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The Roots of Morality

The following dialogue discusses the relationship between experiences in the first three years of life and later moral functioning.

I want my children to have strong morals. Being lectured didn't help me much. Any suggestions?

No one likes to be lectured. It is, however, important to *talk* to our children about being moral people, and it's even more important to *model* moral behavior. But it is not enough for our children to just "know the difference between right and wrong." We can all think of countless instances of children *and* adults knowing that something is wrong yet doing it anyway. Clearly, knowledge alone does not result in moral behavior.

What else can I do, then?

Ideally, you don't have children yet and can prepare for when you do, because the foundation for high moral functioning is laid *while babies are in the womb and during their first three years of life*.

The experiences babies have both before and after birth strongly affect the development of the structure and the "circuitry" of their brains and various systems, including their stress-response systems and the parts of the brain that are involved in moral development. Children need many experiences of attuned, warm and responsive caregiving from their parents in the early months and years for their brains to become "wired" for prosocial behavior and high levels of moral functioning, as well as for confidence, joy/pleasure, love/attachment, playfulness and equanimity. The brains and stress-response systems of children who have many stressful experiences - such as having their cries ignored - become "wired" for fear, anger, panic, impulsivity, sadness/depression, aggressiveness and other antisocial behavior, and for self-interest as their guiding principle in decision-making.

I highly recommend that anyone expecting to become a parent start reading now about what they can do for their own bodies that will help any babies they have, while in the womb and afterwards, to develop without problems, and that will help lay the foundation for not only optimum moral development, but optimum development in all areas. Since the body, the emotions and the mind are all interconnected, what affects one part affects the other parts to greater or lesser degrees. Babies' experiences with their primary caregivers shape their brains in ways that either facilitate or obstruct the development of high levels of moral thinking and behavior.

If you already have children, it's not too late to learn new ways to interact with them and to facilitate better development in all areas, including morality. Many of the principles and practices recommended here apply to older children as well as to babies. For example, listening with respect and responding with sensitivity is important at *every* stage of your child's development, from birth through adolescence and beyond.

I'm the mother of a wonderful baby boy. What does it mean, exactly, to provide attuned and responsive caregiving in the early months and years?

You can provide the attuned, responsive and loving caregiving your baby needs to develop well and become a moral person by:

- Respecting your baby's emotions.
- Responding promptly, consistently and lovingly to his communications (body language, cries and other vocalizations).
- Providing the physical and emotional closeness he needs, including lots of holding. (Keeping him in your room at night for at least the first year will not only satisfy his need for security but will greatly reduce the chances of SIDS, or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.)
- Interacting with him in attuned and responsive ways, by making eye contact, playing with him, smiling and talking to him, etc. It is also very important that you respect his communications and *stop* if he indicates he's had enough.

Why will "respecting my baby's emotions" help him become a moral person?

Research has shown that emotions are strongly involved in every aspect of child development and adult functioning: in thinking and reasoning, in social and emotional development, in motivation and learning, in the development of intelligence and in *moral development*. Yet society as a whole does not yet recognize the importance of emotions. The emphasis is on "correct and self-reliant *behavior*," so the feelings of babies in particular are often dismissed, ridiculed, minimized or ignored. Mainstream America's responses to adults *and* babies who are expressing sadness, loneliness, or other kinds of emotional pain and stress (and sometimes even physical pain) tend to be commands and pronouncements such as: "Suck it up! Quit whining! Life is tough; get used to it!" Whether expressed in words or in actions such as leaving a baby alone to "cry it out," our culture has little tolerance for anything perceived as weakness or "dependency." But when babies are frequently left alone with their often intense and overwhelming emotions, cortisol and other stress hormones are released which, if allowed to remain at high levels for long periods of time, damage their brains and stress-response systems. Deprived of the calming touch and soothing words that would release "feel-good" hormones and neurochemicals and bring down these high levels of stress hormones, babies often cry themselves into an exhausted, stressed-out state. They withdraw into themselves and "shut down" emotionally. When they get older, they may "act out," showing in their actions the emotions they have learned not to express directly (through signals, cries or words) because their attempts at communication have repeatedly been met with silence, ridicule, anger, punishment and/or even violence. Fear, anger, sorrow and panic will be easily triggered in these children and the antisocial wiring that has been laid down in their brains and stress-response systems will predispose them toward impulsive, aggressive and immoral behavior. Chronically frustrated, angry and impulsive children with antisocial tendencies have limited ability to reason and think decisions through. Focused on themselves and their unmet needs, they are unlikely to care about or even notice the feelings and needs of others, and are thus more likely to act immorally.

So you're saying it's important for me to help my baby with his feelings when he's upset or overstimulated?

Yes. It is physiologically impossible for infants to be able to "self-soothe." Their brains and stress-response systems are just not developed enough for them to be able to regulate their emotions, to calm themselves down or comfort themselves. Babies need their parents' calming touch and soothing words to move from an agitated, painful or sad state to a calm and contented state. It takes many months of brain maturation *and* being helped with their emotions for toddlers to *begin* to learn how to regulate their emotions. And if what a child *needs* is to be held by a parent, then sucking her thumb, for example, will be a very poor substitute. If you really wanted a comforting hug from your husband and he told you to self-soothe, do you think holding a

soft blanket or crying yourself to sleep would be a good substitute? Would this denial of comfort be good for the relationship? Does it make sense for adults to expect things of their babies that they don't expect of themselves?

In addition to responding with sensitivity when babies are in distress, it's also important for parents to "join in" with their children's *positive* emotions, such as joy or excitement. Research has shown that being attuned to our children's feelings and needs and responding with sensitivity to both painful and happy emotions has been shown to facilitate both cooperativeness and conscience development.

How, exactly, will helping my baby deal with his emotions help him become a moral person?

He'll develop *emotional intelligence*, which is necessary for the development of *moral intelligence*. Emotional intelligence has two components. The first is being comfortable with all of one's emotions, even those perceived as "negative," such as fear and anger, and knowing constructive ways to move through them and make good decisions. The other component of emotional intelligence is empathy: understanding and caring about how others feel and taking compassionate action. (Children learn to be empathetic by experiencing empathy for *their* feelings, especially from their primary caregivers.) Emotional intelligence is a prerequisite for moral intelligence, which goes beyond "following the rules." Moral intelligence requires an understanding of and concern for the needs and feelings of others, awareness of the impact of one's actions on people and situations, the ability to reason well and creatively problem-solve when faced with a moral dilemma, and respect for the rights of others as well as for their property. Therefore, helping children learn to handle difficult emotions and to develop the capacity for empathy facilitates the development of their emotional intelligence, which, in turn, contributes significantly to the development of their moral intelligence.

So how do babies learn to be independent?

They don't. They can't. Not even adults are independent. We adults rely on each other for emotional support through difficult times, and for practical things, like having truckers bring food to grocery stores for us. Our goal should be to promote a healthy INTERdependence in our children. Efforts to try to push independence on children will be counterproductive: children who are pushed away, whose feelings are dismissed, minimized, ridiculed or ignored, will become insecure and fearful. It is the children whose dependency needs are met, who are allowed to grow at their own pace and who are nurtured with respect, consideration and warmth, that will develop confidence and competence and will be "self-reliant" when appropriate and turn to others for assistance, support and comfort when appropriate.

Would it really hurt my baby's brain or later morality if I let him cry sometimes?

Occasionally your baby may wake up while you're finishing up in the shower and no one else is in the house; it won't hurt your baby to cry for a few moments under this kind of infrequent and unavoidable circumstance. What research has found to be harmful to babies' brains and various systems, including their immune and anti-anxiety systems, are recurring episodes of prolonged, uncomforted crying. "Sleep training" involves this harmful kind of crying and is damaging even if the baby is "only" left alone to "cry it out" for 2 or 3 nights. Also, babies who have repeated experiences of not being able to get a response from the world tend to learn a kind of pervasive helplessness that may lead to clinical depression when they are older. They also learn that they can't rely on their parents to be there for them when they are in distress, which damages the relationship and their ability to trust them. These stressful experiences interfere with the development of the brain, including those parts that are involved in moral functioning. Also, children who have lost some trust in their parents, who have felt abandoned or betrayed by their parents—though they may not consciously remember these experiences—are less likely to later heed their counsel about making choices, including moral choices.

Sounds like this damage to the brain and to relationships could cause some trouble in the teen years.

You're absolutely right. When emotional needs are not met through relationships, through human connection, support, comfort and unconditional love, children and teens will, sooner or later, seek good feelings wherever they can find them: in food, drugs, sex, power over others, alcohol, gambling, thrill-seeking and in other dysfunctional ways. Mainstream America's extensive problems with addictions, obesity, aggression, depression, anxiety, corporate sociopathy, abuse and neglect of children and seniors, etc. are classified by some experts as epidemics. What criminals and abusers do is, by definition, immoral, and it is well known that addicts often engage in various kinds of immoral behavior to support their addictions.

It is extremely important to meet the emotional needs of our babies, children and teens if we want to have healthy and strong relationships with them and if we want them to develop well in all dimensions: emotionally, physically, intellectually, socially and *morally*.

You said earlier that it's good to respond "promptly" to babies' signals. But isn't it important for kids to learn that they can't always get what they want and that sometimes they have to wait?

Life will teach them soon enough that they can't always get what they want. And of course children need to learn to wait *at some point* in their development. But there's a very big difference between what infants and older children are capable of understanding and tolerating. Infants don't understand that you'll pick them up "soon." Feeling alone, hungry or uncomfortable for more than a few minutes is stressful for them. It serves no purpose at all to make them wait. On the contrary, it is harmful. By the time they're toddlers, however, they'll be able to wait a few minutes while you finish a task, and as they get older they'll be able to handle increasingly longer "wait times." Research has found that the children who are frustrated the *least* during infancy and toddlerhood are *most* able to handle frustration when they are older.

There's also a difference between wants and needs, though for infants they're pretty much the same. All infants want is someone to love them, to hold, feed, interact with and protect them while they slowly develop skills and learn about the world. These wants are also what they *need* to develop well and to be secure and happy. As they grow, they'll want things they *don't* need, such as candy, expensive toys, etc. Those situations will provide good opportunities to learn that they can't always get what they want, but that this is OK, and they will be OK.

To summarize, it's not good to indulge young children with everything they *want*, but it is vital that we give them what they *need*. This includes their emotional needs, such as the need for physical and emotional closeness, for security, unconditional love and acceptance and quantities of quality time. Children who have been well-nourished emotionally are much better equipped than emotionally malnourished children to act in a moral way, living a principled life and demonstrating kindness, consideration and respect to others.

For more information about promoting the optimum development of your children both before and after birth, I highly recommend the book "Attached at the Heart: Eight Proven Parenting Principles for Raising Connected and Compassionate Children" by Barbara Nicholson and Lysa Parker. The authors support the principles and child-rearing practices they recommend with research findings from many fields, including neuroscience and anthropology. I also recommend "The Science of Parenting," by psychotherapist Margot Sunderland, who "translates" neuroscientific findings and explains their application to childrearing. Those interested in scholarly articles should read the fascinating and thorough work of Dr. Darcia Narvaez, such as "The Emotional Foundations of High Moral Intelligence," "Triune ethics: The neurobiological roots of our multiple moralities," and "Triune ethics theory and moral personality."

Enjoy the journey as you raise moral, secure, caring, healthy and happy children!!