In my novel, The Birth of Hope, I created an idealized version of what a baby preparing for birth may be thinking and feeling. (You can read a quote from it atop the next page.) We have no scientific way of knowing if thoughts are even possible prior to birth. The experience is more likely a form of knowing that is beyond words. What we do know, thanks to researchers in the field of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health, is that the first nine months of life are vitally important. They lay the foundation for who we are to be in this life, on physical, mental and emotional levels. Let’s explore a bit what has been discovered and how you, as a parent, can use this information.

The field of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health (PPN) is relatively new but, thanks in part to communication technology, has developed rapidly from small groups of therapists in Europe and the United States in the ’70s and ’80s to a respected discipline, with Master- and Ph.D.-level degrees now available. Research in the field began with psychological studies and practices that included regression to prenatal and birth experiences. Many of these early studies were discounted by traditional researchers in psychology, but they laid the foundation for today’s researchers in PPN. The field has expanded beyond psychologists and therapists to include midwives, physicians, childbirth educators, neurologists and others who are interested in, and passionate about, the possibilities inherent in the way we bring new beings into this world. At the end of the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud and his followers postulated that what happened to us in our first three years after birth had a significant impact on the people we would become as adults. The end of the twentieth century brought an expansion to this notion, stretching back to our first nine months—that is, from conception until birth.
The Important First Nine Months of Life

Written by Jeane Rhodes, Ph.D.
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Thomas Verny's The Secret Life of the Unborn Child presented anecdotal evidence of prenatal and birth memories. David Chamberlain's book, Babies Remember Birth (since republished as The Mind of Your Newborn Baby), detailed his research with adult children and their mothers, reinforcing the possibility that we might remember our first nine months of life. These foundational works led to further research and the coming together of likeminded individuals to establish the organization now known as the Association of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health. The organization began publishing The Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology and Health, a quarterly peer-reviewed journal, in 1986, and has an extensive website (birthpsychology.com). Biannual conferences attract participants from around the world.

We can only touch on the highlights of research in the past 30 years that has led to the phenomenal development of the field and the ensuing benefits for babies born to aware parents. The easiest information to accept is the physical aspect of prenatal development. We have known since the 1930s that cigarette smoking has a detrimental impact on babies in utero, but it took more than 30 years for that information to be incorporated into recommendations for expectant mothers. Information now reaches parents directly, but progress is still slow-moving. It seems that resistance to knowing that we are parents from the moment of conception is deeply engrained. Part of the resistance seems to come from our own deep knowing that our prenatal and birth experiences were sometimes very painful, and that the possibility exists for us to create similar pain for our children.

At the purely physiological level, it is fairly well-established that the nervous/endocrine system of a baby is impacted by stress hormones secreted by her mother during gestation, resulting in the new individual having a hyperactive or hypoactive stress response in later life. Environmental experience is now recognized to be critical in the process of building the brain and nervous system. Researchers Cicchetti & Tucker expressed this: "Nature's potential can only be realized as it is enabled by nurture." Previously, neurologists Connelly & Prechtl had stated, "Within limits, during normal development a biologically different brain may be formed, given the mutual influence of the infant's nervous system and the mothering repertory of the caregiver."

While prenatal psychological development may be more difficult to document, it seems clear that we are influenced by our experience in the first nine months and carry the memories in our bodies. For example, the roots of various phobias, especially claustrophobia, have been traced to in-utero or birth experience. As Freud speculated, "The act of birth is the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety."

Those two brief paragraphs are but a tiny glimpse of the wealth of information available, confirming that our first nine months of life lay the foundation for all that comes later. After all, we are building our bodies and coming into awareness during this time. Our early experiences are wired into our nervous systems. The baby passes through more developmental milestones before birth than at any other time in life.

As parents, it can be very intimidating to know we are responsible for creating the environment for our children from the moment of conception. That environment, whether it is welcoming and loving or rejecting and negative, forms the template for your child's expectations of life. Prenatal parenting may be a relatively new concept, but the resources available are rich and varied. The first nine months are indeed the most important time for parenting. Your early behavior is developing, and your own parents are becoming parents, learning to love and nurture this special being who has chosen you as family.

About the Author:
Jeane Rhodes is a licensed professional counselor in the State of Colorado and is adjunct faculty (online) for the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. She is currently on the Board of Directors for APPPAH. Her novel, The Birth of Hope, follows the life of a girl called Hope from conception to birth, inspiring new awareness of the importance of the prenatal and birth stages of life.