

Why Love Matters

By Diana Peach

The difference between a baby and a squirrel

In recent years, brain researchers have pretty much resolved the nature-nurture debate when it comes to human beings. They've concluded that we are influenced by both. Most of us who are parents understand the contributions of "nature." Our infants are born with their own little personalities and temperaments.

BUT "nurture" plays a gigantic part in who we ultimately become, and that's because there is a big difference between a baby and a squirrel.

A squirrel is a squirrel. A squirrel in China isn't so different from a squirrel in England or Oregon. Squirrels can be depended on to do squirrelly things – raid bird feeders, climb trees, store food. They don't need much training or feedback to be successful squirrels.

A human baby on the other hand has to be highly adaptable. We are the ultimate in social animals, born to particular parents, families, communities, and nations. Layer family expectations and parenting styles on top of economic, religious and cultural differences and it's no wonder we are all so unique!

Which brings me to the baby brain. Our need to adapt at a very



young age to different social expectations requires human baby brains to be the least "hard-wired" of all baby brains in the animal kingdom, including squirrels. Interestingly, this means that most of the brain's cortex develops AFTER birth. The cerebral cortex is the part of the brain that controls little things like thinking and language! Here we make meaning of our personal experience of the world, enabling us to interact effectively with others.

It makes sense that this interactive part of our brain develops through social contact. Who we are as social and emotional beings develops through our interaction with the people we encounter in our first 2-3 years of life. Therefore, our earliest experiences as babies have a much greater impact on who we are as adults than many realize. It is as babies that we first learn what to do with our feelings and start to absorb our experiences in a way that will affect our later behavior and thinking.

Baby stress management
Early social experiences shape the developing brain and determine how stress will be responded to in the future. Life is full of stress, you might say, and shouldn't infants and babies get the picture early? A small amount of stress is normal and unavoidable, but babies aren't born knowing how to manage stress, so expecting them to

figure it out on their own is a little silly –like expecting someone to learn French without hearing the language. How to manage stress is one of those skills that we teach through social interaction with our infants.

Babies learn that they can tolerate a certain amount of stress once they are confident that an attentive adult is available to help them. Once a baby has repeatedly experienced care from a responsive caregiver, stress hormones are less likely to flood the brain when the baby experiences minor frustrations. The baby's little brain says, "No big deal. I can handle this, because I know I will get help if I need it."

Why you never forget how to ride a bicycle

Can you imagine what life would be like if every time you rode a bicycle, made a sandwich, or used your TV remote you had to learn how to do it all over again? We wouldn't be able to function. The brain handles this by creating templates, an amazing library of billions of bits of information that we access constantly and at a moment's notice.

Babies' brains are primed to absorb information at an incredible rate. Their libraries collect important how-to guidelines such as how to pick up a Cheerio with two fingers or empty a bin of toys. The libraries also file away very subtle observations of facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and the

emotional meanings associated with them.

Every experience a baby has is stored in the huge warehouse of the brain and forms the basis for how baby perceives the world – as safe and loving or as scary and unreliable. The more a baby has a particular experience the stronger the template becomes. That's awesome when they are good experiences, terrible when they aren't – because it takes ten times as many good experiences to create a happy template over an old crappy one.

Why love matters

Children need a satisfying experience of dependency before they can become truly independent and self-managing. This ability comes from having relationships with people who respond to their needs and help them handle their feelings.

Oh, Diana, you might say. We're going to have all these spoiled children running around because their parents are trying to create happy brain templates! Don't worry. Healthy emotional brain templates lead to healthy emotional and behavioral skills. Stressed emotional templates lead to difficulties handling feelings which then lead to difficulties with behavior. It's all connected.

By 10 months of age, baby brains have the capacity to store lasting templates filled with emotion. These templates form the library for emotional regulation. At this age, baby is already observing how his parent or caregiver handles feelings and is making those strategies his own. He is already absorbing caregiver strategies for calming and self-soothing as well as absorbing negative experiences and expectations that trigger stress. These templates become a guide for behavior later when the caregiver is not available to help the child through the joys and struggles of growing up.

And that's why love matters.

Diana Peach received a Masters in Pastoral Counseling from Saint Joseph's College in West Hartford, CT. Before moving to Oregon she worked in Burlington, VT as a mental health clinician for children ages 0-6 and their families.

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