

When Does Parenting Begin?

Written by David B. Chamberlain, Ph.D.

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In our culture, majority opinion is that parenthood starts after birth. This view has been subtly fostered by medical scientists who think of a baby as physical matter, especially brain matter, which they have long believed is insufficient to register or process memory, learning, trauma, emotion or any truly human experiences until months after birth. This effectively excludes the period of life in the womb from active parenting. Hence, we tend to think that parenting cannot really begin until a real baby is actually “delivered” to the parents.



WELLNESS LIFESTYLE

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Considering all we know today about the realities of life before birth, we must appropriately reexamine the clock on parenthood. The womb is no longer a dark, secret place. We know it is an an inclusive realm! What goes on in there for nine months in the constant molding and shaping of the baby baby—a collaboration between baby and parent. All the same facts of life play the parental involvement, participation and cooperation in the powerful matrix of intimate interactions that take place in the womb. Pregnancy is parenting. The facts: Parental influence on a child is at its peak during construction in utero. Creating is what parenting is about—creating a physical body and brain, creating emotional foundations for living, and establishing a rich connection with the parent self.

1. Creating a Physical Body

Science provides the immediate physical environment that will determine whether the baby's equipment for living will be good, average or optimal. As the foundation for physical life is laid, each new part is built upon the previous one so that both limitations and advantages are preserved. Although some degree of “plasticity” is possible during later development, the original parts remain in place. Parents who want to think about this world after their child is born will be starting too late—nine months after all the basic equipment has been constructed. In the fifth century, parents began to have corresponding benefits of reproduction. These included old and new hereditary viruses, which seem to arrange when our immune system is weak and vulnerable. In addition, environmental dangers became more challenging with the huge new production of industrial and agricultural chemicals, a swelling tide of stimulants and sedatives such as nicotine, caffeine and alcohol, tempting “stress” drugs like opiates and amphetamines, the plethora of new drugs prescribed by physicians, and new forms of electromagnetic radiation including the bombardment of ultraviolet or x-rays being revealed to sensitive parents during obstetrical examinations. Because of so much environmental disruption, the safety and security of the womb is threatened in some places.



A mother's diet can innocently invite birth defects. Science has only slowly found the connection between deficiencies of folic acid from either fortification and the profound malformations of neural tube and spine birth defects which occur when the neural tube fails to close 18 to 28 days after conception. If construction defects occur at the top end of the tube, the baby's brain will likely be affected; if at the lower end, the spinal column will likely be affected. Large scale disruptions in the food supply as in a famine, can cause widespread problems of reproduction. Long term studies of children born to mothers who were starved in early pregnancy show damage to the mechanisms of appetite control and growth regulation, resulting in obesity in the offspring. Famine produces increased rates of diabetes and schizophrenia, partly through zinc deficiency which contributes to both of these diseases. Suboptimal nutrition, one of the factors behind the plague of low-weight babies, causes shortages of essential supplies during brain construction, resulting in a suboptimal brain.

In the mothers of low environments, autogenic neuroplasticity flows and have an impact on human neural development. Hormonal deficiencies, excesses and imbalances affect both the genes and the environment that ultimately determine neural identity and organization—all that before the baby is born.

2. Creating Emotional Foundations

One of the biggest surprises about life in the womb is the extent of emotional development and processing, generally not anticipated in psychology or medicine. Spontaneous and joyful movements that can even be observed from eleven to twelve after conception (weeks self-organized such aspects of self-control, needs and interests. Some behaviors reflect a protest against uncomfortable experiences. By 16 weeks, ultrasound shows babies moving in reaction to something as simple as a mother's laugh or cough. More disturbing are the aggressive actions seen toward the navel during cesarean sections—grasping the navel band with a closed fist, suggesting self-protection, self-assertion, fear and anger that was previously thought unobtainable. With surprising development of hearing and tasting before 16 weeks gestational age, the way is open for babies to have even more extensive interactions with their mothers and fathers. Ultrasound imaging of twins actually shows the unimpeded scope of their social relationships seen in repeated hugging, kicking, kissing or playing together. Life in the womb—now that we can observe it—

has little resemblance to the lay world previously hypothesized in which a baby was a passive passenger, virtually deprived of attention. In those days, parents themselves thought that was appropriate.

As it is with the establishment of physical settings in utero, the emotional system is also organizing itself in relation to the range and variation of experiences encountered. A baby overwhelmed with anger, fear and anxiety will adjust itself to that world and may carry those settings forward unless something changes. Patterns of neural activation visible via ultrasound before birth can be seen after birth. This emotional sensitivity of the fetus is not big reason why adoption cannot be viewed as just a single experience for the parents. Chances are, an adopted baby has emerged from confusion and conflict, both troubled and conditioned by the turmoil of the birth parents. They have been learning from experience.

BABIES IN THE UTERINE WORLD ARE INDEED HAVING A RANGE OF EXPERIENCES, ESTABLISHING PATTERNS OF INTERACTION, LISTENING TO MUSIC AND CONVERSATION, AND COMMITTING THEM TO MEMORY.

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Considering all we know today about the realities of life before birth, we must appropriately reset the clock on parenthood. The womb is no longer a dark, secret place. We know it is not an isolation tank! What goes on in there for nine months is the ceaseless molding and shaping of the whole baby—a collaboration between baby and parents. All the new facts of life plead for parental involvement, participation and cooperation in the powerful matrix of intimate interactions that take place in the womb. Pregnancy is parenting de facto. Parental influence on a child is at its peak during construction in utero. Creating is what parenting is about—creating a physical body and brain, creating emotional foundations for living, and establishing a rich connection with the prenatal self.

1. Creating a Physical Body

Parents provide the immediate physical environment that will determine whether the baby's equipment for living will be poor, average or optimal. As the foundations for physical life are laid, each new part is built upon the previous one so that both limitations and advantages are preserved. Although some degree of "plasticity" is possible during later development, the original parts remain in place. Parents who wait to think about this until after their child is born will be starting too late—nine months after all the basic equipment has been constructed. In the 20th century, parents began to face compounding hazards of reproduction. These included old and new bacteria and viruses, which seem to emerge when our immune system is weak and vulnerable. In addition, environmental dangers became more challenging with the huge new production of industrial and agricultural chemicals, a swelling tide of stimulants and sedatives such as nicotine, caffeine and alcohol, tempting "street" drugs like opiates and amphetamines, the plethora of new drugs prescribed by physicians, and new forms of electromagnetic radiation including the bombardment of ultrasound waves being overused to entertain parents during obstetrical office visits. Because of so much environmental disruption, the safety and sanctity of the womb is threatened as never before.

A mother's diet can innocently invite birth defects. Science has only slowly found the connection between deficiencies of folic acid (one of the B vitamins) and the profound malformations of anencephaly and spina bifida, defects which occur when the neural tube fails to close 18 to 26 days after conception. If construction deficits occur at the top end of the tube, the baby's brain will likely be affected; if at the lower end, the spinal column will likely be affected. Large-scale disruptions in the food supply, as in a famine, can create widespread problems of reproduction. Long-term studies of children born to mothers who were starved in early pregnancy show damage to the mechanisms of appetite control and growth regulation, resulting in obesity in the offspring. Famines produce increased rates of diabetes and schizophrenia, partly through zinc deficiency which contributes to both of these diseases. Suboptimal nutrition, one of the factors behind the plague of low-weight babies, means shortages of essential supplies during brain construction, resulting in a suboptimal brain. In the modern urban environment, estrogenic compounds flow freely and have an impact on human sexual development. Hormonal

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deficiencies, excesses and imbalances affect both the genes and the environment that ultimately determine sexual identity and orientation—all this before the baby is born.

2. Creating Emotional Foundations

One of the biggest surprises about life in the womb is the extent of emotional involvement and expression, generally not anticipated in psychology or medicine. Spontaneous and graceful movement that can now be observed from about 10 weeks after conception reveals self-expression and early aspects of selfcontrol, needs and interests. Some behaviors reflect a protest against uncomfortable experiences. By 15 weeks, ultrasound shows babies moving in reaction to something as simple as a mother's laugh or cough. More disturbing are the aggressive actions seen toward the needle during amniocentesis—attacking the needle barrel with a closed fist, suggesting self-protection, self-assertion, fear and anger that was previously thought unreal and impossible. With surprising development of hearing and tasting before 16 weeks gestational age, the way is open for babies to have even more extensive interactions with their mothers and fathers. Ultrasound imaging of twins similarly shows the unexpected scope of their social relationships seen in repeated hitting, kicking, kissing or playing together. Life in the womb—now that we can observe it— bears little resemblance to the lazy world previously hypothesized in which a baby was a passive passenger, virtually deprived of sensation. In those days, parents themselves thought that was appropriate.

As it is with the establishment of physical settings in utero, the emotional system is also organizing itself in relation to the range and varieties of experiences encountered. A baby surrounded with anger, fear and anxiety will adjust itself to that world and may carry those settings forward unless something changes. Patterns of fearful reaction visible via ultrasound before birth can be seen after birth. This emotional sensitivity of the fetus is one big reason why adoption cannot be viewed as just a simple experience for the parents. Chances are, an adopted baby has emerged from confusion and conflict, both troubled and conditioned by the turmoil of the birth parents. They have been learning from experience and are likely to arrive feeling at least uncertain, possibly rejected, carrying unconscious baggage of anxiety about its identity and connections. Parents are potent factors in shaping the dynamic world of the unborn.

3. Establishing a Rich Connection with the Prenate

Not long ago we thought it was impossible for prenates to have any truly personal or significant experiences. We didn't see that they could have a working mind. In retrospect, our false beliefs about their brain power obscured the fact that babies in the uterine world were indeed having a range of experiences, establishing patterns of interaction, listening to music and conversation,

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and as tests ultimately proved, were committing them to memory. Numerous experiments have made it clear that prenatals who have the opportunity to hear stories and music repeated to them in utero can demonstrate recognition for this material later in life. Prenatals have become familiar with and show a preference for specific lullabies, musical themes like “Peter and the Wolf,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and even theme music from television soap operas.

Prenatals memorize the voices of their mothers and fathers in utero while learning the basic features of their native language—the “mother tongue,” as we say. Spectrographic analysis of voice and cry sounds as early as 26 weeks of gestation show how far babies of this age have already progressed in adopting the voice characteristics of the mother. In a recent experiment, mothers repeated a children’s rhyme daily for four weeks from week 33 to 37 in utero. Tested at 37 weeks while still inside, the babies reacted with a change of heartbeat to the familiar rhyme, but not to an unfamiliar rhyme. In other research, babies have demonstrated immediately after birth a preference for their mother’s voice and their native language. The womb turns out to be a stimulating place and functions as a school. And all babies attend.

In the last few decades, as these facts were gradually becoming known, many books, tapes and exercises were created to help parents understand and communicate with babies in the womb. All are potentially valuable in helping parents to make a creative and loving attachment (rather than an insensitive or aggressive one), a connection which respects the needs and limitations of the baby and doesn’t overwhelm them. Babies are naturally curious and interactive. Taking advantage of this since about the 1980s, organized programs for parents have been developed and tested, revealing the benefits of carefully planned stimulation.

These studies have proven what few believed decades ago: 1) that babies in the womb are alert, aware and attentive to activities involving voice, touch and music; 2) that babies benefit from these activities by forming stronger relationships with their parents and their parents with them, resulting in better attachments and better birthing experiences, and 3) that these babies tend to show precocious development of speech, fine and gross motor performance, better emotional self-regulation, and better cognitive processing. These are the gifts and rewards of active parenting.

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