

- *The Atkinson Bulletin #2* -

## Looking Through Your Baby's Eyes

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It's 5pm, you just ran around all day doing groceries, taking your kids to play dates, making meals, and feeding your baby. Just as you sit down to rest, your newborn awakes from her nap and starts crying. You're groggy and exhausted, but you don't think twice about picking up your baby and comforting her – most parents would.

However, there is more to sensitive parenting than simply responding to your baby's cries. Researchers have found that responding *appropriately* to a baby's signals is the key to forming a strong parent-child bond. This kind of relationship affects how children develop emotionally and cognitively throughout their lives.

A mother who responds by picking up her baby, turning on playful music, and dancing around the living room with her isn't exactly showing sensitive parenting. Is this what you want to be doing when you wake up from a nap? An infant doesn't have language to tell her parents why she's crying or smiling, or to ask questions about the world around her. It's up to her parent to empathize with her – to interpret her body language and other cues – in order to understand her needs and emotions. A fussy baby might make similar sounds whether she is hungry or too hot. In order to figure out how to respond, the baby's parents need to get inside her head, and try to see the world from her perspective. This way, parents can respond in a way that will meet their baby's needs.

But sensitive parenting isn't just a matter of troubleshooting when something goes wrong. In order to help brain development, parents must find ways to engage with her in all aspects of her life. This means following your child's lead, maybe repeating the names of objects that fascinate her. "Wow," a mother might say in the playground, "What's that you are looking at? Oh, that's a funny little squirrel! It has an acorn in its mouth." Or you can see your child trying to get the square peg in the round hole. Rather than just giving them the round peg, move the round peg closer so that you're sure she sees it and say 'Oh look at the round one'. As she reaches for the round one let her know that she's getting warm by the enthusiasm in your voice. 'Yes that's the round one. I think that will fit!' This is the kind of play that helps develop the child's brain.

In our research we've found that thinking about one's own childhood and how you parent now makes for a parent who is more inside the child's mind. Let's say you remember having a miserable day at school. Your dad took you on his lap and just listened. Thinking about how that helped you in feeling better helps you to see the world through your child's eyes. Reflecting on difficult experiences in childhood can also help you to parent. You can think about why something was hard for you and how you don't want your own child to go through the same.

New parents have a lot on their plates – from constant feedings and diaper changes to learning how to be with this tiny, new person. It can be difficult for parents to form strong relationships with their babies from day one. And some babies are much harder to care for than others. Genetic influences, brain development and personal attributes make the task of parenting much harder for some parents.

But new parents aren't alone. Professionals in health, child-care, education and social work can share in the joys and challenges of raising healthy children. Together, we can work together to provide support to parents with young children.