

Early and Very Early Parenting: New Territories

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Publication info: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 12. 2 (Winter 1997): 51-59.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: In the Western world, the beginnings of parenthood have been obscured by the pervasive materialism of medicine and psychology which doubts the cognitive status of neonates and denies the human aspects of fetal behavior. This has led to confusion about the nature of parenthood and when it begins. What is currently referred to as "early" parenting begins after birth and is at least nine months late. If discoveries in prenatal psychology are to be taken seriously, early parenting begins after conception and very early parenting begins before conception. These eras of parenting are new territories and are the first frontier of optimal human development. INTRODUCTION For most of us in the Western world, the real beginnings of parenthood have been obscured by a pervasive scientific materialism that assumes that newborns lack any cognition, ignores the human aspects of fetal behavior, supports an anti-intuitive urban culture, and mechanizes pregnancy and childbirth. According to the Institute of Medicine (1995) nearly 60% of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended-cither mistimed or altogether unwanted. In this society, many couples do not know they are pregnant until weeks after they have conceived. Parenthood is defined pragmatically: it starts whenever we say it starts. Pregnancy is typically seen as a "waiting" period for women "expecting" a future event. Pregnancy is a grace period (often thought to be free of consequences) when parents brace themselves for what they will face after their child's birth. Developments in the womb are caused by inscrutable forces which are considered automatic and are accepted passively. While these views and behaviors characterize our society, a host of empirical findings prove that Western notions of new-parent behaviors are inappropriate and the ideas behind them are obsolete. Parenting is due for a thorough reassessment. Cultural illusions aside, When does parenthood begin? Perhaps it should begin when the baby begins, but when does a human begin? After birth, during gestation, or even before conception? I. EARLY PARENTING BEGINS AFTER BIRTH In our culture, the majority opinion is that parenthood starts after birth. This view has been fostered by medical scientists who define a baby as matter, especially brain matter, which they believe is insufficient to register or process memory, learning, trauma, emotion, or any truly human experiences until months after birth. Persisting in this conventional view, scientists have become dogmatic in their faith, largely resisting the new flood of empirical findings about prenatal and perinatal life. In medicine and psychology, pregnancy is for construction of the physical body of the fetal child. Pregnancy requires professional, not parental, supervision. Professional supervision subtly suggests that doctors control the quality and outcome of a pregnancy while parents are supposed to be passive observers whose role begins after their child is born. Anatomy of a Campaign Nothing better illustrates the confusion of scientific and public thinking about the beginning of parenthood than the extraordinary educational campaign known as "I Am Your Child" which caught the attention of millions of Americans in the Spring of 1997. Inspired by Hollywood director Rob Reiner, and funded by two dozen foundations, the campaign alerted the public to the great importance of "the first three years of life." The campaign included an ABC prime-time gala of stars, a special edition of Newsweek on "Your Child," a White House Conference on Early Child Development beamed by satellite to 100 locations, a series on "Good Morning America," and numerous promotional interviews and appearances. The Campaign provided followup materials on video and CD-ROM for parents. Yet, amidst the exhilaration of millions of people suddenly talking about the first three years of life, it was sobering to discover that almost no attention was paid to the period from conception to birth. This omission reveals much about our society and our current "experts" on parenthood. The infrastructure of the campaign included a small Expert Advisory Board selected "to ensure that information in

the campaign was scientifically accurate." A majority of the advisors were from Zero To Three, an organization of clinicians and other professionals concerned about early human development. In spite of the name, Zero To Three, the organization states that it deals with the period from birth to three! That confusion was reflected in the nationwide campaign: The first three years of life became birth to three. The special edition of Newsweek (1997) magazine contained a series of beautiful charts on motor behavior after birth, learning after birth, and development of emotion after birth. I summarized my reaction in a Letter to the Editor: Something funny happened on the way to the first three years of life-somebody subtracted the first nine months. Newsweek's charts for motor activity, emotion, and learning, all starting after birth, overlooked the fact that these all start before birth. In emphasizing how parents could help stimulate brain associations after birth, you obscured the more important fact that brain construction takes place in the womb. Early Parent Education A new field of "early parent education" has been developing, backed by some State Legislatures and financed by Local School Districts. The purpose is to provide support and information for parents from birth thru the preschool years. Existing programs in Boulder and Hawaii (McFarland and Fanton, 1997; Mansfield, 1997) have already demonstrated their worth in reduced child abuse and domestic violence. Unfortunately, these programs in "early parenting" begin after birth. Similarly, so called "Early Head Start" is for children under four. "Success By Six," a program of the State of Vermont, sends workers to new parents within two weeks of birth. One of their social workers boasted to a Time magazine reporter, "That gets us in the door at age zero." Age zero is birth? What happened to the first nine months? Parenting that starts after birth is a cultural illusion. This parenting begins at least nine months late!

II. EARLY PARENTING IS FROM CONCEPTION TO BIRTH

Parenting from conception to birth is a new idea, perceived by many as radical and unnecessary, since there is, as yet, nothing to parent. This has been the accepted view in both medicine and psychology whose representatives have had a powerful effect on our culture. However, in the last quarter century, the evidence has continued to mount: Life before birth is a formative, dynamic, matrix of interactions in which all parties are profoundly affected (Chamberlain, 1998). Research findings have been providing a startling new picture of the human fetus. (1) The fetus possesses a keen sense of touch, taste, and hearing. Pain receptors are working. Visual resources, though not fully developed, are responsive to light. (2) The fetus already demonstrates impressive cognitive talents, including various forms of learning and memory, as well as a frequency of dreaming higher than at any other time of life. (3) Fetal behavior is social and interactive. Prenates can be cooperative or resistant. They are capable of "agency," they act in self-defense, express personality, and respond to parental communication. Twins in utero are relating to each other: They are seen playing together, kissing, and hitting. Prenates are definitely not what we thought they were (Chamberlain, 1992). The dynamic circumstances of life before birth make parenting a reality, even if it is overlooked or refused. Parents need to know how fast things happen in utero. Before some parents know they are pregnant, their baby's body and organs could already be formed. In utero, construction of the brain is continuous. The brain is exercised, tested by experience, and reshaped-all under the jurisdiction of parents, not professionals. In the womb of the family, the foundations for emotional stability are created and fine-tuned. In the womb, the patterns for intimate relationships are formed, decisions about self are made, and mental expectations about life are cast. Parenting proceeds at a rapid pace, ready or not! For the last decade, parents at the "Prenatal University" in Hayward, California (Van de Carr and Lehrer, 1986) have been thrilled to discover they can exchange touch signals, play games with their unborn babies, stimulate their senses, and even teach them words and feelings to prepare them for birth. Meanwhile, all parents everywhere-whether they intend to or not-are teaching babies their "mother tongue" and are offering a basic course in music. Formal research in prenatal stimulation proves that properly focused parental intentions and interactions with babies in the womb can pay off handsomely. Although experiments in prenatal stimulation and bonding are not yet scientifically or publicly recognized, they have employed control and experimental groups, systematic observations and measurements, and batteries of psychological tests. These experiments have shown beneficial results. Testing of babies given enriched stimulation in Thailand (Panthuraamphorn,

1993), Venezuela (Manrique et al, 1993), and Spain (Lafuente et al, 1997) have generally shown that enriched babies display superior fine and gross motor skills, earlier speech and language development, earlier smiling and greater contentment after birth, superior visual and auditory perception, coordination, and cognitive development. Parents participating in these groups are regularly talking and singing to babies and building relationships with them before birth. Piercing the cultural haze that surrounds them, these parents have discovered the whole baby—a baby with body, mind, and spirit. They have discovered that parenthood starts earlier, is much more meaningful, engaging, and important than they previously thought possible.

III. VERY EARLY PARENTING STARTS BEFORE CONCEPTION

Conscious Conception

To a pioneering minority, parenting begins before conception because they consider it a spiritual process about which they want to be conscious (Baker, 1986). They may also appreciate that their own health, habits, and environment will determine the quality of their conception and they know their efforts at "quality control" can spare their baby from a lifetime of sickness and handicap. Perhaps they also know research has shown that with habitual use, alcohol, drugs, and tobacco are teratogens which can create birth defects. When fathers are smokers, they may damage their sperm and pass a higher risk of childhood cancer to their offspring (Sorahan et al 1997). As many as 15% of childhood cancers could be due to smoking by fathers. The risk is 42% greater if fathers are smoking over 20 cigarettes a day. Other studies have shown that smoking plays a role in sudden infant death syndrome and in the production of smaller, underweight babies—all reasons to prepare consciously for conception. If mothers consume alcohol at the time of conception, they raise the risk of giving birth to babies with facial anomalies (which they may have to look at for a lifetime). To avoid other birth defects, couples preparing for a conscious (rather than unconscious) conception may want to rid themselves of heavy metals, eliminate the need for prescriptions, or fortify themselves nutritionally before bringing egg and sperm together. Having sufficient folic acid in the system before conception may insure normal development of the neural tube, protecting their child from spina bifida and anencephaly. Chronic occupational stress can lower fertility rates, preventing parenting altogether. When it doesn't, a premature conception may provide a stiff challenge to the baby who must continually swim in a stormy sea. Over the years, I have met a succession of pregnant TV producers and "anchors" who asked whether working through to the last weeks of pregnancy might effect their unborn children!

When Babies Show Up Before Conception

Finally, some parents today are being startled by encounters with babies before they are conceived. These parents are introduced to very early parenting by vivid dreams, visions, and appearances that come weeks, months, or even years in advance of physical conception. Their perspective on parenthood becomes distinctly spiritual. Two members of APPPAH have written about these encounters. When I first read their work, I was reminded of when I first read Raymond Moody's now-famous little book, *Life After Life* (1995), which quietly introduced the revolutionary concept of the "near-death experience." This book began sweeping the world, based on only fifty in-depth interviews with people who had had the near-death experience. The remarkable book by Elizabeth Hallett, *Soul Trek* (1995), contains nine years of research discovering the anecdotal reports of 180 persons who told of visitations, inner voices, subtle "knowings," and other types of contact with their babies prior to conception. One baby successfully pressed his mother not to have an abortion, saying he was running out of time and needed to come! These engaging and powerful contacts, filled with purpose and intelligence, have made a profound impression on those visited. Showing up in spiritual form, the future babies brought reassurance, conveyed love, announced, persuaded, gave guidance, and otherwise sought to prepare mothers (some of whom were not yet married) for their future coming. In one case, later dramatized on television, the child appeared to the mother, father, and a sibling, appearing, disappearing, and returning to them independently (Sightings, 1997). Elizabeth's book is packed with stories which exceed the boundaries of the materialist paradigm. You can read some of these stories on our website at *Life Before Birth: Communication Before Conception—A Spiritual Frontier*, (birthpsychology.com). Theresa Danna, in the booklet, *The Link of Love* (1996) tells her own experience as a single woman seeing a baby's face, six to eight months old, with male energy, and light brown eyes "looking right at me." The same

baby appeared seven months later as a three-year old, in a flash when she was falling to sleep. He smiled and said "Mommy, I'm coming." She said of this visit, "Never have I felt so much love flowing into me. . . In that moment my outlook on life changed." Her friends passed off these experiences as wishful thinking. She wondered if she was going crazy. When she wrote to a magazine and asked if there were parents who had similar experiences, she received 20 replies from different parts of the United States. Stories came from mothers, fathers, and relatives who said they had had this sort of experience but had been too shy to tell others. (These, too, can be seen on our website <birthpsychology.com>. Thirty additional touching and compelling cases can be found in *Coming From the Light: Spiritual Accounts of Life Before Birth*, by Sarah Hinze (1997). Sarah's own experience, retold in her book, captured her interest and inspired her search for others who had similar experiences. I would like to share a brief excerpt from her book which is a story contributed by Cambria Henderson. The visitation came as she was cleaning up the kitchen after lunch, as her three little ones napped in their beds. Playing Peek-A-Boo "I heard a giggle behind me and supposed that my son was playing 'Peek-a-boo' with me. I felt the glee, as my little one peeked around the corner, saw me, and then quickly withdrew before I could turn around. That happy little giggle had me completely charmed. I went busily about my work, pretending not to hear. I suddenly caught a reflection of a sweet little face in the mirror that was sitting on my counter. I turned quickly, hoping to surprise and delight him and chase him back to his bed. As my little one turned to run down the hallway, I realized that he had taken off all his clothes. All I could see was the bare backside of this precious child. I thought it strange, as I went after him, that when I turned the hall corner, I couldn't see him. I didn't think he could run quite that fast. I also noticed that my house suddenly became very quiet. I stopped in front of the door to the nursery, thinking I would play a trick on him. Suddenly, I stopped short. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. All three of my children were quietly napping in their beds, all three of them fully dressed! I stood in the doorway in amazement. Who was my little visitor? Where did he go? And why did he choose to visit me and be so playful. I didn't know. I didn't have any answers. Many years later, as my youngest child was playing a game of 'peek-a-boo' with me, after getting out of the tub, she turned and ran down the hallway, giggling with delight. She was so pleased with herself, being such a tease with mom. A feeling of *deja-vu* swept over me. . . I suddenly realized that she had been my child visitor. I had had the incredible opportunity of sharing a sweet, loving moment with my child, five years prior to her birth." Important new trends often begin in this fashion, with clusters of reports from widely scattered sources, reports with important similarities that stretch the boundaries of current thinking. In such stories, babies and children take the initiative to communicate and to establish a bond with their future parents. Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, known for her pioneering discoveries about death and dying, refers to this new literature as "the next great area of research-the study of where we came from." These works are an exciting addition to the literature of prenatal psychology and health. IN CONCLUSION We are living in a time when new paradigms are needed to more accurately describe our babies and ourselves. The research probing deeply into prenatal and perinatal life, like the research that has probed deeply into the experience of death, pushes us to formulate a much larger view. Our new understanding of babies will force a change in our understanding of parenthood and when parenthood begins. The evidence from all types of legitimate investigation (i.e., experimental, clinical, and anecdotal evidence) compels us to wonder about the true beginning of our responsibilities to our children. Parenting begins sooner than we thought, and also can be more meaningful and exciting than we expected. Early and very early parenting, the periods after conception and before conception, are the first frontier of optimal human development. References REFERENCES APPPAH Website (1998). <<http://www.birthpsychology.com>>. The sections cited are found in "Life Before Birth" and the column "Communication Before Conception: A Spiritual Frontier. Baker, J.P. and F. (1986), *Conscious conception: Elemental journey through the labyrinth of sexuality*. Monroe, UT: Freestone Publishing Co. and Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books. Chamberlain, D.B. 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Publication title: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

Volume: 12

Issue: 2

Pages: 51-59

Number of pages: 9

Publication year: 1997

Publication date: Winter 1997

Year: 1997

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 08833095

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198680624

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198680624?accountid=36557>

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Last updated: 2010-06-06

Database: ProQuest Public Health

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