

17236 - New submission from Early Years Strategy - Public Submissions

I am a grandparent and infant mental health practitioner. Together with my friend and retired Maternal Child Health nurse, Lucy Bire, we have created a free e-book using a petal diagram. The aim is to raise awareness about how particular styles of interacting with babies has a significant effect on the baby's developing brain and body. Please see attached. We would love this to be freely accessible to all expecting parents across Australia.

MENTAL HEALTH

My work began as a high school teacher in 1986 and I experienced many times of being challenged by the behaviours of the teenagers. One such experience was a Friday afternoon class with year 10 students who had been drinking alcohol over the lunch break. As a graduate teacher this was very confronting situation.

Research from the Black Dog Institute shares that 1:5 Australians experience a mental illness in any year (most common depression, anxiety, substance misuse). 45% of Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. Of the 20% of Australians with a mental illness in any one year, 11.5% have one disorder and 8.5% have two or more disorders. Almost half (45%) Australians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

Some ways of 'being with' children can unintentionally lead to anxiety in babies and children and leave them vulnerable to suffering from anxiety, depression later in life.

Over the years I have worked with younger and younger children (including in the EYRP research project in Heidelberg West) and was inspired to complete a postgraduate in Infant and Parent Mental Health at the University of Melbourne in 2013. I have come to understand more deeply the connection between our earliest relationships as babies and long-term mental health.

E BOOK – FREE TO SHARE

The e book petal provides a framework, guidance and tools to for parents and expectant parents.

The aim is to increase parent's level of confidence in responding to their babies needs in the first year of life, physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively.

Particular ways of responding to a baby in these earliest of weeks sets up the foundation of brain neural pathways that enable these little people as they grow, to manage emotions well, think rationally under pressure, calm down/seek help after angry outbursts and deal skilfully with anxiety episodes.

We do this by strengthening parenting capacities and skills and enhancing parent-child relationships.

Having inner security, a strong internal compass of self-confidence to guide self through life's ups and downs.

CURRENT SCIENCE AROUND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Especially over the past 2 decades, scientific research in brain development in babies and toddlers (<https://www.zerotothree.org>; <https://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>), is continuing to reveal that certain styles of parenting can have positive effects on the stress systems in a child's brain and body. Science has made it clear that we are born with unique characteristics embodied in our genes and our responses to babies can moderate or strengthen babies inborn traits. Particular ways of responding to a baby will establish pathways in their brain to enable them to manage emotions well, think rationally under pressure, calm

down/seek help after angry outbursts and deal skilfully with anxiety episodes.

The field of attachment research suggests that 'presence' – how a parent or care giver is open to and focused on the inner life of the child – is the best predictor of how emotionally and socially resilient a child will be as they develop into young adults. Emotional development forms the foundation of a person's ability to socialise, get on well with family, friends and be a productive member of society.

During the first half of pregnancy, a baby will grow over 100 billion neurons (nerve cells). Neurons are like tiny computer chips, receiving input, processing it, and sending information to other neurons. For example hearing voices while in the womb, the network of neurons and synapses dedicated to hearing faintly imprints (i.e. records) it.

Even though a baby's brain is forming synapses at a furious pace, less than 20% of these neural connections will have been made at birth. So at birth a baby still has about 1.2 quadrillion synapses to go!

During the first year of life a baby will grow and develop more rapidly than in any other period of life. At birth a baby's brain is about 33% of the size of an adult brain and grows to approximately 55% by 3 months of age, 64% in the first year, 80% by 3 and 90% by 5. Average weight at birth is 400g, 12 months 900g and 3 y 1100g.

E COURSE IDEA

I am also currently working on developing an E -course for these foundational first 3 months of life and very happy to collaborate further on this:

- provides information to parents about baby brain development
- fundamental milestones
- feelings and needs of babies
- 6 behavioural states of babies and how parents can attune to baby's behavioral cues
- Practical compassion exercises for self, baby and others

LOOKING FORWARD

I recently attended a Global Mental Health and wellbeing summit and heard about the challenges globally around the mental health epidemic we are experiencing. There is a renaissance of new practises that are emerging which are so encouraging and it would be fantastic if we can be up there leading the way globally.

The way the future could look:

A world where all people have necessary stress regulating systems in their brains to be able to communicate with each other freely, powerfully and fully expressed for the betterment of humanity for now and future generations.

Warmly,

Robyn Ball

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