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Discussion Points

“Using Children’s Books to Promote Social, Emotional and Intellectual Development”

Babies are remarkable beings and as we have seen in some of the other webcasts, they are filled with remarkable abilities well beyond what we as parents and professionals had ever imagined!

Among these abilities what seems most exciting to me is how attuned babies and young children are to the human face and voice! In many respects, babies and children are true “students” of faces! As young as 4-6 months of age, they can tell if mommy or daddy is not attending to them or if mommy and daddy are “different” than usual.

Dr. Ed Tronick of Harvard University conducted a series of studies in which he asked mothers of 6 month olds to sit across from their babies and engage in usual playful exchanges – smiling, vocalizing, tickling, and frolicking with their babies, who of course, responded with attuned glee and excitement. THEN, he asked the parents to stop any facial and behavioral movement and to adopt a “still-faced” posture. Within seconds, babies became alarmed, tried their best to re-engage their mothers, than became distressed and forlorn.

Already, babies knew that something changed – and they were helpless in getting their mommy “back”!

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What does this tell us about babies, about mommies and all the people who are with babies, and about the facial, gestural, vocal, verbal, body and movement exchanges that occur between babies and those with whom they interact?

This question will be answered by considering something quite ordinary that all parents can do with their babies, toddlers and preschool-aged children – reading of children’s books.

So, I have two goals in my presentation, which I will pose in the form of questions:

Slide # 1 (Show each one as it is read)

- 1. What happens between a parent and baby during the first two years of life (before words) when they engage in a shared activity like reading?**
- 2. When children develop play and imagination between ages 2 and 5, how can popular children’s books be helpful in promoting development and in dealing with common child development themes?**

Firstly, think about some of your favorite children’s book – when you were a child or as a parent of a young child. Well here are some of my favorites:

- Goodnight Moon, by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd
- Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst
- There’s a Nightmare in My Closet, by Mercer Mayer
- The Runaway Bunny, also by Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd

- Mamma, Do You Love Me? , by Barbara M. Joesse and Barbara Lavallee

The list can go on and on, and in fact I have prepared a list of 22 books – admittedly very subjectively selected – representing some of my favorite children’s books, along with the central social and emotional themes that each book addresses. This list, along with other resources, is provided on the Baby Bites website.

So, let’s examine each question that I posed:

What happens between a parent and baby during the first two years of life (before words) when they engage in a shared activity like reading?

In a related presentation on Baby Bites, I discussed the remarkable emotional life of infants and young children, and how the development of babies’ brains as well as their social, emotional and intellectual development are organized, and principally influenced by the nature of their earliest attachment relationships.

So just imagine a 6 month old baby laying on the floor next to her mommy, who is holding a book – say Goodnight Moon – in the air over their heads- so that their joint, shared, mutual gaze is focused on the book. However, mommy lifts her head a bit so baby see’s the book AND MOMMY – who reads each word with rich facial expressions and varying intonation in accord with the narrative. As mommy’s eyes widen – so do baby’s! As mommy laughs and crinkles her nose – so does baby! Each shared moment – each connected body state, feeling, sound, movement, gesture, shared experience get’s “coded” so that “reading with mommy” has a certain “feel” and “value” to it. “Reading with mommy” becomes a special experience!

AND – words and pictures become important because they are symbols that get connected with certain ideas and feelings! “Three little bears sitting on chairs” , or “a little toy house and a young mouse” begin to get connected with the images mommy points to, and as the baby grows into toddlerhood than preschool-age, the words and images do not simply get learn because of repetition – they get learned because it was MOMMY AND ME THAT LEARNED THEM TOGETHER.

The National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families – ZERO TO THREE - calls this the “Heart to Head” Connection.

Slide # 2

The Heart to Head Connection

This simply means that “reading” – or “literacy” – and in fact all intellectual (and social and emotional) development best begins through these shared, interpersonal moments in rich, loving attuned relationships!

So, the first question, what happens between parents and babies when they engage in an activity like reading together is that the brain, emotional, intellectual, and language systems get “turned on” and connected – and in a real sense the mechanisms and receptors for learning become open to experience!

In fact, both before and in addition to books, whenever parents and children engage in these shared emotional experiences, the foundations of intellectual development are being established.

So---- “reading”, first and foremost is an emotional and social task, that sets the stage for intellectual development!

Let’s now consider our second question:

When children develop play and imagination between ages 2 and 5, how can popular children’s books be helpful in promoting development and in dealing with common child development themes?

The hallmark of 2 year olds is the explosion of language, and between 2 and 5 the growth of pretend play and imagination is amazing! Our little babies, entirely dependent on us, become these separate, insistent,

opinionated, verbal, creative, imaginative – sometimes real challenging and puzzling – partners!

This is both remarkable and sometimes difficult! As imagination grows, so does the child's awareness of the world – in all of its wonder and even its dangers. So the 17 month old who could sleep through the night, now at 3 years of age thinks the shadow near his closet is a “monster”. Seventeen month olds don't yet imagine that shadows are monsters – 3 year olds do!

We sometimes refer to this as “growing” into a fear – and in fact, despite the distress it is an absolute wonderful sign of intellectual, social and emotional growth!

But let's consider, very briefly, the varied journeys that children – your children – encounter:

- Some parts of the journey are “universal” in that all children experience them, and they are, for the most part, fundamental aspects of growing:
 - Distress when encountering a stranger,
 - Dealing with separation from those to whom they are attached,
 - Learning about the growing wish for independence – and all the fears and risks that accompany it,
 - Learning how to experience and express the “full drama” of all human emotions- fear, love, sadness, doubt, loneliness, etc. –
 - Learning how to control impulses like biting, throwing, hitting,
 - Learning how to calm down when upset and learning how to best be comforted by those who love them
 - And so on.....
- But some children encounter journeys that are much less typical and favorable:
 - Extended separation from, or death of a parent
 - Multiple placements in foster care or out-of-home placements
 - Exposure to violence or trauma
 - Victim of abuse or neglect
 - Serious illness
 - And so on.....

It is certainly the case that all parents in the first group could benefit from thoughtful developmental and parental guidance – and that is one reason why Baby Bites is a helpful resource.

It is equally clear that children in this latter group will likely need specialized help and intervention.

But let me suggest that a helpful approach for both groups is the use, in a way that is tailored to the child's experiences and style, of children's books to address both the NORMAL THEMES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AS WELL AS THE UNUSUAL AND MORE WORRISOME ENCOUNTERS THAT SOME CHILDREN HAVE.

Let me share an illustration:

- A child is beginning preschool and is very anxious about separation from his mother (So is mom!). Of course, visits in advance of the first day, using photographs, play and imagination to help the child prepare for what will happen – even using pretend school buses and playgrounds to help the child harness the power of his imagination, ensuring that the new “caregiver” is warm and sensitive to your child – all of these activities can be very helpful – BUT books like-
 - The Kissing Hand, by Audrey Penn – can be wonderful explorations about the fears and worries of something new – but can also be terrific ways to help children know that they have “inside of them” those who love them. Such books can also be helpful for children in foster care, children who must be hospitalized, even in helping a child surrounding the death of a loved one.
 - This book, along with many others, is listed on the information sheet I have provided along with this webcast
- There are so many opportunities for parents to employ carefully selected children's books to address both typical developmental tasks as well as the distressful, painful experiences some children and families encounter.
- I have found that these books have another, less obvious but just as important benefit: THEY PROVIDE PARENTS WITH JUST THE

RIGHT KIND OF LANGUAGE TO TALK WITH THEIR CHILDREN AROUND IMPORTANT THEMES!

Before I close with some very brief illustrations of how books can be so helpful, I would like to make two cautionary statements:

Slide # 3 (Show each bullet as I say them)

- Trust your intuition if you have concerns that are not easily resolved.
- Read children's books that are rich in fantasy and avoid overly directly, reality-based, books.

1. It is important that parents consult with an infant or child development professional if they have concerns about their infant or child. If you concerns are too quickly dismissed, seek another professional. While there are many normal and to-be-expected developmental crises and struggles, parents should always trust their intuition if a child's difficulties appear serious or longer in duration.
2. As I have described the use of Children's Books – I would recommend that parents of children under age 5 always select books that address core emotions that use pictures, words and stories that employ fantasy and make-believe! Classic stories like the Velveteen Rabbit, Good Night Moon, There's a Nightmare in My Closet – all rely on imagination to grapple with very serious themes of love, fear, and coping. When children encounter very difficult experiences – like divorce of parents, or death of a loved one – books that too directly address these issues – like – “My Daddy is an Alcoholic” – almost always get read and discarded quickly, because both children and parents understand that dealing with such painful emotions and experiences always requires the use of fantasy that helps children feel strong an that momentarily brings them away from the direct reality they face, but brings them directly to the underlying core emotions that must be experienced and shared with the adult helping them.

So let me end with a few brief illustrations of what I mean:

- A 3 year old who is wanting so much to be independent, but still needs to know that he can sometimes be angry with mommy, and that she will still be there when he needs her – would love Runaway Bunny or even the more provocative Mama, Do You Love Me?
- The 4 year old who is afraid of the dark (of course a nightlight or flashlight can help), might really begin to feel strong and powerful when she reads, There's a Nightmare in My Closet.
- The 5 year old who is mad and sad, because his older brother can play baseball but he can't, would get a charge out of Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (my personal favorite).
- The child who has been adopted at age 4 and seems clingy and worried might enjoy, The Mulberry Bird: Story of Adoption, or the less direct, Are You My Mother?
- And son, and on.

So Children's book offer parents so many opportunities – both for their own education and guidance as well as their child's emotional and social development, to explore important themes of growing up.

And guess what? We adults need the exact same help throughout our lives!

Happy reading and Happy Parenting!

Resources

Websites:

The Brazelton Touchpoints Center: www.touchpoints.org

The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, LLC:
www.childrenslit.com/index/php

The Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders:
www.icdl.com

National Association for the Education of Young Children
www.naeyc.org

The National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families: www.zerotothree.org

The YCS Institute for Infant and Preschool Mental Health: www.yes.org

Books/Printed Materials

Bettelheim, B. (1988). The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales. New York: Random House.

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.

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

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

Spitz, E.H. (1999). Inside Picture Books. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Starting Young (PA Peace Links/Early Head Start)- 60 activities organized around 7 developmental goals for first three years of life

Order from Office of Child Development, Early Head Start, 5600 Penn Ave./Pittsburgh, PA 15206 – 412-661-9280

Zippy's Friends (School- based Mental Health Promotion Curriculum for 5-7 year olds) - Partnership for Children/UK

www.ycs.org

www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/