

## **Addendum One — Three Key Months Are Also Times of Great And Early Opportunity for Each Child**

Both brain development and important emotional processes that are supported by the brain begin as soon as each baby is born. Those processes functionally begin immediately after birth.

There is no period of time when babies are not both affected and influenced by the world they have been born into. Direct experiences and the direct interactions that each child has with the world in the days and months immediately after each child is born can all have significant and relevant impact on both initial brain growth and on going emotional stability and security levels for each child.

Each child is born with the ability to discern very quickly whether the world around him or her is safe or unsafe. Immediately after being born, children cry. They are also hungry. They each discern very quickly and very directly how the world around them responds to their crying and to their hunger.

Each child reaches mental conclusions about the world they live in from the nature of the response to their crying. If the response they receive to their expressed concerns and to their perceived needs in those first days

and weeks of life is to be picked up, cuddled, and comforted, and when they are hungry, if the response they experience is to be fed, then the child's brain tends to make the assumption that he or she has been born into a safe world.

However, if the child tends not to be picked up and if the child is not cuddled or fed when those needs are expressed, then the assumption is made from that information that this world might not be a safe and supportive place.

We now know from some fascinating research that those first days and weeks of life for each child actually are a time of great opportunity relative to giving a sense of security to our children. A number of studies have shown that the children who have a sense of security, and who perceive and experience responsive, comforting, and supportive interactions with their care givers at 3 months old, tend to have more positive interactions with other people at one year old, and even more positive interactions at 3 and 5 years old.

The key patterns of experience and reaction for each child can develop quickly. The assessment of the world happens immediately and it can have significant longer-range impact. Baby Rhesus monkeys who are given immediate support right after birth tend to be more secure and have better interactions with their peers at older points in their life than the less

fortunate Rhesus infants who are isolated and not responded to at that point in their lives.

We have an increasing awareness of the fact that a significant opportunity exists at that point in time to create and build security levels for each infant by responding in positive ways to the needs of each infant in those very early days.

People used to believe that nothing external affected the personalities and the individual security levels of infants until the children were much older. Some theorists believed that it made sense to very deliberately and intentionally let babies cry without directly responding during those early points for fear of spoiling the baby, and encouraging more crying.

Actual research shows that those theories were incorrect. Spoiling a baby is not the result of responding to those needs in those early months of life.

In fact, the babies who have their needs met in those first weeks and months and who have positive interactions in those time periods with their mother or principal caregiver tend to cry less later, and often have more secure relationships with their caregivers at 1 and 3 years old. Spoiling the baby in some way by meeting their needs quickly and responsively in those first weeks and months does not seem to happen or be a problem.

Some remarkable research has video taped infant/mother interactions at 1 and 3 months old, and has shown that the positive interactions that can be seen between mothers and children at that point tend to have beneficial long-term impacts. Dr. Beatrice Beebe and her teams of researchers and therapists at New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University have done some extremely useful research into those issues.

Their research has extended for years, and has been a great learning opportunity for us all. It has been echoed by research done at The University of Minnesota and at the University in Berkeley in California. The researchers in each of those settings looked at the impact of initial experiences on later capabilities and emotions of children.

### **Opportunities To Create Emotional Security Begin In**

#### **The First Weeks and Months For Each Child**

We now know that there are some extremely positive opportunities for helping the emotional stability levels of children that happen in those first weeks and months of life.

The observations are that the children who feel responded to when they express needs in those first weeks and months tend to do well as a result and often have a better sense of direct bonding with the adults in their lives.

Children who don't feel responded to — or who feel that they are triggering either invasive or negative responses from the adults in their world when they cry — tend to do less well in those areas.

That situation and process isn't complicated. It makes both logistical and logical sense. Immediately after being born, children send signals that they need adult responses. Their security levels tend to be higher when adults respond in positive ways, and their security levels tend to be lower when the signals sent by the babies are either ignored or generate negative responses.

Those patterns of response and reactions would seem to meet the expectations of both parenting instincts and common sense. As one child care leader often says, "It is very nicely affirming that the new science that we are building about child care so often reinforces common sense, and so often simply tells us intellectually to do what our hearts already told us to do in more direct ways."

Science, instincts, and our hearts in this case all say, listen to the baby in those early weeks and months and respond when the baby needs a response. Keep responding in comforting ways when the baby is unhappy, and give the baby space to orient him or herself to the world when the baby does not need us as adults to directly respond and interact.

The children at that very early age often do not respond with dependable and clearly positive patterns to the attempts of their parents to comfort them, and that set of seemingly unhappy responses by the child can be confusing and even frustrating for some parents. It is sometimes difficult or even impossible in the moment and in the situation for a parent to comfort a concerned and unhappy child — and that continuing unhappy reaction by the child can make the comforting process more difficult for the parents of the child.

We now know that the comforting process itself offers benefits to the child even though the benefits might not be apparent in that moment and in each specific interaction.

Parents need to know and understand that it is the right thing to do to continue to respond in comforting and loving ways to the needs of the child even when the child doesn't seem to be comforted by the response. We need to teach those interaction realities to all parents and build those responses and that understanding into both the practice and culture of parenting.

Each child is learning about the world they live in through the nature and context of those responses and continuing to comfort an angry or unhappy child tells that child that a key part of the world is on his or her

side. That is a good message for all very young children in every setting to receive.

So we now know that the first three months of life can be key and useful times for creating emotional security in a child. They clearly are not the only times for parents to create that sense of both emotional and physical security for a child, but we now know that those first weeks and months can be high opportunity times for giving that support.

## **We Need Each Child To Get That Support In Those Key Weeks and Months From Someone**

Usually, in the world and the society we are in, that opportunity to respond directly to the child in those first weeks and months comes from a parent — most often the mother of the child. The functional reality is that mothers tend to provide the overwhelming majority of direct contacts with children in those first weeks and months in almost all settings.

All mothers want their children to do well and to thrive. We have not done a consistently good job of supporting that process and explicitly helping mothers understand the full set of approaches that can be used by each mom in those first key months and years to help their children.

Very few mothers have been shown and taught the science about the opportunities to help thriving and success levels for their children that occur in the first weeks, months, and years of life.

That information about the importance of those direct interventions and interactions in those first weeks, months, and years of life for each child should be widely known by all relevant parties, and it should be used to help guide both parenting decisions and public policy thinking. We need every mother and every father to understand those processes and those opportunities even before their child is born.

As we look at various parenting leave options and at parental leave strategies for the mothers in our own society and communities, there clearly is solid evidence that having a parent who is able to be with a child in those first three months can have disproportionately useful and positive long term effects, and that those levels of direct and highly focused parenting in those time frames can trigger highly beneficial long term consequences for each child.

Those first weeks and months can actually have a functionally disproportionate impact on those particular levels of development for many children. Looking at mothers as the usual first level of parenting support, we now know that it can be very good and can create significant benefit and

value for each child to have his or her mother able to be there to care for her child during those special parenting opportunities.

Nursing a baby creates its own set of related health and security benefits for the child and should also be encouraged and supported by us all.

That research about the importance of those first weeks and months also tells us that when the mother has work obligations or other functional or situational realities that keep her from those sets of interactions with her child in that period of time, then we should figure out other ways of having those direct interaction needs met by each child.

We need to figure out how to help each child. That opportunity exists one child at a time and how we deal with that opportunity has a direct impact on each child.

There are other options beyond mothers that can work to meet those needs for individual children. Fathers can fill that role. Other family members and friends can have those interactions with the infants as well.

Childcare support people can also do those interactions with a child.

Having fathers or other family members or any level of caregivers fill that role and fill that role well is more likely to be successful when we clearly define exactly what that actual function and role is for the caregiver in that high opportunity time frame.

Success by both mothers and fathers can be enhanced to at least some degree if the parents of a child have an explicit awareness of those issues and understand their relevance to their child and either provide that support themselves or arrange for someone else to do it for their child.

As with so many other areas of child-raising, knowledge is power. Knowledge is both enabling and empowering. Fathers, various other family members, and designated caregivers for the child are all more likely to meet those needs well in that time of high opportunity and high need for the child when the needs are understood and when the relevant support processes are clearly defined.

Whatever strategies we chose and whatever caregivers we use, we do need to help each child. We should be sure to have a plan in place for each child that has someone meeting those response needs in that important and very immediate time frame for each child.

Three key months creates a set of child support opportunities that deserve the same kinds of support we all need to give in the first three key years of life relative to the approaches that strengthen children's brains.

The Three Key Years book that this addendum is attached to explains the consequences of not exercising brains in those high-impact first three years, and also explains the massive opportunities that exist when we do

provide that support for neuron connectivity in our children in those key years.

We need to support that three-year process of building stronger brains, and it would be a good thing to help make those first three year's activities and efforts even more successful by creating the right set of direct interaction-responses for each child in the first three months of life for each child.

The key for us as a nation today is to meet the needs for each child. We need families, parents, friends, caregivers, educators, and communities to be collectively and individually committed to meeting those needs for each individual child.

We want to build strong brains and have emotionally secure children, and we very much want to avoid having children suffer from toxic stress syndrome. We can do that by having the right sets of interactions with our children and by helping all children avoid both isolation and stress.

There is extensive research that shows very young children who feel constant isolation or stress are much more likely to suffer from toxic stress syndrome. Toxic stress syndrome damages brains and can create negative and dysfunctional patterns of behavior. Dr. Ross Thompson and his team of researchers at the University of California at Davis have shown us how we

can keep that toxic stress syndrome from happening by providing positive direct support to every child.

We very much want to give each child the kinds of positive daily experiences that buffer each child against the toxic and damaging neurochemicals that create that syndrome.

We have a range of positive opportunities to help each child.

Every child we help has a different life as the result of being helped. Every child we save from a more difficult life is a child whose world is different in very positive ways because we provided that support.

That is extremely important and highly beneficial work to do. Both emotional security and stronger brains are worthwhile sets of benefits to create for our children. Both learning gaps and insecurity levels do not need to happen.

Let's save every child.

Let's save every child beginning with the time immediately after each child is born, and then continuing to support the education and learning processes for each child through all of the years when we can make life better for each child.

Three key months.

Three key years.

Let's not waste either one for any child.

## **Three Key Months Endnotes**

The endnotes to this addendum include links and references to some of the relevant research that supports the sense of urgency and opportunity in those very early times of life for each child. The research into the very first months and years of life is robust and growing and teaches us increasingly important and useful information about the impacts of interventions and interactions with infants in those initial time frames for each child. People making public policy decisions about support for child raising, parenting, public health, and even public education should be aware that this research exists, and should be aware of the directions that it points.

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4) A Science Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy; Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children." *Developingchild.harvard.edu*. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 1 Aug. 2007. Web. [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Policy\\_Framework.pdf](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Policy_Framework.pdf)

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