

What About The Children?



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Introduction.

“What About The Children?” is an academic research based organization whose membership includes those with expertise in early years development, social services and primary & special education. The charity’s purpose is not to provide a support service to parents or children but to represent the emotional needs of infants under 3 since they are not in position to represent themselves.

We provide information from research to parents, professionals and politicians about the emotional development of infants and how their emotional needs are met, in particular about the critical importance of secure primary attachment for future emotional health.

What About The Children? exists to raise awareness of the never changing emotional needs of children under 3 in our ever changing society.

1. Description of the problems of poverty, stress and family breakdown.

Due to the nature of our charity we do not have examples of individual problems related to family breakdown and poverty. However what we do offer to you today is backed by our collective professional knowledge, based on recent, relevant first hand experiences in our individual professional work with children and families, as well our own personal life experiences. We have a shared conviction about the importance of early infant experiences for optimum brain development and future emotional health and stability.

So what is the connection between the emotional needs of infants, poverty and family breakdown?

There is ample researched statistical data which supports our claim that infants who do not receive loving care in infancy and as a consequence do not develop a secure primary attachment, are more likely to be disruptive pupils who cannot make use of education. The link with family breakdown and poverty is that when they reach adulthood they are:

- more likely to be found in the prison population,
- more likely to develop mental health problems,
- more likely to have addictive tendencies.
- more likely to be unemployed.

All of this is more likely to lead to family breakdown and associated poverty.

The damage done in infancy by inappropriate, inadequate and inconsistent care giving cannot easily or quickly be put right.

The problem is that when parenting and in particular motherhood is not valued, childhood and especially the emotional needs of young children are not valued.

Today

- there is little status in being a mother
- the Tax system provides no incentive for a mother to spend time with her infant.
- the Benefit system does not reward the two parent family in which the mother cares for her own child during the first few years.
- a single mother who works, leaving her infant with paid formal carers, is viewed as making a better contribution to society than a mother who chooses to spend a few years at home caring for her own infant.

Society's foot is stuck firmly on the accelerator of material acquisition and career achievement, and this leads to children's emotional needs being run over in the process.

All too often parents are rushing to do the household chores, dropping their child at day care, to get to work, leaving their child desperately trying to keep up. The working parent, tired after the days paid work, which they must do to service their high mortgage repayment is left with few opportunities, time or energy to engage with their baby or toddler at the time their baby or toddler needs to engage with them.

The evidence about the consequences of primary attachment in infancy not being achieved in infancy is that the pathways or template for forming future relationships are not in place. While intervention later on to redress the missed opportunity is possible, it is difficult, expensive and not always successful. Investment in the important relationship between infant and mother makes sound economic investment for the future success of individuals, families and ultimately our society as a whole.

The solutions we offer to this “socio-cultural problem” to quote the recent letter in the Daily Telegraph are complex and long term. The solutions are rooted in the knowledge and conviction that the unique bonding of an infant with its mother must receive proper recognition and receive proper support.

2. Causes of the problems of poverty, stress and family breakdown.

Our charity What About The Children? is looking in some depth at the causes of emotional and social instability and the lack of strong bonding in many current relationships. An emotionally secure citizen can

- develop sound relationships
- support a family and
- hold down a job.

However, today there is a rising tide of emotionally insecure people

- whose relationships fail
- who are depressed
- who live outside society's normal boundaries and
- for whom financial independence cannot be achieved.

We need to address why this is happening and we believe the reasons are so often to be found in the way babies and small children are treated in their early years.

- Separating children from their mothers too early, too frequently for long periods of time is a major cause of stress for the infants and this affects their developing brains and personalities in a number of negative ways unless the substitute care is of the very highest quality in terms of love and one to one attention.
- Due to recent biochemical research, scientists have broken through the barrier of interpretation and opinion in matters of early child care and have provided us with evidence of clinical conditions backed up by neurobiological measurements associated with stress. We are seeing these clinical conditions even in children from stable homes who are placed in nurseries as babies, too early for them to cope. How much more, therefore, are we asking from the children of less privileged backgrounds? [It is acknowledged, however, that very high quality nursery care, well-staffed with those who have received good training in the emotional needs of children, can be of help where the mother is under enormous pressure and unable to manage her baby on her own. After the age of 3, there are of course many positive benefits for children in nursery care, because they are sufficiently developed to make the most of the opportunities. Too many Press articles confuse these two pre-school age groups (over 3 and under 3) when reporting on the benefits, or otherwise, of early child care].
- These neurobiological measurements relate to the amount of cortisol released into the brains of infants in nursery care [cortisol being the stress chemical: their levels can be measured from saliva samples]. Research informs us that cortisol levels rocket initially for infants placed in nurseries, understandably, but significantly even after five months in a nursery, the cortisol levels in the brain are found to be permanently

raised, and at a higher level than for those infants still at home with their mothers. The children appear to have settled outwardly, but we now understand that their internal neurochemistry is being destabilized.

- We also know from research that consistent raised levels of cortisol affect the development of the orbitofrontal cortex. This area of the brain is concerned with characteristics such as empathy, foresight, reading social signals, self-control and anger management, concentration, the ability to link cause and effect, memory, and stress coping mechanisms.
- Frequent cuddles and loving behaviour also condition the brain to release the endorphins that reduce the effects of cortisol and over time the infant becomes hard-wired to cope with stress through this neurochemical mechanism. This mechanism will be permanently impaired without sufficient frequent loving attention for the baby.
- Another effect of insufficient one-to-one loving care on the infant brain involves the bonding chemical oxytocin. Research is leading us to understand that if there is insufficient bonding behaviour from a loved one for an infant, such as cuddles, stroking, kissing, and frequent warm closeness throughout the day, then the child will not form as strong an attachment relationship as it should. The resulting neurochemistry would indicate that there will be fewer oxytocin receptors formed in the brain, which means that as an adult this individual will find it harder to form strong well-bonded relationships for themselves. This is an important key as to why adult relationships falter: the brain's support mechanism for relating strongly could have been impaired by an infancy lacking in constant supportive loving closeness
- The synaptic links between the neurons in the brain are mainly, though not exclusively, formed in the first three years of life. There is added growth in adolescence and also following a stroke, but the vast bulk of development takes place during the infant years. These connections are stimulated, among other ways, by loving communication and close bonding behaviour, eye contact and the many ways in which loving parents and small babies emotionally interact. The number of synaptic links that form is in part related to the extent of emotional support received by an infant. If there is insufficient emotional support then there are insufficient links created to use the neurons, and the unused brain cells will actually atrophy and die.

Today more and more babies are being placed in nurseries for the following reasons:

- Financial pressures, high housing costs and costs within the home can force a mother to return to work before her child is ready which distresses both.

- Depression in mothers can pressure them to look for a solution in returning to work. Today a major cause of maternal depression, other than the widely acknowledged hormonal depressions, is that babies are being “born into the work place”. By that I mean that mothers tend to work almost up to the week their child is born without giving themselves enough time at home to make a fulfilling life for themselves outside the workplace. Thus the workplace appears the norm and home is for evenings and weekends. Depression easily sets in as the unfamiliarity of both a new child and a new day time setting cause intense confusion and difficulty, and also isolation. There is no easy answer here, but I record this as a genuine observation as to why some women return quickly to work and leave their babies with carers too early.
- Society now appears to expect a mother to do paid work and the current government has vastly increased nursery places as a signal that this is expected. Their [worthwhile] aim to get families out of poverty has over-ridden the emotional needs of young infants. But emotional deprivation in infants will, in turn, lead to emotionally deprived adults who will themselves be less able to earn, form strong relationships or make a contribution to society. The increase in nursery places could in the long term, therefore, create additional poverty.
- Most parents, and indeed many child care experts, have no idea how a baby’s brain physically develops: child development is seen as a behavioural study, not a biochemical one. Information about neurochemistry is rarely presented to the public in an understandable form and thus the price our babies [and indeed subsequently society] are paying by being separated from their mothers before they are ready is not well understood. Mothers may be less inclined to return to work too early were they to understand the research-proven physiological consequences for their child. If, however, it is essential for them to return to work, then they would take more care in finding high-quality close, loving, substitute care for their babies.
- The gender equality agenda has never had sufficient room for children’s needs. A mother with a baby or toddler cannot be as equally available as those without children. This is rarely frankly acknowledged, and the essential needs of children are over-ridden in the effort to allow women equality in every area in society. The aim is laudable, but the outcome for our children potentially serious.

The consequences of these pressures that push mothers into the workplace and away from their young children too early is taking its toll on the brain development of some of these children.

What About The Children? Is not harking back to a non-existent ‘golden age’ when everything was perfect, but pointing out that there is now new information available from the neurosciences that must cause us all to reassess what is happening to our children. In addition this is not a right wing or a left wing issue, but a child welfare one.

3. Solutions to the problem of poverty, stress and family breakdown

The purpose is child-centred and the goal is for all children under three in the UK to have good, secure, ongoing relationships with both parents during their first three years of life so that they have a firm emotional base for future learning, relationships and citizenship.

These solutions are long term and fall into two categories:

- Fiscal measures which would enable parents to take time off work to nurture their very young children.
- Information and support to help parents understand and meet their children's psychological needs.

Fiscal measures.

To enable parents to have a genuine choice to look after their own children during the first three years of every child's life we advocate:

- Tax measures which support marriage and give flexibility to families with young children where one parent wants to take some time out from work, such as transferable tax allowances.
- Realistic financial support to be paid to all families for at least three years after each birth in place of all subsidies for childcare. We recommend this be through paying mothers a large part of the Child Benefit which they currently receive over 18 years during the first three and replace childcare tax credits. This would create a level playing field for those families who wish to look after their own children and who currently receive no subsidies.
- Strictly control the size of mortgages and other loans.
- Encourage the idea of a 'baby gap' when certain payments can be frozen.
- Government to bear the financial costs to employers of extending parental leave.

Information and support

To enable parents to make informed decisions about how to meet their children's emotional needs we recommend:

- An introductory course on child development for all senior secondary school students
- Parenting education classes, with an emphasis on the importance of children's emotional / relationship needs, made freely available to both parents, particularly during the pre and post natal periods.

[Particularly recommended are courses run by PIPPIN, Parents In Partnership - Parent Infant Network. www.pippin.org.uk]

To ensure that children under three receive continuous, close, sensitive and consistent loving care and are able to spend most of their waking hours with predominantly one special person with whom they have a secure attachment we recommend:

- Appropriate help to be available to all those who experience difficulties with the primary attachment relationship. This will require secure funding for Health Visitors to assist with initial diagnoses and for counsellors and child psychotherapists such as those at OXPIP. (the Oxford Parent Infant Project. www.oxpip.org.uk).
- An emphasis on emotional security must be a priority in any childcare provided outside the family. Childcare professionals must have a good knowledge of children's emotional needs and brain development. Day nurseries are not appropriate for the under threes whereas extended family, nannies and child minders may fill the gaps.

To support parents in caring for babies and young children we recommend:

- Expansion of services such as parent and toddler clubs and one o'clock clubs at which babies and toddlers can socialise and learn together with a parent.
- Family friendly working practices so that working parents are better able to meet the needs of their dependants.