

Breastfeeding: An Important Foundation

By Sheila Kippley September 21st, 2008

Our top priority as parents is to raise our children as best we can. Raising children is the most important work we do as parents. Almost all of us want children who are physically and emotionally and spiritually healthy.

One of the concerns stressed at a brain-research conference I attended was that the kind of care you give to your children may come back to you. It is these children who become teenagers and eventually may become our caregivers as we age. They are the ones who will be in the voting booth deciding our future.

As one workshop speaker said: What kind of care do you want in your last years? Will your face be cleaned with a fresh washcloth or a soiled one? Will your bedpan be empty or full? Will you be spanked when you dribble accidentally?

If we want caring children who are also caring as adults, a helpful step to achieving that goal as parents, whether breastfeeding or not, is to nurture our babies well during the first three years of life. I do not want to rule out the exceptions, the wonderful conversions that occur, but, by and large, the treatment children receive in their first three years has a great affect on their later lives.

A building needs a foundation. Our children also need a foundation. That foundation is the first three years of life. Our job isn't over after childbirth. Nor is it over after they celebrate their third birthday. But experts keep telling us that it's what the mother (and soon the father) does during those early years that is so important and determines whether we give our children a healthy start or a troubling start.

Research shows that when a baby is stressed or lacks maternal care his brain is coated with a large dose of cortisol. Cortisol can shrink the learning center of the brain, and cortisol can cause the dendrites to atrophy. This helps to explain why cortisol is associated with severely delayed development. This is why we have seen on television Romanian orphaned babies rocking in their cribs or teens moving constantly in what is called the "dance of neglect."

That's the bad news. The good news is that the mother protects her baby against these harmful effects just by her presence. With breastfeeding mothers are present and a breastfeeding mother soon learns that her baby thrives on maternal intimacy, that her baby loves to be with her.

One of my favorite books is *The War Against the Family* by William Gairdner because he states how we can have healthy individuals in our society. In his opinion, the kind of care needed for healthy individuals depends on **the mother providing a care that is uninterrupted, intimate, and continuous for her child during the early months and**

early years. This kind of care is almost always provided to each child if his mother breastfeeds him as nature intended

I want to mention the work of Dr. Elliott Barker, a Canadian psychiatrist. Dr. Barker worked with 300 of the most dangerous persons in Ontario. They were at a maximum-security prison, all criminally insane.

He is convinced that criminal behavior is due to the lack of good care during the first three years of life. He helped to form a group called the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children because he believes that crime can be fought by promoting proper nurturing during the first three years of life.

Dr. Barker says that the greatest cruelty that you can do to human beings is to harm them so emotionally that they can never form an affectionate relationship with another human being, that they can never trust another person, and that they can never have capacity for empathy.

Dr. Barker had developed videos and teaching materials for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, a group he wanted to reach before they drop out of school. What did he teach them? That the most important job they will ever do as parents is to raise their children and that the times during pregnancy and the first three years of life are so important. This is when the life-foundation is set.

Dr. Barker had a simple four-point program for crime prevention:

- 1) That mother, father, and baby have a positive birth experience.
- 2) That the mother breastfeed and that she breastfeed as long as her baby wants it.
- 3) That the parents avoid separation from their baby because frequent changes in caregiving are bad for the baby.
- 4) That spacing between the births of babies is desirable.

Please note that I am not saying that even the best of mothering in the first three years will eliminate crime. How we wish it would, but we remember that breastfed Cain murdered his breastfed brother, Abel. However, society does need to listen to the psychiatrists who find themselves examining the first three years for the clues on how to raise normal children and to avoid raising future psychopaths.

My advice to mothers is this: Listen to your hearts. Love your babies; hold your babies; read to your babies; sing to your babies; be there for them.

Ignore the advice of society's control freaks. Nurse your baby frequently. Nurse your baby to sleep. Nurse your baby all through the night in your bed with all the proper precautions and recommendations set by the experts. Take your baby with you to meetings or shopping and to church. Take the baby with you to that wedding.

Be one with your baby. Stay attached. Remember that breastfeeding is a continuation of pregnancy. There are many similarities between breastfeeding and pregnancy, but the

important one is the oneness a mother has with her baby. Society needs to protect this oneness. Our churches need to promote and protect this oneness. Our husbands need to appreciate its value.

It is encouraging to see a psychiatrist like Dr. Elliott Barker promoting and teaching the importance of breastfeeding to society, as well as to the individual mother with her baby. May we renew our efforts to do what we can to promote breastfeeding and to help nursing moms and their families. Let's give our children that healthy foundation!

(Adapted from a luncheon address given at the LLL Eastern Pennsylvania Area Conference, October 2000)