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## Discussion Points

### ***“Do Babies Have Emotional Lives? YES!!!”***

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The human infant is an amazing creature, and for parents of newborns, a real mystery! Parenthood is the most HUMBLING experience, in large part, due to three main reasons:

1. **Babies “speak” to us in “code”**, meaning that WE (Parents and all who care for babies) have to LEARN MORE ABOUT THE AMAZING ABILITIES THAT NEWBORNS AND BABIES HAVE and how they let us know how they are doing, and how *WE* are doing with them!
2. **Babies are unique, individuals so that general statements that apply to ALL infants are difficult to make!** Parents who have one child often believe that their baby’s development is influenced by all the experiences the baby will encounter – that it is the ENVIRONMENT makes a difference. While that is true – parents who have two or more children know that FROM THE FIRST MOMENTS OF LIFE BABIES HAVE UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, TEMPERAMENTS, STYLES OF ENGAGING AND COMMUNICATING.

3. **Babies activate in their parents (and caregivers and all who interact with the baby), feelings and memories (sometimes unconsciously) about their own childhood and experiences with others.** This means that parents ALWAYS HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO THEIR OWN FEELINGS AND REACTIONS. That means that sometimes parents will have feelings about their own babies, which may be hard to speak about and share with others – even negative and angry feelings. YET parenting is filled with ambivalence – mixed feelings – and these feelings, while normal, need to be understood.

So, I have three overall goals in my conversation with you. As one-sided as this video is, it is still a change to have a “conversation” with you and I hope I can answer some of the questions you are having. These three goals are:

Slide # 1 (show each number as the point is being made)

1. **Babies are AMAZINGLY COMPETENT!!!**
2. **Babies’ brains and development in all areas are influenced by attachment relationships!**
3. **Child development, and parenthood are filled with joy, as well as challenges and crises, many of which are predictable.**

1. Learning about the remarkable research in infant development and the brain sciences that lead us to conclude that babies are amazingly complex and filled with abilities! This will help us know the “language” that babies use well before they have “words”.
2. Learn about the remarkable influence that the parent-infant *attachment relationship* has on the baby’s brain, emotional, social, communicative and intellectual development, and to learn what parents can do to

promote development from birth (even pregnancy) through age 5! This will help you become more “attuned” to your baby and more respectful of your infant’s individuality! This is not always easy.

3. Learn about some of the typical challenges and “crises” that babies and families can face in the first several years of life. This will help you anticipate some changes in you and your baby that are expected in the journey that babies lead us on. This may also lead you to become aware of ways you, as a parent, may feel and react not necessarily because of the baby – but because of your own unique style and life story.

Let’s begin, with a question that I have heard from parents, adults and even other professionals over the years:

***“WHEN DO BABIES START TO HAVE FEELINGS?”***

Slide # 2

**Babies have feelings from the first moments of life and respond to all the sensory experiences they encounter!**

- A full term baby has very responsive nervous and sensory systems! Babies can see at birth (best about 8-12 inches from their faces – like when they are held in a parent’s arms), they can hear, recognize, and prefer their parents’ voices, they can smell and prefer their mother’s breastmilk over the breastmilk of other mothers, and they can make a wide range of facial expressions and vocalizations that over the first six months will evolve into a very complex system of communication! *SO- babies have feelings from the first moments of life and will respond with distress to discomfort and mishandling, and calmness and pleasure when their needs are met.* One more point to make – contrary

to long-held misconceptions – babies do feel pain (e.g. boys who are circumcised). Although we cannot discuss this now, the preterm baby or babies with medical or developmental concerns also require special care and handling.

- By 6 – 8 weeks, babies make lots of eye contact, smile when smiled at and let you know if they are uncomfortable and are not being held properly! They already are beginning to form short term memories and they need consistency and predictability.
- At one time, a widely held belief was that infants and young children were too “immature” to be affected by the environment or have feelings that mattered, and society developed unfortunate practices that reflected this misconception. When I was 3 and ½ years old, both my parents worked and they enrolled me in New Jersey’s first parent cooperative nursery – Memorial Day nursery in Hoboken (long ago closed). On my first day in the center, well-meaning staff told my hard-working and very conflicted mother that as soon as I was distracted by the toys and tricycles, she should leave the center. Within moments I discovered she was gone and I spent the next hours sitting on a table near the large, industrial-sized windows looking for my father’s blue Plymouth. Over 50 years later, I still recall the scene and setting.
- SO- All of this means that when parents look at, make faces, make “sad faces” when babies are sad, play with them (like “this little piggy”), treat them as real human beings – they are taking it all in- and as we will see those parts of the brain that code emotions and contribute to learning are GROWING!

Let me pose another question:

***“HOW DOES A BABY’S BRAIN DEVELOP?”***

Slide # 3

**INFANT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT  
BEGINS BEFORE BIRTH AND IS  
LARGELY DEPENDENT AFTER  
BIRTH ON THE NATURE OF  
ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIPS !**

- The greatest period of brain development - the brain “growth spurt” occurs from the last trimester of pregnancy through the first 2 years of life. During this period, all the good things that happen and all the adverse experiences and interactions that occur will be “biologized”- meaning that actual changes occur in the physical/chemical structures in the brain. During this period, both the “mind” and “brain” are being formed. We now know that when babies are “attuned” to, when they form secure attachments, when their lives are characterized by consistent, predictable, loving, calming, respectful experiences, their brains are formed accordingly. On the other hand, when babies are not treated well, when they experience lots of change- especially in the ones who care for them, when they are exposed to out-of-control events or trauma, their minds and brains will be formed accordingly as well.
- This does NOT mean that babies are rigid or must be protected from any stressor! In fact, all babies (all humans) will always encounter stress. However, it does mean that babies need those closest to them to be attuned and attentive to their needs and that babies actually grow when they encounter some new experiences that are connected to those who love and care for them. **WHAT BABIES NEED HOWEVER**, is to be attuned to and felt with! Let me provide three examples:
  - A mother is holding her six month old and a “stranger” enters the room. (Social and emotional referencing)
  - The “Jack-in-the-Box” moment
  - A baby’s finger is accidentally pinched during play with mommy

Babies brains are being formed during these moments.

- SO- What this means is that not only do we help babies feel safe, secure and confident when they are treated with attuned love, predictability and consistency – we are helping to form connections in their brains that help them to recognize feelings in others (empathy), learn how to experience and express all emotions, and learn an important task of “self-regulation”- how to calm themselves and stay connected when upset!

Let me review on final point:

***“INFANT DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTHOOD  
INVOLVES CRISES!”***

Slide # 4

***INFANT DEVELOPMENT AND  
PARENTHOOD INVOLVES  
STRESS AND CRISIS!***

- Experienced parents are laughing at this obvious statement!!!
- The first point to make is that stress and some form of crisis is a normal part of human development. Everyday life brings a certain amount of “normal” crisis, and on occasion crises occur that are more intense and with support can be manageable. However, when crises become overwhelming to parents and children, stress can become toxic and damaging- both biologically and psychologically!
- I will not speak about those extreme cases, but instead touch on a two examples of very ordinary events that can easily develop into more serious problems if not understood properly.

Slide # 5 – Show each statement as it is read

- As babies are developing the ability to walk towards the end of their first year, their sleep is often disrupted.
- Sometimes an infant or toddler can say or do something that will make their parent react as if an adult has behaved this way.

- Many of you may know about the work of Dr. T. Berry Brazelton—the famed pediatrician from Harvard University. For over 40 years, Dr. Brazelton and his colleagues have been describing the amazing abilities of babies, toddlers and children, and have documented the ways they are affected by both positive and negative events. One of Dr. Brazelton’s most lasting contributions has been the development of an approach to help parents in their most important work of child development. This approach is referred to as “TOUCHPOINTS” and I have provided you with a reference to his wonderful book of that name. This approach is based on the well-documented notion that when children are developing in new ways, other areas of development will temporarily “unravel” and become disorganized.
  - So, some of you may have notice that just around the same time Jimmy is crawling and cruising along, his sleep becomes less predictable, he may have night awakenings, and he may become more irritable, clingy and harder to transition into sleep.
  - IF PARENTS REGARD THIS AS A PROBLEM – EITHER IN THE CHILD OR IN THEMSELVES – they may respond with unnecessary and unwarranted distress, sadness or guilt and even misguided harsh discipline. However, if parents can expect (Brazelton refers to this as “anticipatory guidance”) such disruptions, and provide the child (and themselves) with needed comfort and support, this “crisis” will result in growth

and mutual competence – both mommy and baby grow and feel proud!

- But let me share a moment between a parent and toddler that is likely familiar, but nonetheless stressful: A parent is trying to feed her 18-month old, seated in a high-chair, but he begins to refuse the food, tip the bowl onto the floor, and when the parents tries again, the toddler makes an angry face and hits the parent.
  - We must acknowledge how hard this is for parents – and for some parents, this brief encounter can be extremely difficult and worrisome!
  - Why? Firstly, babies don't come with instructions! Wouldn't it be great, if just as this scene unfolds, a voice over a loud speaker says (to the parent): **“Congratulations! You have successfully helped your child develop a strong sense of growing independence and the ability to express his own unique feelings! He is becoming able to make choices, express them and disagree with others in a way that will serve him well in life!!!”**
  - Let's be painfully candid. For many parents, this “benign” episode can stir up rage, and perhaps at a level they are not even aware of, remind them of someone who mistreated, or hit them as a child, and this little toddler in the present, can stir up reactions from the past! Then rather than understanding the toddler's behavior as a crowning achievement of development, the action will be interpreted as disrespectful, abusive, intentionally harmful – all well beyond the developmental abilities of an 18 month old – and the parent might respond in kind – and either be verbally or physically harsh and hurtful.
  
- These examples are meant to remind us that every single day, events happen in the lives of babies, children and their families that reflect the three major points we have been making:
  1. Babies are amazing competent but behave in ways that we have to understand!
  2. Their parents are the most influential developers of their minds and brains, and
  3. All development – of babies and parents – are filled with crises – and maybe we can add that babies,

toddlers and children, always remind us of others in our lives – including ourselves!

SO- What this means is that parents – all parents – need support! Parenting is a relationship not just a skill and, unlike many other developed countries, we need policies that allow parents time to invest in parenthood!

Babies DO have an emotional life and we parents will do well to learn as much as we can about them – and about ourselves!

I hope this has been helpful. I have listed some resources that I you can enlist.

Good luck!

### Resources

#### Websites:

The National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

The Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders: [www.icdl.com](http://www.icdl.com)

The Brazelton Touchpoints Center: [www.touchpoints.org](http://www.touchpoints.org)

The YCS Institute for Infant and Preschool Mental Health: [www.ycs.org](http://www.ycs.org)

#### Books

Brazelton, T.B. (1992). Touchpoints: The Essential Reference. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley/Lawrence.

Brazelton, T.B. and Greenspan, S.I. (2000). The Irreducible Needs of Children. Cambridge, Mass: Perseus Publishing.

Costa, G. (2006). Mental Health Principles, Practices, Strategies and Dynamics Pertinent to Early Intervention Practitioners. In G.M. Foley, and

J.D. Hochman, (Eds.) Mental Health in Early Intervention: Achieving Unity in Principles and Practice. Baltimore: Paul T. Brookes Publishers.

Fraiberg, S. (1959) The Magic Years. New York: Scribner's:

Greenspan, S.I. and Greenspan, N.T. (1985). First Feelings. New York: Viking Press.

Greenspan, S.I. and Weider, S. (2006). Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: A Comprehensive Developmental Approach to Assessment and Intervention., Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.  
Lieberman, A.F. (1993). The Emotional Life of the Toddler. New York: The Free Press.

Lansky, V. (1993). Games Babies Play: From Birth to Twelve Months. Deephaven, MN: The Book Peddlers.

Stern, D. (1990). Diary of a Baby. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Stern, D. and Bruschiweiler-Stern, N. (1998). The Birth of A Mother. New York: Basic Books.

### Videotapes

The Emotional Lives of Children -The Heart to Head Connection: Identifying Signs of Stress in Young Children. (2005) Two-part videotape series and materials about the indicators of emotional development and difficulties in infants and children, birth to 5. Montclair, New Jersey: Programs for Parents, Inc.,

Exploring First Feelings, based on the work of Dr. Stanley Greenspan. Washington, DC: Institute for Mental Health Initiatives.