "object permanence" between the ages of nine and twelve months. Infants do not look for lost objects. When an object is removed from the range of the child's vision, he does not recognize that it exists elsewhere. The child who delights in playing "peek-a-boo" or "jack-in-the box" is enjoying the new discovery that hidden objects can reappear.

The important next step in maturation, achieving "object permanence," does not happen until the child is 28 to 36 months old. This means the child who is separated from his mother, for example, cannot bring up an image of his mother or other important people in his life before that time. His distress in being separated from his mother cannot be assuaged by thinking of his mother, and so separation anxiety can become overwhelming.

One way of helping children through this difficult period is for them to have a physical object which is connected to their parents' warmth and love. This transitional object can provide physical and psychological evidence of their parent and provide security for young babies and toddlers, especially during times of transition, whether from waking to sleeping or when moving from home to preschool.

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their tongues in response to someone who is doing this playfully, even when they are newborns. Babies are learning to react to the world around them from the very minute they are born.

ATTACHMENT

Many new mothers are aware of the idea of bonding, the attachment that is felt between a mother and her new baby. But this attachment is more than the result of the fleeting few moments when the mother holds her newborn child. It is a feeling that must be nurtured by a parent's being responsive and loving throughout the child's early years. A child with a secure attachment to a loving, nurturing adult is armed with the ability to venture forth into the greater world with confidence.

Some psychologists call the interaction between a child and the adult to whom he becomes attached a dance. Just as when someone is dancing with another, one partner must be attentive and responsive to the other's moves, so too mother and child (and, it is hoped, father and child) engage in an interaction where there is response and reaction to the other. A baby cries fretfully; her mother picks her up and soothes her. A mother coos to her child; the child vocalizes and smiles in response. Security at-

tached babies
who

experience attention, mutual communication, affection and respect tend to become children who are themselves affectionate, trusting, and respectful of others.

Parents can foster this necessary attachment by what psychologists call attunement. There is meaning behind babies' and toddlers' behavior, and parents who are attuned to a child can learn this meaning. Observing the child, spending time looking and listening before reacting, can yield interesting insights about the child, as can watching the child's responses when taking an action.

For example, babies have different kinds of crying which demand different responses. The fussy, whimpering cry of a child who is bored will usually end when a parent pays attention to the child. The piercing cry of a child in pain obviously needs to be responded to differently, as does the rhythmic crying of a tired child. Attentive parents will generally be able to distinguish between these types of crying by the time the child is eight to ten weeks old.

When parents respond to what a child needs, when they react to the child with warmth and caring during the daily routines of feeding, washing and diapering, when they engage with the child in playful interaction

matched to the child's response, this gives the child a feeling of security and confidence that he or she can handle the world. When a baby is not responded to or responded to with harshness, he withdraws, becomes suspicious and fretful, and since all areas of development are linked, even his cognitive abilities can be

impaired. Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, the renowned pediatrician says, "The task... is not to force development. Rather, it is to try to ensure that the practices of daily life give the infant and toddler the emotional security that is the foundation for learning at home, in school and throughout later life." The attached adult is a partner with the infant and toddler in the child's developmental process. Just as the child cannot survive physically without the help of an adult, he will not do well emotionally unless physical care is given by someone who is caring, consistent, and attached.

TEMPERAMENT

Just as all parents are not the same, all babies are not the same. Mothers of large families can attest to the fact that every baby is born with a unique temperament. Some babies are inherently "easy" children. Their moods are easily regulated, they are generally cheerful, and they adapt easily to new situations. Other babies are the opposite. They are fussy, they cry a lot and seem to be in a bad mood often, and they have a hard time adapting to anything new. Some babies prefer to be handled with a light, soft touch; others like a firmer touch. Most babies fall somewhere between the two extremes. Differences between children come in many forms.

A small percentage of children have temperamental characteristics that impose heavy demands on parents. It is important for parents to realize that a child with a difficult temperament is not being deliberately troublesome. This is where the idea of attunement can really help. Observation and learning the child's signals can guide the parent in figuring out how to respond to the child. Dr. Stella Chess, one of the first child psychologists to do a systematic study of children's temperaments, points out that the manner in which parents and caregivers respond to a child can modify the child's tempera-





ment. A "difficult" child should not be insulated from situations she find to be distressing – protecting a child in this way will prevent her from learning to behave in a socially appropriate manner. Parents, however, must not demand something which is beyond the child's capability to achieve, but make demands in a manner which allows the child to succeed and thus gain confidence in her ability to manage herself.

Understanding, patience and consistency will help a child with a difficult temperament adjust positively to life's demands. Negative behaviors can then lead to positive traits, with the demanding, high-intensity baby or toddler, for example, becoming a lively child with a zest for life.

A SECURE BASE

Toddlers are defined by their ability to walk unaided. This new stage in a child's life brings him all kinds of delight. He loves to explore, to discover the new world that is now within his grasp. But the toddler still needs the security of his parents' love and care. Toddlers seem to know how far they can go and still be in their parents' line of sight. They frequently turn back from their explorations to assure themselves that their caregiver is watching them. They use the parents as a "secure base" from which to explore, frequently returning to them to show them an exciting discovery or simply for a hug or caress.

A shy child will use a parent as a "secure

base" to help him engage socially. He will cling to his mother until he feels comfortable enough to engage with other children or adults and return to her frequently for reassurance and comfort until he can participate without fear in his environment. The parent who responds to the child's simultaneous need for attachment and exploration with a balance of protectiveness and encouragement allows the child to know that he can venture forth into the

world but return to the parent when he needs comfort or security, when something is scary, or when he is in need.

Eventually, the child will internalize this external "base" and feel secure in his parents' love and protection even when they are not physically present. In Dr. Alicia Lieberman's beautiful phrase, the child will "support himself by the arms that do not hold him."

References: Parents may be interested in further reading on the topic of infant-toddler development. Two fascinating books are *The Emotional Life of the Toddler* by Alicia F. Lieberman and *The Scientist in the Crib: What Early Learning Tells Us about the Mind* by Alison Gopnik. Dr. T. Berry Brazelton is one of the pioneers in teaching parents about interaction with infants and toddlers. He has written numerous books and articles.