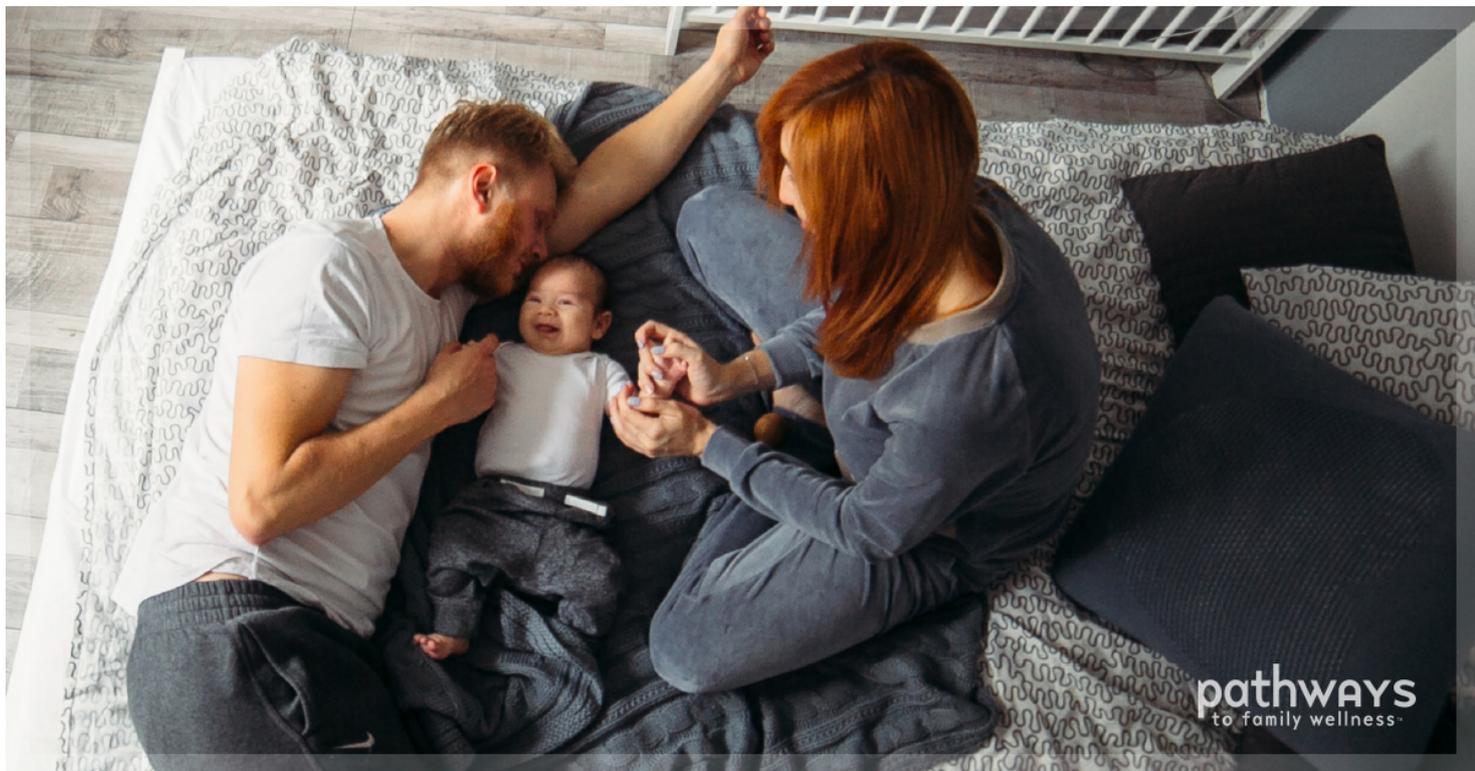


Infant Needs and the On-Demand Life

Written by Mary Tarsha, M.Ed., and Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:42

On-demand services may have spoiled parenting—yes, by their very convenience. For example, we no longer have to plan our schedule around the airing of our favorite program or make efforts to record a particular show. With a few clicks, we can escape into streaming thousands of movies from our TV, computer, or mobile device. We can use Google to answer a question about almost anything. We can order ahead from a favorite restaurant, and our order will be ready when we arrive. An Uber is just around the corner. We don't have to wait, or slow down our pace. We can stay focused on our own needs and goals, always thinking ahead.



[Appearing in Issue #59. Order A Copy Today](#)

How does this fast pace and focus on getting the next thing done influence our relationships? If we are tilted forward toward checking off the next thing on our list, can we really be in the present moment? Focusing on the present—mindfulness—is linked to happiness. But it is also required for being a good friend and a good parent.

Infant Needs and the On-Demand Life

Written by Mary Tarsha, M.Ed., and Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:42

Being emotionally present is especially important with those who are still learning to be human— babies and young children. They operate at a slower pace, and expect caregivers to be with them in the moment. (Notice how your young child will start to demand attention when you are on the phone— which is probably why we evolved to have a village of caregivers and playmates!)

When we get used to things on demand, we start to think that everyone should act accordingly. We lose patience with people who move too slow or take too long. We can start to think that babies should conform to our preferences on demand, too...but they cannot. They follow an inner compass of growth and development. Practically speaking, tending to the needs of babies means meeting their needs in the here and now, not demanding that they conform to adult schedules. Their basic needs are many and include the components of what we call the evolved nest: on-request breastfeeding, extensive affectionate touch, self-directed play, and quick responsiveness. When an infant receives care that satiates needs as they arise, with a present-moment focus from the parent or caregiver, the infant develops normally, along a healthy trajectory into adulthood.

Why does early experience matter so much? Because meeting an infant's needs supports the neuronal architecture of the brain and neurobiological systems as they rapidly develop, enabling proper functioning. At a very basic level, babies are self-actualizing when their needs are met— they are getting support to follow the inner guidance system that psychologist Abraham Maslow found so important for self-actualization to occur. Maslow agreed with psychoanalytic theory that the thwarting of the self, of one's normal path to self-actualization, occurs in early life from the betrayal in relationships. When we don't provide the evolved nest, it betrays the baby's soul/spirit/being.

Meeting basic needs in the early years carries long-term benefits that protect the child throughout life, physiologically and psychologically. Adults who received nurturing and responsive care environments in their early years demonstrate greater resilience to stressful situations, better immune functioning, less anxiety, and fewer physical health problems overall. There is a plethora of research from neuroscience, developmental psychology, molecular biology, chemistry, genomics, and sociology validating the importance of early care experiences upon brain development, specifically the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus, critical parts of the brain that control learning, memory, and behavior.

Recognizing the overwhelming, converging evidence from an array of disciplines, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a report in 2012 addressing the importance of early care experience for adult health. The report encourages all pediatricians to be the "front-line

Infant Needs and the On-Demand Life

Written by Mary Tarsha, M.Ed., and Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:42

guardians of child development” because “many adult diseases should be viewed as developmental disorders that begin early in life.” The AAP is calling for a greater awareness of the importance of early care experiences, proclaiming that many adult diseases begin in early life and more emphasis should be given to providing healthy environments to infants and children.

Unmet Needs = Toxic Stress

So, what happens when an infant’s needs are not met? Potential toxic stress is created. Toxic stress and traumatic attachments in early life influence brain development, specifically the right hemisphere, resulting in:

-

an inability to regulate emotional states under stress, including regulating fear-terror states

-

dysregulation of the “fight or flight” system (part of the autonomic nervous system); dysregulated “flight” systems results in PTSD, and dysregulated “fight” systems potentially leads to aggression disorders

-

dysregulation of the vagus nerve, which connects with major body systems and governs social capacities

-

personality disorders in early adulthood

In short, the individual is stunted or thwarted in reaching his or her full potential. Long-lasting effects include both personality and emotion regulation disorders. Deprivation of basic needs in the early years of life leads to an internal divisiveness; children become divided within

Infant Needs and the On-Demand Life

Written by Mary Tarsha, M.Ed., and Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:42

themselves and divided against the world. It pushes the child off the trajectory for self-actualization.

There is evidence that suggests that deprivation of basic needs (neglect or under-care) may be more detrimental than physical abuse. Neglected children demonstrate more severe cognitive and academic deficits, social withdrawal, limited peer interactions, and internalizing problems compared to children who were physically abused.

Supportive and responsive care has a profound role in mitigating the effects of adverse (stressful) experiences. A nurturing and responsive environment is a buffer against toxic stress, helping the infant return to baseline (nonstressed condition) and consequently, continue along an adequate developmental trajectory (for species-typical normal development, the full evolved nest would need to be provided). However, if supportive and responsive care is not provided in the midst of stressful events, toxic stress ensues, and severe traumatic attachments can develop.

A Practical Suggestion for Young Child Care

What is one practical way to increase the quality of infants' early care experiences? Build extra time into the family's schedule. Create buffers of time around scheduled events in the caregiving routine. For example, if you need to leave the house by a certain time, factor in an extra 15–20 minutes as a buffer. In this way, if the infant or child requests to nurse, needs a diaper change, needs extra play time, or more affectionate touch, these needs can be met in a nonstressed manner.

Extra pockets of time allow the caregiver to meet the infant's needs, safeguarding against an "on-demand" mentality, but also may diminish the caregiver's stress. A parent or caregiver that is less stressed and anxious is able to be more responsive to an infant's need, picking up on subtle cues from their baby. Less mental and emotional energy is dedicated to navigating the schedule (trying to get the infant/child out the door on time), freeing the caregiver to be nurturing, warm and responsive in the here and now, safeguarding against an "on-demand" mentality toward infants. Thus, built-in buffers of time have the twofold benefit of ameliorating caregiving stress and facilitating the meeting of the infant's needs.

When infants and children are not treated with warm, responsive care, bad things happen.

Infant Needs and the On-Demand Life

Written by Mary Tarsha, M.Ed., and Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:42

However, when they are given a healthy start with responsive, stable, and nurturing relationships around them, infants flourish into happy and healthy adolescents and adults. This avoids many pitfalls, which could include the long-lasting consequences of learning disabilities, emotional disorders, and physical health conditions. Investing in infants provides a return of better health and happiness.

What if you didn't meet your child's needs in the early years? Even if your child is older, you can begin providing responsive and nurturing care now. Physical and emotional health is one of the greatest gifts to any child. All it takes is some time, warmth, and responsiveness to their needs.



This article appeared in [Pathways to Family Wellness](#) magazine, Issue #59.

View [Article Resources](#) .

View [Author Bio](#) .

View [Author Bio](#) .

Infant Needs and the On-Demand Life

Written by Mary Tarsha, M.Ed., and Darcia Narvaez, Ph.D.

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:42

To purchase this issue, [Order Here](#) .