



OFF TO A GOOD START

Why the first three years are so crucial to a child's development

Newsweek Special Issue Vol. 7 1997

IT IS A MOMENT YOU never forget—the first time you hold your baby in your arms. Who is this mysterious new person? Before long, you will know the difference between a cry of hunger and a cry for comfort, a genuine grin and the grimace produced by an upset stomach. But here's the amazing part: as much as you are learning (and at times it seems like more than any human could handle), your baby is learning a thousandfold more. Every lullaby, every giggle and peek-a-boo, triggers a crackling along his neural pathways, laying the groundwork for what could someday be a love of art or a talent for soccer or a gift for making and keeping friends.

Cutting edge science is confirming what wise parents have always known instinctively: young children need lots of time and attention from the significant adults in their lives. This does not mean that parents have to go out and spend a small fortune on specially designed infant stimulation toys or flashcards for babies or any of the other dubious developmental aids that prey on parental insecurities. What it does mean is that parents should take advantage of their child's natural curiosity. Babies are learning machines; everything is interesting to them. Shadows on the sidewalk, the distant barking of a dog, a voice on the telephone: these are miracles to an infant. If parents share a baby's wonder and laughter, children will grow up feeling that their observations and responses are valid and that people listen to them.

Researchers looking for new answers to old questions about the importance of heredity and environment have discovered that much of what makes a person unique is the result of experiences in the first three years of life. New technology, such as positron emission tomography (PET) imaging of the brain, has provided hard data on the importance of these years. Simple activities, like cuddling and rocking a baby, stimulate growth. The longterm effects of inadequate nurturing can be devastating. In profoundly deprived children—for example, orphans left to languish in an institutional nursery—critical areas of the brain remain undeveloped. Psychologists say that language development begins early, as well.

The building blocks are games like peek-a-boo, which teach babies about face-to-face communication, and the seemingly incomprehensible babble known as parentese, the beginning of verbal interaction. The first years also shape a child's personality. Although some characteristics, such as a tendency toward shyness, may be genetically determined, studies have shown that babies who are hugged often feel loved and cared for are much more likely to grow up confident and optimistic. In other words, genetics provides the material; life molds the spirit and the soul.

Studies have also shown that family connections are at the core of a child's social development. Despite wide spread reports about demise of the extended family, a new NEWS-WEEK Poll of parents of children under 4 showed that grandparents and inlaws still play a huge role in child rearing. The vast majority of parents surveyed said they turned to their own parents or



other family members when they needed advice rather than books, videos or classes. Fifty-nine percent said that grandparents were “very” involved in their child’s life. Traditional values also seem to be alive and healthy. Nearly half (48 percent) of the parents said that making sure that their child grew up to be a moral person was their most important goal.

New attention to the early years presents a challenge for parents, educators and policy-makers. According to the landmark 1994 Carnegie Corporation study “Starting Points:” only half of infants and toddlers are routinely read to by their parents. The effects are serious: teachers report that more than a third of kindergartners are not ready to learn when they arrive at school. Day care is another pressing issue. Fifty-six percent of mothers of children under 4 are in the work force, yet there are no national childcare standards. As a result, too many children spend their days in unsafe facilities under the supervision of inadequately trained caregivers. Nearly a quarter of families with children under 3 live in poverty. Most of these are families headed by single parents (usually the mother) without access to regular health care or other social services.

According to the NEWSWEEK Poll, more than half of the parents surveyed said they did not believe that the policies of government and business were supportive of families with very young children. But can leaders and legislators break out of their old ways of thinking and be as innovative as the scientists? There are some hopeful signs. In the absence of a clear national mandate, states and municipalities have started their own initiatives. Generally, the goal is to help children by reaching out to the whole family, including parents and often grandparents. Some states target specific groups—at risk children or teen parents, for example—and offer such services as home visits by nurses, or parenting classes. Schools can also take advantage of the research. In the last few years, many districts have cut art and music classes even though studying these subjects can help children learn in other areas. Art and music are not just luxuries, as financially strapped school administrators sometimes claim.

There are more than 15 million American children under the age of 4. A child born this year will graduate from high school in 2015 and college in 2019. Think of these infants and toddlers as the architects of the 21st century. They are heading toward that future now, one baby step at a time.