

Love connection

Your child's first two to three years will affect her whole life. But when it comes to creating that all-important loving bond, the pressures of modern life – to earn more money, keep up with the Jones's and answer that endlessly beeping phone – can get in the way. Emily Simpson talks to teacher and children's advocate Miriam McCaleb about love, science and loud espresso machines.



Miriam McCaleb
with Brooke

Q *Miriam, it was while you were teaching at a university in Tennessee that you learned information about babies and early relationships that you say blew your mind. What was that information?*

I already knew instinctively how important early relationships were but suddenly here was this biological evidence. We could look at brain scans and watch the migration of cells and the electrical currents inside of brains and we could see that, inarguably, infancy and toddlerhood is a time like no other, in terms of building the sort of brain circuitry that sets a person up for a lifetime of maximum potential.

The decisions that we make for our really young children have life-long implications. This isn't touchy-feely stuff, this is science.

Q *So the science proved that the relationship between a mother and her baby literally had a physical impact on a baby's brain. What happens if a baby doesn't get that affection and interaction?*

If you take an extreme example and look at brain scans of children who were in Eastern European orphanages, the researchers describe a black hole where their orbitofrontal cortex should be – that's a region of your brain that is involved in empathy.

Q *You talk a lot about the need for parents to create a*



“Imagine if we measured our success, not by the car we drove, but by how often we had dinner with the family”

‘secure attachment’ with their baby. Can you explain that term?

Secure attachment is the result of a warm, loving, consistent relationship. It's like emotional glue.

Q At what age is it established?

We know that the circuits involved with those forms of attachment have pretty much done their work before the age of two. (Although it's important to add that relationships can always change and therapy and intervention is possible.)

Q How can we make sure that we create a secure attachment with our baby?

It really is the simple stuff we do every day that's the magic: bathing, feeding, dressing and changing nappies. Our brains are built by repeated experiences. Most children have between 5000 and 6000 nappy changes in a life time, so are they going to be experiences of warmth and interaction? Or is it going to seem like the adult is annoyed, has more important things to do and is not really engaging?

There's also that thing we do - the technical term is a joint attention sequence - which is when you follow your baby's gaze and provide language. 'Oh there's a bird! Well look at that big old blackbird...'

Q You're a big advocate of easing new babies into life in the world...

The stuff of normal adult life - cafés or malls or parties - can be totally overwhelming. Infants have fragile sensory systems, it can be stressful to be bombarded by all of the busyness, and bright lights and noisy espresso machines of the adult world.

Q Don't you think in our culture we encourage people to re-enter normal life with their new baby as soon as

possible, instead of hiding themselves away at home?

I think parents freak out that the life that they knew is gone - they used to make great money and have people pat them on the back and tell them they're doing a great job. Now they're exhausted, their boobs hurt and they don't know what the hell they're doing. You have to just give it some time and realise that this phase doesn't last forever.

I read a great piece of advice: after you have a baby, you should just stay in your pyjamas. Even if it's for six weeks, so that anyone who comes to your door sees that you're in a new state.

Unrealistic expectations are placed on parents. That you should be at your cousin's wedding with a week old baby. No you shouldn't! 'Sorry Cuz, I've got a new baby...'

I heard another great piece of advice from a colleague who is a father of five. He said: until your child turns three, you should basically aim to care for your child, cook dinner and do the laundry and everything that happens over and above that is a bonus.

I wish we could cut each other a bit more slack around it. It takes courage to parent in opposition to those around you - to be the one still in your jammies.

Q But the media doesn't help does it? Because, for example, there's so much focus on celebs getting their pre-baby bodies back.

We are a culture that's pretty into appearances and we also love convenience. And babies are NOT convenient. No one ever said they were.

My peers - we had our first babies in our mid 30s to early 40s; it's quite a unique position in human history to have babies in that context. We've got 15 or 20 years of independent living under our belts, financial independence, an education. We're used to doing things when and



how we want and none of that bears any relationship to the reality of parenthood.

Q Let's talk a bit about this term that I've heard, 'middle-class neglect'.

Well there are all the obvious identified risk factors for potentially not forming a secure attachment: teenage parenthood, if Mum has a series of male partners, if parents move frequently... But actually, good parenting knows no socio-economic boundaries; you can be as poor as a church mouse and a fantastic mum. And poor parenting crosses those boundaries too. You can be a doctor or a lawyer and not particularly skilled with children.

Q What elements of modern middle-class life detract from our kids?

I think we are really affected by what British psychologist Oliver James calls 'affluenza'. Constantly striving for the next biggest telly or winter escape. The parade of lovely shiny 'must-haves' that are marketed to us and our children. Imagine if we measured our success, not by the kind of car we drove, but by how many times we sat down and had dinner with our family. ▶

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I also think we can be distracted by wanting to be seen to be doing the right thing as parents. For example, when my daughter was a little baby, maybe 16 weeks, I took her along to swimming. For us, the whole experience was utterly overwhelming. She was still getting used to being *alive* and taking a *bath*, let alone the full-on environment of other crying babies, cold changing rooms, plonking our tiny little babies at the side of the water and dunking them. She would cry and cry, she hated it.

I shouldn't have had a bar of it, but I was trying to be a good mother and fit in with the other mums I was meeting.

A much better way would have been to have gone to the pool in our own time when she was fed and rested, slowly immersing her in the water, reading each other's cues.

Many of these baby classes populated by middle-class mothers are not necessarily about being a responsive parent.

Q And then there are the distractions of Facebook and text messages...

I see time and time again, children trying to engage with parents and parents shushing them: "just a minute, just a minute, just gotta send this..." We're guilty of it in this house as well. Checking the email every few minutes – it does suck your time away.

Q We're also used to spending our pre-baby lives constantly seeking stimulus – emailing, texting, googling and talking to adults. Then you're with a toddler and you're sitting and talking about grass. You can feel a bit bored.

That's the challenge of parenthood: the willingness to be totally present in your head and your heart. That means, unplug your email, turn off your cell phone... Look, a lot of people find it kind of boring. But if you can get into that zone it's infinitely fascinating, because they are learning so fast... It's golden.

But if you tell people that you spent the morning practising opening and shutting

cupboard doors, you won't find a lot of receptive ears. It's not easy to impress people with that stuff, which can be hard if you've had an exciting career that people admired.

Q It can also be hard to get into that kids' zone when you feel frantic and rushed...

I think that rushing is often just a habit. Take some deep breaths and ask yourself: do you really have to get to the library to return those books right now?

Or could you actually wait a few minutes and let your toddler climb into the car seat all by herself, even though it's excruciating to watch and it feels impossibly slow to your adult clock.

The experience is extremely beneficial to her. How about stashing a magazine in your car and saying, 'okay babe, take your time.' That way, when you are in a genuine rush, your toddler will believe you. It will have meaning to them if it's not just your default mode.

Q Letting kids do things themselves gives them so much confidence...

That's right. As parents, we don't decide when learning happens. There can be as much learning in the putting on of the socks and the gumboots as there is in splashing in puddles.

Now I love splashing in puddles, but don't rush into that if your child is more interested in her socks and gumboots.

Q But how do you avoid rushing if you actually are a very busy working parent?

When you're getting ready to switch gears and go from being work self to home self, or even 'fun with the girlfriends self' to home self, take a moment to mentally shift gears.

Do it in the car; consciously park any of your adult dramas, switch off your phone and be fully present when you walk in the door – even if it's just for 10 minutes.

And then, some of it is just organisational stuff – like cooking big versions of the family's favourite meals on the weekends so that it's not such a scramble in the evenings.

Q Let's talk about daycare. As a working mother, when I hear people criticising it, I feel annoyed and guilty. Is there a positive place for daycare?

My cautious answer is: it depends. It truly depends on the family, the child's age, the hours per week, the quality of the childcare, the size of the group of children at the centre. A baby in a group of four or six is going to have quite a different experience than a baby in a group of 20. As a parent, arm yourself with knowledge. ERO reports are available online for every centre. The Brainwave website [see below right for address] has some fantastic information about the most recent neuro-science around childcare and some good advice about choosing a centre.

I would encourage people to look hard for an environment that prioritises relationships. Some centres call this 'primary care' - it means one person will change your baby's nappy, give her a bottle, put her to bed, wherever possible. It's about prioritising a relationship with a consistent person. There's data to support that this is vastly preferable and less stressful for the baby, but it's more normal to have this person on nappies, that person on bottles, Trev in the sleep room and then when baby wakes up,

Belinda's in the sleep room. It's this kind of production line of adults.

The primary work of infancy and toddlerhood is to become securely attached to the significant adults in their life. And only when they've done that work can they be ready for peer relationships. So toddlers will parallel play alongside each other, whereas a three year old will fully engage with another child.

On the subject of daycare...
We'd love to hear your experiences - good or bad - with daycare and your child. Email us at: treasures@acpmagazines.co.nz

Q How else can you tell if a daycare is good?

I would counsel families to visit, spend time, sit on the floor and get a feel for the environment. If you wouldn't be comfortable spending eight hours there, don't ask your baby to.

Q What do you think the effects of a bad daycare experience would be on a child?


There are some children who are pretty resilient; others will be miserable and their optimal development will be compromised.

Again, it's the age of the child, the number of hours per week and the individual temperament of the child in childcare.

I walk a fine line, I'm a children's advocate but I don't want to bash parents with the guilt stick. I'm a big supporter of family childcare - if baby can't be in your

home, maybe she can be in nana's home, or in another family home.

Q But daycare is the only option for many parents.

And this is what I mean about the guilt stick. We have to be so careful. It doesn't serve either the parent or the child to feel guilty or regretful. It's not about striving to be a perfect parent. One thing I know is that no mother cradles her newborn in her arms and thinks, 'I'm going to try to stuff this up.' Everybody does the best they can with what they have at the time. 

Miriam McCaleb

Miriam McCaleb has a background in early childhood education and has taught children and adults in both New Zealand and the US. She is a founding member of the South Island branch of the Brainwave Trust, which raises awareness of brain research and the importance of early experiences on infant brain development.

Miriam is also an independent consultant, speaking to groups of parents and teachers about child development. She lives in North Canterbury with her husband and seven-year-old daughter, Brooke.

HELPFUL SITES

- See Miriam's website baby.geek.nz
- For more on the Brainwave Trust, check out brainwave.org.nz
- For ERO reports see ero.govt.nz

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