2017 Texas Symposium on DeafBlindness
The Importance of Emotional Connection for Human Health and Happiness
8:30-10:00 AM
Saturday, March 4, 2017

Presented by
Dr. Suzanne Zydeek, Founder of the connected baby and Research Professor at the University of Dundee, Scotland
suzanne@suzannezeedyk.com

Developed for
Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Programs
Babies come into the world already connected to other people....

Suzanne Zeedyk
The Science of Human Connection, 2012

Figure 1 Suzanne Zeedyk, The Science of Human Connection logo

Such a statement is more radical than we might at first think. It means that babies arrive in the world as persons, already interested in other people’s facial expressions, rhythms and movements. They are able to communicate. They are active participants in relationships. Their brains automatically make meaning from what other people do.

That statement – babies come into the world already connected – means that the capacity to be an engaged, relational being doesn’t happen some time later in development, such as when children walk or talk or start school. This capacity is present from birth. Babies share in mental and emotional experiences (the technical term for which is ‘intersubjectivity’). This means that how we, as adults, relate to our babies matters. In fact, it matters not from birth but while babies are still in the womb.

This is not the vision that we have always held of babies. It wasn’t very long ago that science thought babies’ mental and emotional worlds were a bit of a blur or that babies were rather socially isolated and inward-focused. Cultural beliefs, too, teach us what to think about babies: can they see at birth? Are their smiles really smiles or just wind/are they crying because they need comforting or because they are trying to manipulate you?

Thus, it becomes valuable for us to become aware of our ideas about babies. Everyone benefits when new become curious about ourselves and our beliefs. The beliefs we hold about babies are often unconscious, so we aren’t even aware we hold them. They feel ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ to us. But what we believe shapes how we
behave, and the neuroscience is teaching us that how we behave towards babies shapes their brain development.

Quite literally, babies’ neural pathways are moulded by the way other people treat them! We can help babies to develop the neural pathways that we would wish for them by becoming more aware of how we ourselves regard them. It is ironic: in order to help babies develop the capacities we would most wish for them, we actually need to become more aware of ourselves, as adults, as parents, as members of a cultural group, as humans relating to other humans.

How can I make this claim, that babies come into the world already connected? How do we know that? A vast range of scientific studies now exists, with findings showing how much babies’ physiology, attention, emotions, and actions are inter-linked with other people. For example, if you engage with a baby and then suddenly stop, the baby notices and they get upset. At birth, babies are able to imitate you facial expressions and hand movements. Before they can talk, babies are able to tease, and they know when you are teasing them. The ability to tease means that babies already have some idea about what you are likely to be thinking – or the teasing wouldn’t be effective or so cute!

Even in the womb, babies come to recognize the voices of the people in their world. Parents and midwives often tell stories of babies, as soon as they are born, turning their heads to find the ‘source’ of that familiar voice – and therein gazing for the first time upon the face of their mother, father, sibling, or grandparent. That ‘meeting’ isn’t like meeting a stranger, though. That person was already familiar to them, because they knew the wound of their voice before they met. Babies loved that person before they met them.

Is it too strong to call an ‘audio stimulus’ a ‘person’? When does a ‘sound’ become a ‘person’? Is it too strong to equate ‘audio familiarity’
with ‘love’? Herein lies an on-going scientific debate. How should scientists describe their findings?

I think it is not too strong to call an ‘audio stimulus’ a ‘person’. I think it is not too strong to link ‘a sense of familiarity’ with ‘a sense of love’. What we are trying to do here is to see what the science can tell us about how a baby experiences the world. I think it is fair to summarize the conclusion emerging from the vast range of scientific findings in this way:

Humans are an intensely social species. We have brains wired to make meaning out of the behavior of other people. Babies are humans, and so their brain is making meaning, even before birth. This means that babies experience whatever we adults do as relating to them. Babies’ experiences of us become experiences of themselves. Are other people trustworthy or predictable or scary or kind or reassuring or comforting or dismissing or loving? Am I competent or creative or stupid or delightful or disappointing or irritating or smart or lovable?

So, how we behave towards our babies matters. Babies’ brains are making meaning out of everything they experience, out of everything we do with them and “to’ them. When we adults become more self-aware and self-reflective about how we are relating to our babies –how we respond to them, how we attend to them, how we behave with them – then we become more aware of what our babies’ experiences are. We become more compassionate and empathic and forgiving. We become a better listener and a more relaxed companion. We become more confident that we are giving babies the experiences we dream for them.

Ironically, becoming more aware of babies’ experiences is often a hard step for us adults. It can make us uncomfortable and fearful. We’re not sure we want to matter this much to our babies! It’s a bit overwhelming to realize how important we might be, how influential our own parents were for us. We see our failures, our faults, our inadequacies.

That fearful perspective doesn’t help us or our children. I hope we can start from a different place. Let’s start from a place of non-judgement. Let’s not give ourselves a hard time. Let’s forgive ourselves for the failures we think we see. Let’s get ourselves into a curious place, for then the insights we’ve been discussing can feel fascinating. They help
us to row, rather than to close down. Let that be the spirit with which we embark upon an Early Years Movement: a search for joy and fun and reassurance. These are amongst the experiences that we most desire – babies and grownups alike.

If you want to read more about the underlying science, here are some of my favorite books:


*Keeping your Child in Mind* by Claudia Gold, Da Capo Press 2011

*Parenting for Peace* by Marcy Axness, First Sentient Publications 2012

*The Oxytocin Factor* by Kerstin Uvnäs-Monberg, Da Capo Press 2003
We all carry within us the fear of disconnection

Suzanne Zeedyk
The Science of Human Connection, 2014

Every time you start your day, you draw on the emotional attachment processes your brain built as a baby. Perhaps you wish your partner a good day at work, give the dog one last fond pat, confidently place your youngest child in the arms of her childminder, worry whether your older child is going to patch things up with their mates at school, and turn your mind nervously to the meeting you will shortly be having with your manager. All of these experiences travel personalized neural circuits that were not in place when you were born but which you had laid down largely by the time you were one year of age. It is astounding to realize how much of our adult lives are influenced by experiences we had before we could walk, talk, or consciously remember.

Attachment is receiving renewed interest from a wide range of sectors: scientists, medical staff, educational bodies, governmental agencies, lawyers and economists, for a start. We are facing up to the fact that emotions have a much greater influence on our behaviours, thoughts, health, and cultural characteristics than our logical take on the world has traditionally acknowledged. We are realizing that we are better placed to address seemingly intractable societal problems, such as prison rates, outcomes for children in care, stress-related illnesses, and even poverty, by paying closer attention to our children’s emotional needs.

In the excitement, though, we risk viewing attachment through the lens of such problematic concerns. I think its value becomes clearer when we understand that attachment processes operate in all our lives, throughout every day, and often in ways of which we have absolutely no awareness. Understanding even some of the science of attachment
helps us to become more reflective, compassionate, and creative, as individuals and as a society.

How can we explain our physiological need of other people?

‘Attachment’ as a concept was introduced by John Bowlby in the 1950s. Bowlby was a British psychiatrist who became interested in the effect of a child’s early experience on their later mental health. Bowlby’s knowledge of evolutionary theory helped him to think about how biological drives prompt particular behaviours, and especially how the drive for survival operates in mammal species.

One of the unusual characteristics of the human species is that their young are extremely dependent. They do not walk independently for a year or more, and cannot run steadily until the age of 4 years. They have no hope of defending themselves against a predator without the help of another of their species. How might such vulnerable creatures help to keep themselves safe? This is the drive at the core of each infant’s attachment system: how can I help myself to feel as safe as possible in my particular world? What do I need to do to help the adults in my world to love me, to stay close to me, to be interested in my experiences?

Bowlby addressed that question by describing a child’s need for ‘proximity-seeking’, that is the child’s need to stay close to the adults they trust most. Since then, new theorists have used alternative terminology to explain the attachment drive. Sir Harry Burns, Scotland’s Chief Medical Officer, describes it as a person’s ability to “manage him or herself in stressful situations”. Patricia Crittenden, who runs the Family Relations Institute, defines it as the organization of mental and behavioural strategies for protection of the self and progeny”. Dan Hughes, one of the leading international thinkers in healing attachment trauma, brings it down to the core values of “playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy.
Sabre tooth tigers and teddy bears

I like to use the terminology of ‘sabre tooth tigers’ and internal teddy bears’. The image of tigers reminds us that a baby’s behaviour results from his fear of impending danger and that his fear is not imagined, because it is physiological and thus real. The notion of a ‘sabre tooth tiger’ helps us adults to take a baby’s many moments of fear more seriously.

The language of teddy bears emphasizes the importance of comfort for helping a baby deal with those fears. When a baby has repeated experiences of being comforted in the face of anxiety, then she develops the capacity to keep herself calm, which links well with the description of Scotland’s Chief Medical Officer, to “mange her stress”. But learning what comfort is like can only be done with the help of another person, because human brains are so immature at birth. The formal name for the capacity to calm yourself down is ‘self-regulation’. The terminology of ‘teddy bear’ gives us a starting point when such jargon feels complicated. We all know inherently what a teddy bear does, even if you didn’t have one.

Living with too much fear

Many people end up without a strong internal teddy bear. This is a key point of attachment theory: our early emotional experiences have a monumental impact on our later emotional capacities. Many children don’t get enough comfort, because the adults around them (whether parents or professionals) don’t recognize their behaviour as a cry for help or because the adults themselves feel overwhelmed by a babies’ intense emotional needs or because the adults don’t have enough time to pay attention to children’s feelings.

The anxiety won’t kill them. You can survive without a teddy bear, and without the resilient emotional system that comfort gives you. You can
survive, but you cannot thrive. You are likely to pay some heavy life prices, as well the people around you. The research has shown repeatedly that babies grow their core teddy bear by the age of one year. If one hasn’t taken root by then, then the child-adolescent-adult into whom that baby grows will also have difficulty comforting him or herself. Life becomes harder if you cannot comfort yourself. Healing attachment wounds, later in life, is all about learning how to comfort yourself. It’s never too late to grow an internal teddy bear.

Figure 7 Young girl hugging a stuffed bunny.
Texas School for the Blind & Visually Impaired

Outreach Programs

Figure 8 TSBVI logo.

IDEAs that Work

"This project is supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the U.S. Department of Education."

Figure 9 IDEAs that Work logo and OSEP disclaimer.