

LISTENING TO BABIES

by Vimala McClure

My work with parents and their infants over the last twenty years has confirmed to me that babies have three common needs: they need to agree with their caregivers, they need particular sensory signals from their caregivers in order to properly respond, and babies need to be heard. When these three needs (which all overlap) are met in a healthy fashion, the baby radiates health, well-being, and contentment, regardless of the baby's temperament. When any of these needs are stifled or not met, the infant must expend a tremendous amount of energy processing the consequences.

Babies need to agree with their caregivers

Joseph Chilton Pearce, in *Magical Child Matures*, emphasizes that children are innately driven to "follow the model" that their parents present for them. He explains that an infant's inner blueprint for development holds all the possibilities for its reality. However, the particular experiences that child has depends on what is reflected back to the child by its models. The inner blueprint pushes the infant to search for those mirrors and interact with them.

For example, if an infant of a Spanish-speaking mother is placed with a Swahili-speaking mother, the structure of his language will be Swahili. The possibility for any language is within the child's universal internal blueprint; the mirror placed in front of him, in the form of the caregiver model, brings out the particular configuration of that child's expression of his inner blueprint. The models which are not presented cause that part of the blueprint to atrophy; it is much more difficult to learn another language after the stage-specific period in which that model is of prime importance to the child.

When we apply this idea on the emotional and spiritual levels, we can begin to see the importance of subtle cues we give our infants. It is important to be aware that this is not a mechanistic process; rather, it is holistic — it takes in the being rather than just a part such as the intellect. Therefore, a parent who presents a model of intellectual achievement to the child can unfold that child's blueprint for high intelligence, but without a corresponding sensitivity to the child's other needs, what develops is a highly intelligent person who is emotionally and spiritually crippled.

When we affirm a baby's wholeness right from the start, the baby grows in confidence and trust. How is this done? By conveying respect, focused attention, honesty, and unconditional love in our interactions with infants.

The parent who doesn't believe her baby has a capacity for interaction or that the infant is not "smart" enough to process environmental cues and stimuli is careless in her baby's presence. The infant gets the message: I am not worthy of respect. Conflict arises between the infant's inborn blueprint, which assumes limitlessness as a given, and the messages he gets from the parent, with whom he is driven to agree.

Depending upon the situation, out of this conflict can arise frustration and then anger, or depression and hopelessness. Because of the way our society is structured, we rarely notice until the child has grown to adulthood, when his state of being counts for more because of his capacity to contribute to society as a whole.

Then we notice in a big way; people who are unable to give or who persist in self-defeating behaviors wreak havoc on everyone around them.

Babies Need Sensory Signals

Infants are designed by nature for a specific sequence of events that unlocks the blueprint of limitlessness they carry within. At birth, they are alert and ready to go; the stress hormones produced at the beginning of labor have helped to create massive numbers of new connecting links between the neurons in a baby's brain.

The baby is primed for all the new learning that will happen in the coming months. However, if the stress hormones continue to be produced in the baby's body, this prime-time is lost; a kind of shock ensues wherein the brain shuts down. The baby withdraws into sleep and will be irritable, non-interactive and unsmiling for the first month to six weeks of life.

The infant's brain needs certain signals to tell it to stop producing stress hormones immediately after birth. These signals come from the mother's sensory system and include eye contact, skin contact, re-connection with her breath and heartbeat sounds, the scent of her body, and the sound of her voice. When the infant receives these signals, the stress hormones stop, and the baby is ready to use all those new connections in the brain.

This baby will be responsive, interactive, and smiling within 24 to 48 hours of his birth. His delightful signals back to mother and her responses begin the dance of bonding. Mother continues to provide these sensory cues, varying and adapting them to each stage of the baby's development. She thus allows the baby's inner blueprint to unfold within the relative safety of these stimuli which are known to him, and from which he can venture out slowly to take in the rest of the world.

Babies who have been stressed after birth, for whatever reason, are not, however, doomed to a less-than-optimal emotional and spiritual development. A conscious parent can be patient with the infant who has withdrawn, providing a safe, understanding space within which the baby can slowly open up.

Too often, because the parent also suffers from stress (and a less-than-optimal infancy of her own), the parent becomes frustrated with her infant's lack of response and comes to the conclusion that the baby doesn't like her or that the baby is incapable of understanding. She begins to feel helpless and inadequate and, without really intending to, models frustration to the baby.

Advances in psychological research are beginning to show us that infants are far more capable of "understanding" what goes on around them than we ever thought they were. Babies have a different manner in which they process information, just as children differ from adults in the way they interpret things. But I am convinced that infants do absorb the underlying energies or messages — the feeling-overlay — of events and people around them, most specifically that all important source of information, the parent. In addition, babies have feelings of their own and a need to express them.

Babies Need to be Heard

When I begin to talk about infant conversations in my Infant Massage seminars, I like to start with an analogy, usually acted out by participants.

Imagine you have just been through a very traumatic experience, something that really disturbed you deeply. You feel yourself on the verge of tears and unable to relax or concentrate, and you go to your spouse or a friend for help. You begin to talk about what happened to you and how you're feeling about it.

After a moment of sympathy your friend begins to shush you, saying, "There, there, never mind. Please don't cry. I can't stand it when you cry. Come on, smile for me now. Let me get you something to eat. Maybe you should go to a doctor." You will probably dry your tears and internalize your pain in order to preserve this relationship and because your friend's responses have told you it is not safe to be yourself in her presence.

Now imagine yourself in the same situation, with a different response from your friend. You begin to talk about what happened to you and how you're feeling about it. Your friend looks at you eye-to-eye. She leans forward and holds your hand. "I'm here for you," she says. "Tell me all about it. I can see you're really hurting, and I want you to know that I love you and I want to help you through this."

She puts her arms around you and you relax into deep sobs in the safety of her presence. You ramble on, sometimes incoherently, and she's there, saying, "Tell me more. And then what happened? That must have been so painful for you." You feel her genuine support and that trust enables you to really unload and, finally, come back to your center again. Your relationship with her is stronger; she feels good for having been there for you, and you are better able to go on toward healthy functioning.

Infants need to be heard as much as anyone. I have seen many remarkable instances in which an infant's responsiveness and general disposition has completely changed after being truly heard.

I was demonstrating some massage strokes on a baby in one of my seminars. The baby had been premature and had undergone the additional trauma of an injury to the skin of her chest that caused some scarring. Her mother said that she enjoyed being massaged, except that she could not tolerate having her chest touched.

The baby responded well and accepted the massage for her legs, feet, and stomach. But when I reached the chest area, she began to cry. Rather than stopping and shushing her, I continued to gently mold my hands to her chest. I started to actively listen to what she might be saying through her tears. "Yes, you've really been through a lot of pain." "Tell me all about it, I'm listening." She cried hard, and after a moment her mouth began taking on a different quality (a change I've seen many times). She moved her mouth as if talking, though she was crying. She looked at me intensely, as if she was trying to tell me something very important.

"You were very brave, and I know your mommy is very proud of you," I said. "And when you're ready to let go of that pain, she's here to help you. We all love you very much." I continued to gently massage her chest as she cried, and let her know I was listening to her. After several minutes, her cries decelerated and her mother picked her up to comfort her.

The next day her mother brought her again for a demonstration. This time, when I began massaging her chest she opened out her arms and smiled at me. Her mother turned to me with tears in her eyes, saying this was the first time the baby had ever been able to accept someone touching her chest area. Later, the baby's mother reported that she loved being massaged and fully accepted all of it each

time. Actively and compassionately listening to an infant isn't much different than listening to a child or adult. It requires empathy, genuine love, and respect for the infant's experience. I believe that the reason it is so difficult for us to listen to our babies is that our own infancies may have been full of frustration and unheard feelings. When we hear our babies cry, rather than truly listening to what they say, we superimpose our own inner infant. Our overwhelming impulse is to quiet *that* baby.

How to Listen to a Baby

I go through a three-step process when a baby I'm working or being with begins to talk, to fuss, or to cry. First, I take a long, slow, deep breath and relax my whole body. This directly counteracts the tendency to hold the breath and tighten up.

Second, I set aside my own inner infant for a moment, recognizing that in order to truly hear this baby, I must clear myself.

Third, I connect with the baby, eye-to-eye if possible. If the baby is avoiding eye contact, I place my hands gently but firmly on his body and connect with him through my hands. I let my energy go to him, telling him with my voice, my eyes, and my hands that I would like to hear what he has to say.

Then I stay with the baby, keeping myself very relaxed and receptive, listening and responding to him, observing his body language. I watch his mouth and what he says with his eyes. When I am very sure that he feels heard and has said most of what he has to say, if he needs it I offer him the comfort of rocking, walking, or patting to help him get organized again. Invariably, a baby who feels Heard will sleep more deeply afterward and will extend himself in trust more the next time I see him.

When we truly listen to our infants we are fulfilling all of their psychological needs. The underlying message is, "You are worthy of respect. You are valuable just the way you are." The baby is driven to agree, and he grows in confidence, feeling his place in the world. His sensory receptors take this message in and his whole body relaxes.

The chalice of this infant's heart is filled to overflowing, and as she grows she will seek opportunities to share her love with others. And how will she do this? By following the model she has been given. She will be there for others in the way her caregivers have been there for her. What a lovely, healthy cycle!