

Ten Things Everyone Should Know About Babies

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Ignorance about babies is undermining society

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Have you noticed all the stressed babies? Maybe one in 30 I see has glowing eyes, which I take as a sign of thriving. What's up? Perhaps ignorance about babies and their needs. Here are 10 things to know.

1. Babies are social mammals with social mammalian needs. Social mammals emerged more than 30 million years ago with intensive [parenting](#) (a **developmental nest or niche**). This is one of the many (extra-genetic) things that evolved other than [genes](#). This developmental nest matches up with maturational schedule and thus is required for an individual to develop optimally. Intensive parenting practices for babies include years of breastfeeding to develop [brain](#) and body systems, nearly constant touch and physical presence of caregivers, responsiveness to needs preventing distress, free play with multi-aged playmates, and soothing perinatal experiences. Each of these has significant effects on physical health.

2. Human babies are born "half-baked" and require an external womb. Humans are born way early compared to other animals: 9 months early in terms of mobility and 18 months early in terms of bone development and foraging capacities. Full-term babies have 25% of adult brain volume and most of it grows in the first 5 years. Thus, the human nest for its young evolved to be even more intense than for other social mammals because of the underdeveloped newborn, lasting for 3-5 years. Humans also added to the list of expected care a village of positive social support for both mother and baby. (Actually, human brain development lasts into the third decade of life, suggesting that social support and mentoring continue at least that long.)

3. If adults mess up on the post-birth "baking," longterm problems can result. Each of the [caregiving](#) practices mentioned above has longterm effects on the physical health but also social health of the individual. For example, distressing babies regularly or intensively (by not giving them what they need) undermines self-regulatory systems. This is common knowledge in other cultures and was so in our past. In Spanish, there is a term used for adolescents and adults who misbehave: *malcriado* (misraised).

4. Babies thrive on affectionate love. When babies receive food and diaper changes and little else, they die. If they receive partial attention and stay alive, it is still not enough—they won't reach their full potential. Urie Bronfenbrenner, who emphasized the multiple systems of support that foster optimal development, said that babies do best when at least one person is crazy about them. Others have noted that children grow best with three affectionate, consistent caregivers. In fact, babies expect more than mom and dad for loving care. Babies are ready for a community of close, responsive caregivers that includes mother nearby.

5. Babies' right hemisphere of the brain is developing rapidly in the first three years. The right hemisphere develops in response to face-to-face social experience, with extended shared eye gaze. The right hemisphere governs several self-regulatory systems. If babies are placed in front of screens, ignored or isolated, they are missing critical experiences.

6. Babies expect to play and move. Babies expect to be “in arms” or on the body of the caregiver most of the time. Skin-to-skin contact is a calming influence. After learning this one of my students when at a family gathering took a crying baby and held it to his neck, which calmed it down. Babies expect companionship not isolation or intrusion. They expect to be in the middle of community [social life](#). **They are ready to play from birth.** Play is a primary method for learning [self-control](#) and social skills. Companionship care—[friendship](#), mutual responsiveness and playfulness—builds social and practical [intelligence](#). Babies and caregivers share intersubjective states, building the child’s capacities for the interpersonal “dances” that fill social life.

7. Babies have built-in warning systems. If they are not getting what they need, babies let you know. It is best, as most cultures have long known, to respond to a baby’s grimace or gesture and not to wait till crying occurs. Young babies have difficulty stopping crying once it starts. The best advice for baby care is to sensitively follow the baby, not the experts.

8. Babies lock their experiences into procedural [memory](#) vaults that will be inaccessible but apparent in later behavior and attitudes. Babies can be toxically stressed from neglecting the list of needs above. They won’t forget. It will undermine their trust of others, their health and social wellbeing, and lead to self-centered [morality](#) which can do much destruction to the world.

9. Culture does not erase the evolved needs babies have. Babies cannot retract their mammalian needs. Yet, some adult cultures advocate violating evolved baby needs as if they do not matter and despite the protests of the baby. Everyday violations include baby isolation like [sleeping](#) alone, “crying it out” sleep training, infant formula, or baby videos and flashcards.* When violations occur regularly, at critical time periods or are intense, they undermine optimal development. These violations are encoded in the baby’s body as the optimal development of systems is undermined (e.g., immunity, neurotransmitters, [endocrine](#) systems like [oxytocin](#)). Surprisingly, some developmental psychologists think it fine to violate these needs** in order for the child to fit into the culture.

The rationalization of “culture over biology” reflects a lack of [understanding](#) not only of human [nature](#) but of optimal development. This has occurred in laboratories with other animals whose natures were misunderstood. For example, Harry Harlow, known for his experiments with monkeys and “mother love,” at first did not realize he was raising abnormal monkeys when he isolated them in cages. Similarly, at least one of the aggressive rat strains used in lab studies today was first created when scientists isolated offspring after birth, again not realizing the abnormality of isolation. Note how the **cultural assumptions** of the scientists **created** the abnormal animals. So it matters what cultural assumptions you have.

The culture-over-biology view may be doing the same thing with human beings. By not understanding babies and their needs, we are creating species-atypical human beings. We can only know this to be the case in light of knowledge about human beings who develop under evolved conditions (the "developmental nest" described in point 1): typically, small-band hunter-gatherers. They are wiser, more perceptive and virtuous than we humans in the USA today (see NOTE below).

Thus the final point:

10. Experiences that consistently violate evolution undermine human nature. When species-atypical childrearing occurs, we end up with people whose health and sociality are compromised (which we can see all over the USA today with epidemics of [depression](#), anxiety, high [suicide](#) and drug use rates***). Such mis-raised creatures might do all right on achievement tests or IQ measures but they may also be dangerous reptiles whose world revolves around themselves. A lot of smart reptiles (“snakes in suits”) on Wall Street and elsewhere have been running the country into the ground.

What to do?

- (1) Inform others about the needs of babies.
- (2) Be aware of the needs of babies around you and interact sensitively with the babies you encounter.
- (3) Support parents to be sensitive to the needs of their babies. This will also require many more institutional and social supports for families with children, including extensive parental leave which other developed nations provide. It's an uphill battle right now but raising awareness is the first step.
- (4) Read and learn from books that convey the evolved principles of caregiving, like the following:..go to full original article at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/moral-landscapes/201312/ten-things-everyone-should-know-about-babies>

Free and online: Caring and Connected Parenting <http://saiv.org/parenting-guide/>

* Note that sometimes violations (e.g., formula, isolation) are required under **emergency** conditions that are matters of life and death. Also note: In a way, USA culture forces parents into these violations because there is no extended family or community support to help provide for all the many needs of a baby.

**Of course they don't think it's a violation because they don't take the set of mammalian needs seriously.

*** In the USA, everyone under 50 has numerous health disadvantages compared to citizens in 16 other developed nations (National Research Council, 2013).

NOTE: Of course, every human community is not perfect but when you provide young children with their basic needs, they are less aggressive and self-centered. They are less preoccupied with what they want because they got all they wanted when they needed it in early life. The baby nest described above makes for a smart, healthy, well-functioning body and brain, with high emotional intelligence and self control. They are more socially skilled and empathic towards others. All this makes getting along with others so much easier. All this will have to be explained more thoroughly in another post, citing the anthropology research that shows what people in small-band hunter-gatherer communities are like.

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NOTE on BASIC ASSUMPTIONS: When I write about parenting, I assume the importance of the *evolved developmental niche* (EDN) for raising human infants (which initially arose over 30 million years ago with the emergence of the social mammals and has been slightly altered among human groups based on anthropological research).

The EDN is the baseline I use for determining what fosters optimal human health, wellbeing and compassionate morality. The niche includes at least the following: infant-initiated breastfeeding for several years, nearly constant touch, responsiveness to needs so the young child does not get distressed, playful companionship, multiple adult caregivers, positive social support, and natural childbirth.

All these characteristics are linked to health in mammalian and human studies (see [Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013](#), for a review.) Thus, shifts away from the EDN baseline are risky. My comments and posts stem from these basic assumptions.