

SPOILING INFANTS AND TODDLERS: THE MYTH THAT CAN AFFECT A LIFETIME

by Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

Many research studies make clear that the following child-rearing belief is not true: You will spoil your young child if you constantly fulfill the child's needs. The opposite is closer by far to the truth. Cooperative independence, achievement, emotional and physical well-being, and good behavior patterns develop if you fulfill the needs of your young child. You will spoil your infant and toddler and make child rearing difficult if you regularly fail to meet your child's needs adequately.

The key to easier and better parenting is the relationship you create with your infant or toddler. A child's satisfaction, which is the result of your appropriate and consistent responses to your youngster's normal needs, makes child rearing enjoyable for your child and for you.

Of all primates, human beings have the longest period of normal developmental dependency. Child-rearing practices often overlook this fact. The profoundly important needs of the young child are too frequently ignored or inadequately met.

It is important that infants and toddlers have continuous and ready access to the parent(s) with whom they have developed an emotional attachment. That parent is usually the mother. Numerous research studies point out patterns of behavior that build a child's secure attachment to parents. These are: (a) loving physical contact between the parent and child; (b) the parent's regular ability to soothe the child by holding; (c) the parent's sensitivity to the child's signals, and ability to time interventions in harmony with the child's rhythms; (d) the mutual delight that the parent and child get by being in each other's company; and (e) creating an environment that permits the child to derive a sense of the effects of his or her own actions.

If parents consistently provide these elements to their infant or toddler, they create the foundation for an emotionally healthy life. In addition, they build into the child's personality a resilience that, in future years, will enable the individual to cope with life's problems and challenges successfully.

Parents help their children when they give their infants and toddlers as much attention and recognition as they need. The origins of child, adolescent, and adult problems regarding attachment to and love for another person often rest in too little responsive mothering or mothering that is provided by a constantly changing variety of people. Mothering is nurturing behavior that can be given to the child by the father and other family members as well as by the mother.

Children require interpersonal relationships that foster the development of trust. It is a parent's accurate interpretations of and appropriate responses to the infant's signals that nurture the child's felt security and the development of trust. Research shows that babies who are held often and not left to cry mature into six- and seven-year-olds with more stable, self-controlled, and resilient personalities than do infants who cry without being quickly comforted. They also are more self-disciplined and less aggressively dependent. In the presence of caring adults, infants learn to trust that others will give assistance. They also gain confidence in their ability to get the attention they require.

Why is it so important for infants to experience a sense of trust in their world? First, because trust enables the expression of curiosity. The expression and development of early, intrinsic curiosities are the roots of motivation, intellectual interests, and achievement. Secondly, a sense of trust promotes self-confidence. When children experience the world of their parents as

a nurturing, helpful, and predictable place, they risk reaching out and making the efforts needed to achieve their goals. When children reach out and achieve their goals with the support of their parents, they learn to trust and have confidence in themselves. Third, the amount and quality of a parent's interactions with an infant can determine the susceptibility to physical disease in the child's early years and beyond.

In an article from La Leche League International's *Breastfeeding Rights Packet*, Edward R. Cerutti, M.D., discusses the importance of breast feeding to a child's emotional development. "This is one of the few countries in the world where breast feeding is not considered fashionable after six to twelve months of age. This is an erroneous and completely unnatural belief that originated in unfounded psychological principles of 1920. The child who nurses for two or three years is often more secure and less anxious. The 'problem' of the late weaner does not rest in the mother and baby's relationship but in our own distorted perception of the relationship of mother and child."

In an article on infant bed sharing, James McKenna, Ph.D., writes, "Bed sharing and breast feeding mutually reinforce each other since biologically they are an integrated, time tested system that maximizes—not threatens—human infant survival as well as maternal health. Research shows that when babies sleep closer to their mothers and breast-feed more, both mother and infant actually sleep more in total minutes than when they slept in different rooms. Moreover, routinely bed sharing mothers evaluated the quality of their sleep as being as good as, if not better than, mothers who routinely sleep apart from their infants—contrary to popular conceptualizations."

Our parents, and those parents in the generations before them, loved their children. However, they did not have good information to guide their child rearing. Often they were guided only by their intuition and the child-rearing customs of the time. In the past fifty years, extensive studies have been done on child development and child rearing. Today we have the opportunity to use that information to guide us as we love our children. In child rearing, when knowledge replaces myth, parenting is easier and better for all.

It is evident that the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual well-being of an individual throughout life has, at its foundation, mothers and fathers who meet the needs of their infants responsively and continuously. Parenting can spoil an infant's life and future if mothers and fathers regularly fail to satisfy the needs of their young child.