

### **Why ‘attachment’ is a key to mending our broken society...**

Human babies are unique in the animal kingdom in the extent of their underdevelopment at birth. What other animal cannot walk until it is a year old? And cannot fend for itself in any way until it is at least 2 years old?

But the physical underdevelopment is only a part of it. The human brain is only partially formed at birth. The billions of neurones in the brain are completely undifferentiated at birth, and there are parts of the brain that are simply not there.

It is the earliest experiences of the human baby that literally shape his or her brain development, and will have a lifelong impact on that baby’s mental and emotional health.

This is not about giving parents a ‘guilt trip’ – we all feel guilty at times for things we think we did not do, or for the times we shouted, or left the baby to cry. These things happen, and don’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

What it IS about is being a ‘good enough’ parent.....and that means that a baby must overall have the sense that its needs are being met – not instantly, and not always.....but generally the world is a reliable place, and adults are generally kind.

The baby that ‘learns’ about the world as a good place will retain this sense as almost an ‘instinct’ for life.....this individual will be emotionally more robust than the baby who does not usually have his needs met.

So what is meant by ‘having your needs met?’ Well, when a baby cries, he doesn’t know he is wet, tired, hungry, bored or too hot – he only knows something is wrong, and he relies on an adult carer to soothe his feelings. There are 2 impacts on the brain of the baby who is neglected continuously or abused.

A baby cannot regulate her own feelings at all. If her needs are not met she will simply scream louder and louder and eventually take refuge in sleep. So the first impact is that a baby left to continually scream and scream will experience raised levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. Excessive amounts of this damages the baby’s immune system, and there is also evidence to suggest that a baby left to scream throughout babyhood will have a higher tolerance to stress, meaning that in later life they will be more attracted to high risk –taking behaviour than a baby who has only a normal level of cortisol.

The second impact is that the ‘social’ part of the brain only starts to develop at around 6 months. The peak period for development of this part of the brain is at 6-18 months old. Growth is stimulated by the relationship between baby and carer, where ‘peekaboo’ games and singing songs, cuddling etc all play a strong role.

Where a baby does not receive any attention (as has been shown in certain developing world orphanages where physical contact with babies has been minimal), this part of the brain literally does not grow and may never grow.

This has profound implications for society. A human being without a social brain finds it very difficult to empathise with other human beings. In other words, sociopaths are not born – they are made by their earliest experiences when they are less than 2 years old

There is scientific evidence that shows more than 80% of long term prison inmates have attachment problems that stem from babyhood. It is now believed that you can predict two thirds of future chronic criminals by behaviour seen at the age of two.

### **Why does poor attachment arise?**

So often, poor attachment is the result of the parents' own unhappy lives. A Mother who was not attached as a baby to her own Mother will struggle to form a bond with her baby. A woman who suffers post-natal depression will often struggle to form a bond. Parents with drug, domestic abuse or unemployment problems will often struggle to form a bond. Poor attachment is no respecter of class or wealth.....

But I want to stress again – this is not about making parents stay at home, or carry their baby around 24/7. Attachment means building a bond with a baby, so that the baby instinctively learns the capacity to be a part of a caring relationship. Where both parents work, or where there is a single parent, or adoptive parents, attachment can be very secure.

The point is that the risk of insecure attachment is greater the less caring attention from a familiar adult that the baby receives. A caring nursery worker can become an 'attachment figure' for a baby, as can a nanny, a child minder and of course, members of extended families.

Where a baby's home life is disturbed ie due to divorce, death, domestic abuse, drugs or even post natal depression, it can be a positive experience for that baby's quality of attachment to be in a caring child care environment.

Where a baby's home life is happy, and there is a strong bond between the baby and the rest of the family, again a caring child care environment is not harmful, and can even add to the baby's quality of attachment.

On the other hand, where a baby's home life is disturbed and the baby is put into an insensitive child care environment, this can be a disaster for that baby.

It's really common sense. A baby can take only so much stress, and only so much change and disorder – if you pile it up and up, the baby will instinctively resort to the two alternative strategies of 'flight or fight'.

A nursery might measure the contentedness of their baby room by how little crying there is – ironically, a baby that has ‘given up’ on having her needs met will sometimes withdraw, not making a sound and appearing very passive. Far from being a good sign, this can be an indicator of a baby whose future life could be inclined towards depression, a ‘victim’ mentality, even self harming.

On the other hand, a baby that cries noisily and often could be a ‘fighter’ who has instinctively learnt that to get any attention, it requires a huge amount of noise and aggression! Many violent criminals have been shown to have a high tolerance to their own stress hormones, requiring that they resort to high risk-taking behaviour in order to experience what are, to most of us, only normal levels of stress.

So these two examples merely show that you cannot easily judge how contented a baby is by the amount of crying. In fact, the quality of attachment experienced by a baby is very hard to measure even for an experienced professional.

But there is now research that suggests in Britain 40% of children are not securely attached by the age of five. This does NOT mean they will all go on to have behavioural problems or relationship problems. But what it does mean is that they will be less robust in their emotional make up to meet the challenges and disappointments of life. And it also means they will struggle to form strong attachments to their own babies, thus perpetuating a cycle of misery through generations.

There is no scientific evidence, but I would draw some conclusions from this – namely, it may well be poor attachment that lies behind the UNICEF report showing British children are the unhappiest in the developed world. It also may be poor attachment that accounts for our high teenage pregnancy rate (Mums who are themselves children looking for love) and our high divorce rate (adults unable to form long-lasting relationships).

### **What can we do about poor attachment?**

Well the astonishing thing is that if we tackle poor attachment early enough (before the baby is two), it can be turned around very quickly to the benefit of baby and carer. The Oxford Parent Infant Project (OXPIP) is an Oxfordshire wide charity that is about to celebrate its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of providing psychotherapeutic support for families who are struggling to bond with their babies. Our results over 10 years have been astonishing and we are highly regarded by Oxfordshire Social Services, Health Visitors and GPs as a place for on-referral of families in need.

Our highly trained parent infant psychotherapists work with carer (often the Mum, but could be Dad, Grandparents or foster parents) to improve the quality of the relationship between them and the baby. It sounds simple, but it has dramatic and far reaching consequences for the baby’s lifelong mental health.

So what can Government do to help turn around this pandemic of poor attachment, with its vast consequences for our society?

What a baby needs is the right environment for secure attachment. Ideally the right environment is within the home, but where parents work or if there is illness or other family problems, attachment can be supported through a sensitive childcare environment. It follows that in the small percentage of cases where the family's life is chaotic and there are child abuse concerns, adoption should be swift, ideally before the baby's first birthday.

But first, within the home.....an ante-natal questionnaire in Canada has been 80% successful in identifying later attachment problems. Predicting where there are likely to be problems so they can be dealt with early enough must be the start point.

Midwives and Health Visitors should be thoroughly trained in the importance of early attachment and should have the emotional wellbeing of the baby in mind as much as his physical wellbeing.

There should be parent-infant support widely available for onward referral from GPs, Health Visitors and Midwives. This could include a wide range of support such as Mother/baby therapeutic groups, therapeutic baby massage groups, drop in clinics, one to one parent/baby psychotherapy, video feedback (one to one) etc. Note: All these therapies have been used by OXPIP and research by the University of Warwick has shown a strong positive improvement in the relationship between parent and carer. It would be valuable to carry out a 'random control trial' to assess the value of different types of therapy.

Second, where a baby spends more than a few hours a day in a child care environment, there should be protocols within the nursery that ensure the attachment needs of the baby are met. These could include: focus on the 'key worker' relationship, so that one adult carer does all the 'intimate' activities with the baby such as nappy change and feeding, and the same adult should be responsible for the 'handover' morning and evening to the parent; giving the baby's special toy or muslin cloth etc a prominent place during the day. There are plenty of opportunities to maximise the sensitivity of the child care environment to support the attachment needs of the baby.

Also, training in early attachment for childcare workers is critical. The turnover of staff in nurseries is high, and often the staff are young and inexperienced. All these facts contribute to a greater risk of 'insensitive' care.

There are some nurseries (and many child minders and nannies!) where the baby's emotional well being is a high priority. Some of these recognise the importance of what they do – for others it is instinct. One research establishment (Penn Green Nursery in Corby) is specifically researching the impact of life in a 'sensitive' nursery on the very young.

Finally, where the baby cannot be safely left at home and social services intervention is necessary, there should be much greater focus than is currently the case on the risk to the baby's emotional development of being in an uncertain and unstable situation for a long period of time. OXPIP has assisted Oxford Social Services in assessing certain cases and this has been helpful in a swift resolution.

It has been OXPIP's experience that before the age of two, there is a huge opportunity to improve the quality of attachment between baby and carer. When compared to the cost of a child on the child protection register, or the cost to families and society of a child with conduct disorder, early intervention is not only kinder, but also much cheaper than cure.

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