

Welcoming Babies

By Rena Osmer

“O wonderful, wonderful, most wonderful, wonderful! ...and yet again, wonderful!” I was about to enter the embryology exhibit at Boston’s Museum of Science and Technology and read Shakespeare’s words engraved in the entryway. Yes, I thought, these words belong at the gateway of life and birth. So does joy. When a child is born to the Baka people of the African rain forest, they sing, “My heart is joyous!” Joy is also central in this verse from Rudolf Steiner for parents in relation to the young children:

*May light stream into you that can take hold of you
I follow its rays with the warmth of my love.
I think with my thinking’s best thoughts of joy
On the stirrings of your heart.
May they carry you, May they cleanse you.
I want to gather my thoughts of joy
Before the steps of your life,
That they unite with your will for life,
So that it finds itself with strength
In the world,
Ever more,
Through itself.*

Blessed is the baby who finds himself welcomed into the world with wonder and love and joy. Like the spring sunshine that coaxes new life into growth, these irresistible messages from the heart warm and enliven the forces of the baby’s physical body, making them supple, plastic, and receptive to the influences of the world. And if these feelings are accompanied by gentle, protective, nurturing gestures of interaction from a best-beloved, the child will develop trust in the goodness of the world and become an active, enthusiastic participant in his growing experiences. He will be nourished in his development both inside and out.

Every hug, every lullaby, every kiss, every warm blanket, every peek-a-boo, every word, every touch, every giggle, and every smile become a part of him because he is so vulnerably becoming as at no other time in life. Nurturing gestures influence the development of his brain and the function and form of the other organs. They help him to regulate his blood pressure, body temperature, appetite, cardiovascular system, sleep, and immune system. In *Peaceful Babies—Contented Mothers* Dr. Emmi Pikler asks us to consider the touch of our hands. “Hands continue the infant’s first connection to the world (outside of nursing). Hands pick her up, lay her down, wash and dress and maybe even feed her. How different it can be, what a different picture of the world an infant receives when quiet, patient, careful yet secure and resolute hands take care of her—and how different the world seems when hands are impatient, rough or hasty, unquiet and nervous. In the beginning, hands are everything for an infant.” The hands are the person, the world. The way we touch a child, lift and dress her is *us* more precisely, more characteristically than even our words, or smile, or glance. If, from the start, we handle an infant peacefully, patiently, and carefully, she will discover ever more joy in these activities, learning at the same time to trust us more and more and to take an increasing part in our work.

An enthusiastic welcome into life evokes an enthusiastic response for life; that is the simple but profound nature of the baby’s imitative capacity. Have you seen that burst of joyous movement that the somewhat older baby shows when his best-beloved enters the room and the two begin to talk to each other

even before they have the words to say? The baby's eyes widen, his eyebrows raise, and she smiles as she sits down in front of him. He coos back at her greeting and he is happy, animated, and eager to continue the conversation with his whole body.

Responsive verbal and physical interactions between baby and caregiver encourage him to develop initiative and confidence in building and maintaining meaningful relationships with other human beings as well. That is one of the reasons why in my parent/infant classes I teach new mothers Wilma Ellersiek's "caresses," her artistically formed, gentle body-touching games. We wait until the baby has "awakened" in that bodily part of himself and then we play with his new-found capacity through speech and movement. For example, the infant in the following description from Emmi Pikler is just awakening to his hands. "After a few weeks, the baby discovers his hand. At first he only 'sees' it as something that moves—independent of himself, foreign to him. Later, he will gradually realize that it belongs to him; it is his own hand. . . . He moves and turns his hands, watching them with wonderful slowness, trying out all versions. . . . he closes and opens the fists. The next day he may be busy with the thumbs. . . . For days he tries out everything, moving each single finger. Then he puts the hands together and brings them close to his eyes, moves them away, then observes them again somewhat closer. The infant's hands get into his mouth. He sucks the fingers. . . ."

"Let me teach you a little game to play with your baby," I say to the mothers and together we do a simple hand touching game like "Kille-Kille-Ka" or "Bind-a bind-a band." Now mother and baby can play with this new-found friend, baby's hand, and through such simple activity, find joy together.

Mothers find wonder when we observe the babies too, when telephones and dirty dishes are left behind and they can relax quietly in a circle of women and watch and talk about the small group of babies on the floor in our midst. "Look how Ava reached out her hand for Caleb." "Did you see how still Noelle was when she looked at her mother?" "How quickly Lily crawled after the sound of the bell rattle." We appreciate the little accomplishments of each child, and the babies are bathed in our mood of warm attention. When finally the babies begin to fuss because our conversation has escalated and our focus has shifted from them, the lyre begins to sound us back together. The babies return to their mothers, and we sing a soothing lullaby and get ready to leave.

Stanley Greenspan, professor of psychiatry, behavioral science and pediatrics at George Washington University, is a much-published author and the founder of Zero to Three, a national organization for babies and their families. He believes that we stand at "an evolutionary crossroads" in this new millennium.

With all of our technological advances we are in danger of "losing the strands of human intimacy." Because of this, not only our children's healthy development, but our very future as a human culture is at stake. In light of all this, how important it then seems to welcome babies into the world with wonder, love, and joy.