

Backing up parents from the start

Why are the early years of a baby's life so important?

Dr. Brazelton: Well, I think it's when the baby lays down all sorts of images of himself and of the world around him. And, there are at least four things that get set up in those first three years that we know of—and they can be made up for later, but at greater expense. One is a sense of *self-esteem*. If a child has enough self-esteem, then maybe he or she can care about other people and have a sense of *altruism*, which is certainly something we've lost in this country. The third thing is a sense of *humor*. Kids don't have a sense of humor if they've been neglected in the first three years. And the fourth is something that all of us care about, the inclination to learn, a sort of hunger for *learning*. All of these get laid down in the first three years.

Why is it important for parents to have support in the early days of their parenthood?

Dr. Brazelton: I think most parents come into parenthood with a passion for wanting to do well by their child with a feeling of "I don't know what I'm doing, nobody educated me for this." And so they need people just to back them up.

How do home visiting programs help foster a child's development?

Dr. Brazelton: Healthy Families America is one of many programs that are starting up all over the country to try and make up for this real gap in what parents need and what they're getting. And, they back up families that are under too much pressure to be able to free up the energy to look at their child and learn how to nurture that child. And by offering support early, they can make this a much more exciting and passionate interchange between the parent and the baby.

I have a concept of freeing the parents to feel good about themselves so they can pass that sense of well-being onto their child. I think it's like taking off the layers of an onion. You take off a few layers of the onion and this passion that most parents bring to a new baby, just bursts in front of your eyes. It's very exciting to see.



How does violence and neglect in early years affect the child?

Dr. Brazelton: I was on the National Commission for Children and Families in 1990 and we went around the country looking at what was happening to families and children. We found that we're the least child- and family-oriented society in the civilized world. And we also saw the price that we're paying: angry, contained, unavailable children who can't learn. These are very costly to our society. So, we're paying a terrible price. And then we see what happens in Arkansas and Colorado as these children burst out with anger.

The antidote to that is so simple: Backing up parents right from the start. Giving them a feeling that they know what they're doing, that they have passion for this child, and that they have the love they can give to each other within the family. It's so simple. This is what tears my heart out, that it wouldn't take much to back people up if we start early enough. If we wait, it gets less and less available over time, and the child gets more and more contained or anger shoved under. So, it costs a lot later on, but it doesn't in the beginning.

Is empowerment an important aspect of the parent/child relationship?

Dr. Brazelton: Well, I think every time you give a parent back a sense of success or empowerment, you're offering it to the baby indirectly. Because every time a parent looks at that baby and says, "oh, you're wonderful," the baby just bursts with feeling good about themselves. And all of that piles up over time. And those kids are going to be successful.

