

Babies, Bonds, and Brains

Published in October 2005 edition of Kids These Days
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Wow, is this ever an exciting time to live in when it comes to discovering what goes on inside a child's brain! Because of new technologies like PET scans (positron emission tomography) and MRI's (magnetic resonance imaging) we are able to watch a living brain react to other people and situations. For the first time in the history of being human there is hard evidence to prove lots of things we already knew through observation. There is also an explosion of new information about what's going on in babies' brains at very early stages of development.

Their brains develop most dramatically during the early years of life, and what parents and care-givers do during those early years makes a profound difference for the rest of their children's lives. This responsibility can seem scary until you realize that humans have been raising humans for hundreds of thousands of years. Attentive moms and dads can generally figure out what to do, sometimes with the help of other experienced parents in a community.

"What to do" almost always involves paying close attention to the child. This is the basis of bonding. Bonding is the emotional and physical attachment that happens between a parent, especially a mother, and the child. It usually begins at birth and is the basis for further emotional growth within the child and the parent!

We used to think that infants were simple-minded creatures who merely imitated those around them and only felt very basic emotions: happy, sad, angry. Recent research shows a different creature: babies can experience complex emotions like jealousy, empathy and frustration that we used to think came much later in life. They are also smarter at early ages than we thought. A four month old can notice small differences, especially in faces, that adults and older children no longer have the ability to see. They can also pick up on a variety of emotions by watching the facial expressions of the people around them!

Older infants, around one year of age, start to follow the gaze of those around them to figure out what's so interesting and what's going to happen next. This "gaze following" also boosts language learning.

Bonding results in emotional wellbeing and is very important for a child's future health. If the emotional bonds are weak the child may have trouble learning to speak, read and succeed in school and in the community.

This bonding business is a kind of dance, where you take a turn and then the baby takes a turn, back and forth. It is very satisfying stuff! Children thrive on interaction, one-on-one time and lots of eye contact. Babies' social, emotional and learning lives begin with the earliest conversations between infant and caregiver. So next time you have the privilege to hold a baby, look deeply into their eyes, smile, and get ready to dance!

Diane Sly, MA
Early Childhood Educator
info@aeyc-sea.org

Websites: Zero to Three: <http://www.zerotothree.org>
I Am Your Child: <http://iamyourchild.org>
American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.aap.org>
Newsweek, August 15, 2005: "Your Baby's Brain"



A E Y C

Assoc. for the Education of Young
Children-SE Alaska
3100 Channel Dr., Suite 215
Juneau, AK 99801
Phone: 907.789.1235
Toll Free: 1.888.785.1235
www.aeyc-sea.org