

## The Individual Life Project: A New Way of Discovering the Unborn Child's World and Potentialities

**Author:** Soldera, Gino

**Publication info:** Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology & Health 16. 4 (Summer 2002): 361-376.

[ProQuest document link](#)

**Abstract:** None available.

**Full Text:** Headnote ABSTRACT: In each individual there is a life project, which can be traced back to conception. The life project exists in the depths of a child's being, close to their essence; from there, it influences all the internal and external processes. The life project contains what a person needs to realize personal potentialities that are present from conception. The life project seldom appears clear to the parents from the beginning although unborn children send signals of their existence and their character. Unfortunately, in our materialistic culture signals from the unborn are systematically ignored, deflected and then forgotten by parents. Education begins from conception and can be properly achieved by parents only if they establish a deep contact with their children, communicating with them, and coming to know their life project.

INTRODUCTION One merit of prenatal psychology has been to bring to light the fact that there is in each individual a life project that can be traced back to conception. This view posits the idea that from conception there is an individual genetic structure which will accompany the human through his life, and in addition an individual life project, on which his future life will depend. The individual life project, like any project, encompasses what that human being will become, with his personal characteristics, his latent potentialities and his predispositions, which may be developed in the course of his life and may influence his mode of existence. If we consider the human being as a global and unitary being, we should not forget that from his first formation a genetic structure has been operating within him which is actually psychogenetic, since the genetic components of organic nature co-exist with those of psychic nature; thus the genetic structure can be considered both on the biochemical and on a functional and emotional level. Certain researchers on this subject posit the existence of E-DNA or emotional DNA, derived from the emotions that parents transmit to their child through heredity or during pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> What the unborn child receives, as an inheritance from his parents, is the sum of the competence and wisdom achieved by humanity as it has evolved to date, and which is now uniquely and originally present in him, and ready to be learned and experienced. For this reason, the human being shouldn't be considered as a tabula rasa, a white cloth to be colored in, or an empty bag to be filled in, but rather as a fully alive and dynamic reality who from the outset deserves attention and respect, which serve to establish significant contact and initiate meaningful exchange. The unborn child brings something new and precious to life, a message to his parents, his family, his society, and to humanity as a whole, enabling this last to continue in renewal and evolution towards an ever better quality of life. Acknowledging the existence of a human being as full and complete from the outset is of fundamental importance to the kind of relationship the parents will establish with him; this relationship bears substantially on the kinds of experience the newborn will undergo, and constitutes the primary material of his education through the relations and attitudes directed towards him from outside. We can thus say that in the unborn child there is innate and particular knowledge, difficult to accede to precisely because it is deeprooted in the individual; and that this will play an important role in determining his life choices. Of course, this innate knowledge is always available to the individual, even if he remains unaware of it. Moreover, it is very different from the knowledge that will later be acquired through life experience, and helps the individual to express himself and make himself known. INFANT PRODIGIES Thanks to propitious environmental conditions, infant prodigies such as violinist Yehudi Menuhin, concert pianist Van Cliburn and composer Mozart, were able to express and thus convince people of their abilities during their infancy. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was one of the most famous infant prodigies. He began to learn the notes of the piano when he was three years old; at four he could identify imperfections in tuning of a quarter tone; at the age of 8 he was

able effortlessly to play a complex piece that he had never seen before. Mozart started to compose at the age of 5, writing two minuets for harpsichord. From his earliest youth he could play a piece by heart perfectly after just one hearing, and could improvise on a musical theme without repetition. In such cases, without an appropriate sound environment, or without parents and tutors expert in music, it is unlikely that these children would have been able to play instruments or compose music from infancy. We can hypothesize that the absence of propitious conditions would not have permitted these children to develop and express their abilities, at least in this phase; on the contrary, it might easily have created a sort of inner unease, similar to that experienced by the mother towards the end of pregnancy, when she finds herself unable to bring her already mature child into the world. We are still far from a full understanding of innate knowledge, and in particular of the bases on which it is built and the channels through which it develops. Certainly instinctive and innate knowledge is unrelated to the channels of logical and rational intelligence, which are still very weak in the child, but is instead related to everything which pertains to intuition, understood as direct knowledge-unmediated by literal truth-and as a ready and acute perception of reality. Intuition seems to be innate in human beings, and has always sustained and favored their exploratory, expressive and creative activity, and empathy towards others. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the case of Ariane, a French child who from the age of 14 months lived in direct contact with animals of all species, first in Africa, then in the Amazon, and finally in Australia. Her parents were both veterinarians and passionate about wild animals. Ariane showed from the outset an exceptional ability to establish an immediate rapport with all types of animals, a perception of what was happening in the locality, and a sense of when a situation was growing dangerous or risky, at which point she would throw herself into her parents' arms for security and protection.<sup>2</sup>

## THE INDIVIDUAL LIFE PROJECT

The fact that in our society innate knowledge is little considered-even neglected-in favor of acquired knowledge, represents a disadvantage for the individual, who from the outset finds himself unable to make use of his extensive abilities and potential; on the contrary, he is obliged to undergo a process of conditioning far removed from his natural reality. The child is obliged to adapt himself from infancy to an artificial reality, and increasingly to live according to adult models and rhythms. In time this depletes sensitivity and attentiveness towards the inner world, in favor of a precocious and sometimes worrying emphasis on the external. The child is thus distanced from himself. This frequently engenders a disequilibrium between the internal and external worlds, leading to adult unease and suffering, while society meanwhile loses its most authentic life references. To know our individual life, which everyone possesses from the beginning but which few are aware of, we need to look within ourselves and excavate what we find with a measure of insistence, if we are not live our lives in indifference, and without aim. The individual life project exists inside the individual, in the depths of his being, close to his essence; from there, it influences all the internal and external processes which affect his life, just as the genetic structure, if it encounters no particular obstacles in its path, precisely and fixedly effects the building of the human organism. On the psychological level, we may place the individual life project between the transpersonal self and the personal self, maintaining a continuous and direct dynamic rapport with both. The transpersonal self continuously feeds and nurtures the individual life project, while the life project influences and is influenced by the personal self, without in any way losing its own characteristics, thanks to a sort of functional self-regulation. The individual life project fulfills two important roles: first, it allows the human being to develop, grow, and acquire what is necessary to live; second, once these basic abilities are acquired, it allows him to improve the special abilities which require sacrifices and effort to bring to fulfillment and complete openness towards life. Formation and development refer to the initial phase of life, where the centripetal processes are particular active bringing energies from outside into the person. The individual life project thus acts as a guide to development, determines the hereditary processes, effects the constitution of individuality and orients relations with the environment, thus permitting the gradual development of body and mind. Constructive application of abilities occurs later, once developmental has been achieved: when the polarity is reversed, the centrifugal processes begin to make themselves felt, drawing out the individual towards the outside, towards others, and towards

society. This occurs in an atmosphere of openness, awareness and comparison with others, moving toward maturation. This second role, often neglected, corresponds in psychoanalytical terms to the passage from primary to secondary narcissism—a phase in which the individual decides to abandon everything concrete and personal acquired during development. These are now considered limiting and unnecessary and are set aside in order to discover new dimensions, above all the internal spheres of life and experience. For this reason life is a succession of renunciations, holding deeper discoveries of our own being, and where the initial pain gives way to the joy of finding ourselves, finding a meaning to life, and a sense of a larger reality. History provides testimony to this, having often had its course affected by the acts of persons, like Saint Francis, who at a certain point in their life were able to heed the inner call to a greater coherence with themselves and with their individual project, and decided to change their life completely, devoting themselves to others or to religious life, doing what they felt they had been called to do. The individual life project contains everything that the human being needs to fulfill the personal potential present from conception, following a unique and original path with its own modes and rhythms. The various situations encountered throughout life, and the resources available, are not an end in themselves, but a means of coping with internal and external obstacles and difficulties necessary to bring about personal maturation.

**POTENTIALS AND PERILS** To live on the revenue of our own physical, intellectual and artistic abilities without striving towards higher ends and without resolving problems or childhood traumas may ultimately have negative effects in moral and personal degeneration and loss of vision of the enormous possibilities offered by life—possibilities which must be actively explored, discovered and embraced. This process has been observed in many famous people, including Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Judy Garland. The actress Judy Garland, born in Minnesota to a family of theater artists, first demonstrated her talents at the age of two, as soon as she was able to walk. She had a highly successful professional life and all who saw her dance, sing and act (critics included) unreservedly admired her. However, this success was accompanied by a whole series of hysterical scenes before performances, excessive use of alcohol and medications, abuse of sex, and by suicide attempts that increased her alienation from her real self, and rendered inaccessible the means of anchoring herself. In this way she sank further and further until her eventual death in a lavatory cubicle.<sup>3</sup> Other gifted individuals, however, touching rock bottom, have decided to change the course of their lives, have taken themselves in hand, and managed to discover their immense inner resources. One such was Dante Alighieri, whose immortal work *The Divine Comedy* provides a profound and systematic examination of the various stages of a person's life, beginning in hell, and progressing through purgatory, before finally attaining paradise. It is impossible to accede directly to our life project, even if we wanted to, because it is hidden in the depths of our heart and is invisible to our eyes, as are the thoughts that dwell continuously in our mind. But if we are attentive and maintain an open attitude free of those prejudices which are so often the burial ground of our awareness, the individual life project continually transmits to us, in various forms and ways, its messages and information, depending strictly on the kind of relationship we have in that moment with ourselves and with the external world. If, on the other hand, we are inattentive, if we maintain a closed and prejudicial attitude, then the life project may manifest itself in covert ways such as body language, a particular functional disease, or through strong impulses—often beyond our control—towards people and things, or through life situations which continually repeat themselves. A German approach to psychosomatic disorders<sup>4</sup> that afflict the individual in the course of life, traces their origins back to the individual's estrangement from his life project, which leads to defeat, by which we understand a loss of meaning in life. On the contrary, when there is a healthy openness and receptivity towards our own life project, the project makes itself known in manageable and direct ways, through the natural desires, interests, opportunities of life. Dreams, precisely because they come from the internal world, constitute a privileged means of coming to know the designs of our life project and the ways in which we currently relate to it. To ensure suitable child development, parents should not only attend to the development of personal abilities and talents, but also to the child as a human being, as a persona: this is essential for fulfillment of the personal life project on which both present and future depends.

Here is the example of William James Siclis (1898-1944) who started to read at the age of 2, invented a new logarithmic table at 8, and at 10 already spoke six languages. At 11 he enrolled in Harvard University, where he gave math lessons to the professors. When William was a child, his father subjected him to intolerable pressures, forbidding him any infantile amusement or play, or allowing the press to hound him. He grew up so hating his father that after his graduation from Harvard at the age of 16, he gave up interest in mathematics. This young talent dedicated the rest of his life to banal clerical work; his interests became obsessive and autistic, and he was unable to live out his life with dignity.<sup>5</sup> The individual life project may be known to parents from the moment of conception, because it is from that moment that the unborn child, as a being that lives in synthesis with the present, begins transmitting signals which contain within them the contents of the future. The Swiss theologian and writer Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801) realized this and expressed this opinion about pregnancy: If a woman could describe in detail all the imaginative states which pass through her soul during pregnancy, perhaps she could partly foresee her child's philosophical, moral, intellectual, and physiognomic destiny.<sup>6</sup>

#### GETTING THE CHILD'S EARLY SIGNALS

The signals which arrive from the unborn child are many, and we have various clear instances of this. For example, during pregnancy, Napoleon Bonaparte's mother developed an overriding interest in military issues, visiting battlefields and studying military strategy, even though these matters had never interested her before pregnancy, nor did they interest her in the slightest after the birth of the future emperor.<sup>7</sup> One day during pregnancy, the mother of Edward Teller, noted physicist and advocate of nuclear weapons, was walking in a Budapest park when she stopped to study the surrounding landscape. When her friend asked why she had stopped, the mother answered: "I feel this time it will be a male, and I am sure he will be famous; I am looking for the most suitable place for his monument."<sup>8</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt's mother, talking to a lady who was the mother of four children, told her: "I have had only one child, but he has turned out very well."<sup>8</sup> Roosevelt's mother precociously realized his value, committed herself to ensuring his formation during growth, and subsequently supported him through every difficult step of his life. Nowadays the signals coming from the unborn child are often systematically ignored, redirected, or forgotten by parents, influenced as they are by the cultural tenets of society, and are thus basically skeptical that their child is a real, complete human being like them, with distinctive potential and resources. Because of this cultural attitude towards children, parents are unable to establish a free, open and empathic relationship with them—from one consciousness to another consciousness. Such a relationship would allow parents to perceive their child in totality and sometimes in essence, all the while remaining themselves; they could enjoy communication and exchange which constitutes the foundations of the first true relationship of all human beings, and on which all future relationships depend. Instead, from the outset, many parents tend to squander precious information about their child, information essential to the development of a suitable education. This becomes even more important if we consider child education in its original and true meaning, that is, to draw out what the child has inside. For this reason, parents should undertake care of a child from the beginning of gestation itself, because it is during gestation that the individual prepares for ultimate potentialities. The unborn child needs to be placed in physical and psychic conditions most propitious to self-expression, and free of obstacles which lead to waste, limitation and disharmony, and which may constitute a breeding-ground for future illness and disease. In other words, education begins at conception and cannot be appropriately undertaken by parents if they do not establish contact with their child, if they fail to communicate and remain ignorant of their child's life project. This knowledge of the child's life project begins in gestation, when the mother realizes she is not the same person as she was, and that a new human being, with its own body and mind, is now living inside her and influencing her existence through its presence and energy, inducing new experiences, new ideas and thoughts, and new moods. Grasping the differences that occur from conception in her internal world and in her relationship with her partner, allows the mother to begin to acknowledge her child's reality, energies, characteristics, and, ultimately, the life project. It is a matter of noticing entirely natural signs occurring spontaneously in numerous forms and aspects. These signs may not be immediately transparent and comprehensible; on the contrary, for the most

part their occurrence is considered without significance and ascribed to chance and circumstance rather than to the dynamic process deriving from the actions and interactions of the life being formed. In general, only a careful and global reading made a posteriori, by rearranging the various elements of the mosaic, allows us properly to understand the significance of these signs, and what the child wants to communicate to the parents through them. A detailed diary, such as I have encountered in several cases, allows us retrospectively to identify many elements and events directly related to the child's interests, behavior and emotions, which have proved indicative of this child's personal reality. I offer this illustration.<sup>9</sup> Ms. C., 37, from Pordenone, Italy, wrote after the birth of her third-born son, L: During pregnancy I changed very much: my behavior was very similar to my partner's. At the beginning, I felt overwhelmed by a strong energy that I was not able to control; I was no longer very patient, and if I could not do something immediately, I became irritated. I developed a bent for practical and organizing activities, I preferred to draw rather than to paint, I felt nervous and irritable when there were changes in the weather. Faced with a problem, I didn't feel the need to think about it a lot, but went for an immediate solution. I loved listening to music and I loved water. From the beginning (after two months of pregnancy) I felt that my child was a male with green eyes like his father and a strong constitution, and that he was a decisive person with strong ideas. Moreover, I didn't feel that he was a particularly delicate child, in the sense of preferring a firmer handling to gentle caresses. Then I felt very attracted by new things, I liked to go out and to visit places that I had known before. In the last two-three months of pregnancy, the child used to wake up at 4 a.m. and turn somersaults. In the evening, my partner and I would talk to him and caressed him, and he responded with little kicks. He sensed my and my partner's mood very much, and if we were worried or nervous, he became very upset. He sensed the people he did not like and became likewise upset. At night we made him listen to a music box and after awhile he fell asleep. At birth, L. was a physically strong child with green eyes. When he heard the music box, he immediately calmed down and this proved very useful during the first days in hospital. He continued to wake up at 4 am; in the first months, he cried and ate; afterwards, he woke up and he chatted on his own or played with his toys. He loves water and playing with water, and this has a calming effect on him. He is very sensitive to weather changes he sometimes grows nervous and restless even one or two days before. He is very sensitive to my and his father's moods: if we are worried or nervous he too will become restless, or else will cry. He loves being all together with us both, playing and speaking. Instead of giving me caresses, he tends to make faces, or hit me playfully, or pull my hair, this obviously as a source of play and fun. He is not usually very patient, and when he is not able to do something immediately, he gets angry. He loves music, especially if it fits with his mood, and asks for it at night when he has to fall asleep, while during the day he has great fun listening to stories and nursery rhymes. L. is a very energetic and active child, he moves a lot (in particular his feet, as during pregnancy), and he likes to wander around, exploring and discovering new things. Out on the grass, or anywhere in the middle of nature, he tends to calm down and to observe what's happening around him: the sound of the wind, flowers, animal behavior, and above all the presence of water. These simple observations reveal is a strict continuity between L's experience before and after his birth; and this has been a pleasant surprise for me, allowing me to establish a deep relationship with him from the outset, and also actively involve my partner in this relationship, such that the father could feel the child immediately as his. Here is another example, reported to me by Ms. A., 30 years old: Pregnancy represented a sort of renewal for me. Rationality, which had primarily constituted my way of coping with reality before pregnancy, gave way to imagery, intuition, empathy, emotion. Some days after conception, I felt a deep change in myself. I started to feel a strong will-power growing inside me, I felt full of energy and capable of doing many things. These are not characteristics of my personality, which is introverted, unsure, calm and reflexive. For this reason, I felt a child was growing inside me. A child who was particularly like his/her father: optimistic, very extrovert and sociable, lively, with a particular predisposition to open-air life. This character became part of me throughout my pregnancy. I developed a greater aptitude for establishing relationships with others, I grew more communicative and sure of myself, and I spent more time walking, being in contact with nature, discovering new places. During

pregnancy, I had another intense perception, which made me understand even more clearly how deep is the communication between a mother and an unborn child: I felt with inexplicable certainty that the child was a boy, and I even expected him to be a fine chubby child with blonde hair and blue eyes. Leonardo, as we have called him, is now 15 months old. He is very much like his father physically and in personality. He is chubby and has wonderful blue eyes and blonde hair. He is particularly sociable, everyone finds him very pleasant especially because he has a rich and amusing way of expressing himself. I think that extroversion and sociability are the personality traits which most characterize him: he actually started to smile at people very early, at 20 days, and to communicate vocally very early, when someone talked to him. Leonardo is also full of energy, he does not give up easily when tackling something he is not able to do; he is always on the move or involved in discovering the objects around him, and he is so curious and lively that I need to be very creative to keep inventing new games. He loves to be in the open air, and if he could, he would spend the whole day playing outside. Every day I am more astonished to see how strong a mother's intuition and empathy abilities can be during pregnancy; every day I realize how my child's personality has enriched and completed me since conception. The opportunity for parents to know the child's life project begins at gestation, but also continues after birth throughout the child's growth and development. The fact that parents have a predictive ability towards their child in this phase has been confirmed by research by Dr. Pino Noia, from the Center of Prenatal Diagnosis at the Policinico Gemelli in Rome. According to this research, 81% of future mothers are able to predict intuitively if the unborn child is a male or female.<sup>10</sup> SIGNALS AFTER BIRTH At birth, the child's life project, like his personal characteristics, can be grasped through body language, and in particular through the morphological structure and the face, which represent the social and individual aspect and the external image. In the first months it is difficult to grasp the individual life project because the child still has low control of his body and is almost entirely dependent on the external world. The sensitive parent will thus try to observe the child through emotional reactions and expressive manner, revealed in diverse situations towards environments and people. Parents adept at this kind of observation have generally learned to know their children from gestation; in fact, the child is basically the same, and change is simply his way of being. It is extraordinary to see how in this phase some mothers know everything about their child, even things that the experts are not able to grasp, and which they thus tend to dismiss as pure imagination. The older the child grows, the reactions, communication and behavioral traits become more meaningful. The work of listening and understanding a child is easier for a person who has adopted an open manner, is able to listen and to enter into an empathic relationship. Humans seem free and able to communicate themselves, their treasures and their jealously guarded secrets, only when they instinctively feel the warmth of being sufficiently loved and respected in intimacy. Love is necessary in order to acquire trust in the other, to understand that it is possible to give oneself up to another without being harmed, and helped along the difficult pathways of life. Therefore, in general, we can say that if parents carefully listen to their child, it is possible at every moment to grasp an entire flow of information relating to the child's personal reality, needs and tendencies, and that this can only favor an understanding of vocation and the future life project. Moving in this direction can be relatively easy for parents if they do not place themselves and their own life project before that of the child, and if they give ample opportunities to be creative through the most suitable channels-various kinds of play, singing, music, drawing, and writing. Able and sensitive parents do not entertain fantasies about their children, because everyone should be able to live his life freely and to decide autonomously; they do not impose their own values and prejudices on a child's life: the child needs simply to be regarded with unconditional approval and to experience self as a positive reality, full of potentialities. This can be summarized in the affirmation: "I am sure you will do well in everything you decide to do." The child's individual life project seldom appears clear and defined to the parents from the outset; they are generally able, in the best circumstances, to notice various signs day by day, details which, even if they do not seem initially meaningful, can be linked together. As these signs or fragments emerge, they arrange themselves into a unitary design within an ever more clearly defined outline. The individual life project reveals itself in the most disparate

and unexpected ways: particular experiences, interest in places, works of art, activities, or in less happy periods, such as illness, the loss of a loved one, or in suffering. DISCOVERING OUR OWN PROJECT Here are two revealing episodes, one involving film director Ingmar Bergman, and one involving the English psychiatrist R. D. Laing. Ingmar Bergman wrote: I wanted a movie projector more than anything. The year before, they had taken me to the movies for the first time and I saw a movie called Black Beauty, I think. Everything started there. It put me in a fever which has never left me. Those dumb shadows, with their pale faces, looked at me and spoke with an unaudible voice to my innermost feelings. Sixty years have gone by and I am still in this fever.<sup>11</sup> The famous exponent of anti-psychiatry, R. D. Laing, tells of a discovery he made when he was a teenager, in a small public library: In this library I was looking at all the books very carefully, from A to Z. This first important work I read by Kierkegaard was the most intense experience of my life. I read right through, without sleeping, over thirty-four hours. I had not read any references which might have sent me in this direction. It was a total revelation. I had finally found someone who was perfect for me. I felt as if a new life was beginning inside me.<sup>8</sup> It could be said that every occasion offered by experience allows us to know different aspects of reality, to take possession of the means given by existence and to increase our awareness of life. Nonetheless, there are certain very particular occasions where the signals received are extremely precise and their effects strong and profound, and these can reflect particular dispositions and attitudes, or provide a strong inner stimulus to grow and change. TMs can favor contact with our own personal limitations or with our shadowy areas, and may occur equally during episodes in which we play a principal role as during those where we are passive spectators. The importance of this moment is given by the event's recurrence over time and under diverse circumstances: from the richest to the poorest, from the most to the least pleasant, from the quietest to the most dramatic, or as in those successive dreams which present identical content under diverse guises. The event becomes thus a means allowing the interested party to access the core of the message and to grasp its precise meaning—to take possession of the opportunity provided by the experience. This happens in each of us when in the course of life we begin to go in the right direction, we observe that we start to unravel the skein of existence, which becomes at once less confused and cumbersome, and also clearer, allowing us to begin to grasp the meaning of life in things and events, and to move in compliance with our life project. We thus become aware that our interior compass needle is oriented towards the essence, towards our true nature and origin; meanwhile life starts to become a source of serenity and joy, growing broader, richer and more pleasant than before. Everything grows clearer, even if only briefly, because we feel inside that we have chosen the right path and are set in the right direction. Study has shown that a sense of personal illumination is achieved when human beings are in tune with themselves and aware of their own life project, and this can manifest itself in all its consistency and value. In this sense every moment of our life becomes a matter of life and death, an occasion of change in duality and of continuity in unity, allowing rebirth to a new existential condition corresponding with a personal order and organization. The principal victims of our mistakes are ourselves and not others, however it may first appear and whatever we may believe. Our mistakes serve to indicate that we are deviating from our essence and our life project, and proceeding down another path that will complicate our existence, which will have to identify new opportunities and ways of personal development through a sort of re-elaboration and readaptation of our project. Parents can from the outset play a decisive role in allowing children to follow their own life and to live in compliance with their life projects, which corresponds with their own existential expectations: the reasons why they are here now and not elsewhere, and why they were born in this particular period of history rather than in another. Parents have little freedom to maneuver in front of the child, and have few available alternatives, not least because the child is not born from nothing, and on the contrary, is the precise consequence of an entire series of processes which have gone before. Therefore, as happens in the relationship between person and reality, one cannot refuse it without throwing into question one's relationship to it. Refusal or only partial acceptance of a child is an irresponsibility which harms the relationship between child and parent and has negative consequences on the lives of both. Gardner asserts that exceptional results in child development and

in intelligence development can be obtained when innate potential is molded by educational practices and by a culture in concord with individual preferences, in a process where certain specific abilities interact in complex tasks and are moved together with other abilities to creative ends.<sup>12</sup> This reality must be accepted in its totality: if we do not accept it or accept it only partially, it is no longer our ally, and becomes our enemy, complicating the situation, and making it ever more difficult to handle. Parents can only accept their children in toto for who they are and for what they would like them to be and become. There are no alternatives if we want life to express itself in all its beauty and fullness. Nowadays we are still far from this aim, because our low self-esteem and our lack of trust in ourselves and in our potential, almost automatically engender a lack of trust in life, in others, and in our own children. Parents often tend to place their own expectations, desires and needs before those of the child, and, unfortunately, they tend also to introduce their own ghosts and chimeras, with all their consequences. Overcoming this frequently long-established mechanism requires an investment of energies and resources that parents do not always possess and are often reluctant to use, because of their own difficult childhoods or because of the huge investments they have made in other areas of their life, which are quite unconnected with their child's reality.

**THE EMPATHIC RELATIONSHIP** When parents realize that accepting their child means accepting themselves and their own life, it becomes easier for them to establish contact and to live out an empathic relationship, knowing the child's tendencies, merits and defeats, resources and difficulties, and the child's hidden or not yet mature abilities. A relationship based on empathy allows parents to open up unreservedly to a relationship with the child and to rediscover themselves, thus gaining a firmer grasp of their own personal characteristics and discovering both an individual and a shared life matrix. Internal and external barriers can be overcome, a deep and direct contact entered into, with meaningful exchanges between equals, person to person, rather than adult to child. Bruno Bettelheim taught that an empathic relationship means putting ourselves in the position of the other, and understanding their emotions and motives. Thus in an empathic relationship we feel what the other feels, through a vicarious relationship in which we experience not only what it means to be in another person's situation, but also in his skin.<sup>13</sup> Empathy is in fact that particular form of relationship that allows us to move outside the roles imposed by nature and society and allows the other to live in his global essence, beyond the world of appearances. Something extraordinary occurs in this moment: the parent acknowledges the child for the first time and the child acknowledges the parent for the first time. Both find themselves in a position to overcome the personal Self and the personal You, and to enter into the We, and thus feel a shared reality, albeit from different and complementary positions. Something similar occurs in a deep love relationship between two partners, in which personal worlds open themselves completely one to the other, so as to start close and unlimited exchanges of information, which allow the couple to know each other and to build together their solid link. The first and true parent-child relationship is forged from the beginning of life, sometimes at conception, more often during gestation, at birth or after birth. During gestation an individual's primary forces work with all their vitality and strength, and this facilitates the building of a particularly intense relation between parent and child which will last a lifetime, without rupture, whatever may happen, conditioning the development of future rapport and assuring mutual support, involvement, and sacrifice.

**REFERENCES**

1. Turner, J. R. & Turner, T. (1994). La terapia della memoria prenatale (The therapy of prenatal memory). *Educazione Prenatale (Prenatal Education)*, 3, p.7.
2. Seitre, J. & Seitre, R. (1999). Amici nella giungla (Friends in the jungle). *La Repubblica delle Donne (Women's Republic)*, 154, 102-107.
3. Shipman, D. (1993). Judy Garland: The secret life of an American legend. New York: Hyperion.
4. Santagostino, P. (1997). Quaderni di Psicosomatica (Psychosomatic Journals). Milano: Edizioni Riza.
5. Winner, E. (1999). Talenti non comuni (Uncommon talents). *LE SCIENZE dossier (The Sciences)*, 1, p. 31.
6. Janus, L. (1997). Come nasce l'anima (How the soul was born). Roma: Ed. Mediterranee, p. 22.
7. Bertin, A. (1988). Come dal principio del suo essere il corpo impara e assimila così si sviluppa (How the body learns and develops from the very beginning of its essence). Paper presented to Congress On the Origins of Education, Epinal, Switzerland (June).
8. Hillman, J. (1997). Il codice dell'anima (The soul's code). Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, p. 96.
9. Soldera, G. (2000). Le



emozioni della vita prenatale (The emotions of prenatal life). Diegaro di Cesena: Macro Edizioni, pp. 180-182. 10. Editrend (1997). Gravidanza e parto (Pregnancy and childbirth). Dossier SALUTE (Health), 29, p. 16. 11. Bergman, I. (1988). The magic lantern: An autobiography. London: Hamish Hamilton. 12. Moderato, P. & Rovetto, F. (1997). Psicologo: verso la professione (The psychologist: Toward the profession). Milano: McGraw-Hill, p. 441. 13. Bettelheim, B. (1996). Un genitore quasi perfetto (An almost perfect parent). Milano: Feltrinelli, p. 188. AuthorAffiliation Gino Soldera, Ph.D.\* AuthorAffiliation \* Psychologist Gino Soldera is President of the National Association of Psychology and Prenatal Education (ANPEP/Italy) and creator of the 77 Giornale Italiano di Psicologia e di Educazione Prenatale (Italian Journal of Psychology and Prenatal Education). For further information: [www.anpep.it](http://www.anpep.it). Correspondence to Gino Soldera, via Conti Agosti 161, 31010 Mareno di Piave, Treviso, Italy. Email: [gino.soldera@libero.it](mailto:gino.soldera@libero.it)

**Publication title:** Journal of Prenatal&Perinatal Psychology&Health

**Volume:** 16

**Issue:** 4

**Pages:** 361-376

**Number of pages:** 16

**Publication year:** 2002

**Publication date:** Summer 2002

**Year:** 2002

**Publisher:** Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

**Place of publication:** Forestville

**Country of publication:** United States

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

**ISSN:** 10978003

**Source type:** Scholarly Journals

**Language of publication:** English

**Document type:** General Information

**ProQuest document ID:** 198724396

**Document URL:** <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198724396?accountid=36557>

**Copyright:** Copyright Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health Summer 2002

**Last updated:** 2010-06-06

**Database:** ProQuest Public Health

---

**Contact ProQuest**

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - [Terms and Conditions](#)