



“Babies come into the world already connected to other people...”

Such a statement is more radical than we might at first think. It means that babies arrive in the world as persons, already interested in other people's facial expressions, rhythms and movements. They are able to communicate. They are active participants in relationships. Their brains automatically make meaning from what other people do.

That statement – babies come into the world already connected -- means that the capacity to be an engaged, relational being doesn't happen some time later in development, such as when children walk or talk or start school. This capacity is present from birth. Babies share in mental and emotional experiences (the technical term for which is 'intersubjectivity'). This means that how we, as adults, relate to our babies matters. In fact, it matters not from birth but while babies are still in the womb.

This is not the vision that we have always held of babies. It wasn't very long ago that science thought babies' mental and emotional worlds were a bit of a blur or that babies were rather socially isolated and inward-focused. Cultural beliefs, too, teach us what to think about babies: can they see at birth? are their smiles really smiles or just wind? are they crying because they need comforting or because they are trying to manipulate you?



Thus, it becomes valuable for us to become aware of our ideas about babies. Everyone benefits when we become curious about ourselves and our beliefs. The beliefs we hold about babies are often unconscious, so we aren't even aware we hold them. They feel 'normal' and 'natural' and 'obvious' to us. But what we believe shapes how we behave, and the neuroscience is teaching us that how we behave toward babies shapes their brain development.

Quite literally, babies' neural pathways are moulded by the way other people treat them! We can help babies to develop the neural pathways that we would wish for them by becoming more aware of how we ourselves regard them. It is ironic: in order to help babies develop the capacities we would most wish for them, we actually need to become more aware of ourselves, as adults, as parents, as members of a cultural group, as humans relating to other humans.

How can I make this claim, that babies come into the world already connected? How do we know that? A vast range of scientific studies now exists, with findings showing how much babies' physiology, attention, emotions, and actions are inter-linked with other people. For example, if you engage with a baby and then suddenly stop, the baby notices and they get upset. At birth, babies are able to imitate your facial expressions and hand movements. Before they can talk, babies are able to tease, and they know when you are teasing them. The ability to tease means that babies already have some idea about what you are likely to be thinking – or the teasing wouldn't be effective or so cute!

Even in the womb, babies come to recognize the voices of the people in their world. Parents and midwives often tells of stories of babies, as soon as they are born, turning their heads to find the 'source' of that familiar voice – and therein gazing



for the first time upon the face of their mother, father, sibling, or grandparent. That 'meeting' isn't like meeting a stranger, though. That person was already familiar to them, because they knew the sound of their voice before they met. Babies loved that person before they met them.

Is it too strong to call an 'audio stimulus' a 'person'? When does a 'sound' become a 'person'? Is it too strong to equate 'audio familiarity' with 'love'? Herein lies an on-going scientific debate. How should scientists describe their findings?

I think it is not too strong to call an 'audio stimulus' a 'person'. I think it is not too strong to link 'a sense of familiarity' with 'a sense of love'. What we are trying to do here is to see what the science can tell us about how a baby experiences the world. I think it is fair to summarise the conclusion emerging from the vast range of scientific findings in this way:

Humans are an intensely social species. We have brains wired to make meaning out of the behaviour of other people. Babies are humans, and so their brain is making meaning, even before birth. This means that babies experience whatever we adults do as relating to them. Babies' experiences of us become experiences of themselves. Are other people trustworthy or predictable or scary or kind or reassuring or comforting or dismissing or loving? Am I competent or creative or stupid or delightful or disappointing or irritating or smart or lovable?

So how we behave towards our babies matters. Babies' brains are making meaning out of everything they experience, out of everything we do with them and 'to' them. When we adults become more self-aware and self-reflective about how we are relating to our babies -- how we respond to them, how we attend to them, how we behave with them -- then we become more aware of what our babies' experiences are. We become

more compassionate and empathic and forgiving. We become a better listener and a more relaxed companion. We become more confident that we are giving babies the experiences we dream for them.

Ironically, becoming more aware of babies' experiences is often a hard step for us adults. It can make us uncomfortable and fearful. We're not sure we want to matter this much to our babies! It's a bit overwhelming to realize how important we might be, how influential our own parents were for us. We see our failures, our faults, our inadequacies.

That fearful perspective doesn't help us or our children. I hope we can start from a different place. Let's start from a place of non-judgment. Let's not give ourselves a hard time. Let's forgive ourselves for the failures we think we see. Let's get ourselves into a curious place, for then the insights we've been discussing can feel fascinating. They help us to grow, rather than to close down. Let that be the spirit with which we embark upon an Early Years Movement: a search for joy and fun and reassurance. These are amongst the experiences that we most desire -- babies and grown ups alike.

Suzanne

If you want to read more about the underlying science, here are some of my favourite books:

How Infants Know Minds by Vasu Reddy
Harvard University Press 2008

Keeping Your Child in Mind by Claudia Gold
Da Capo Press 2011

Communicative Musicality by Malloch & Trevarthen
Oxford University Press 2009

Parenting for Peace by Marcy Axness
First Sentient Publications 2012

The Oxytocin Factor by Kerstin Uvnäs-Moberg
Da Capo Press 2003