

## The Baby is the Book

by Jan Hunt, M.Sc.

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On a recent Internet radio show<sup>1</sup>, I emphasized that babies are the true experts on parenting. I added that I often ask new parents if they wish they had an expert living with them to help them to figure out what to do next! I told the radio audience to "Just look to the baby. If you're doing something wrong, the baby will tell you. If you're doing something right, the baby will tell you that too. Babies know exactly what they need."

The interviewer neatly summed up these thoughts by adding, "People say the baby doesn't come with a book, but they do... *the baby is the book!*" Exactly. It is the baby - and only the baby - who knows just what she needs. She will give us immediate feedback on everything we do. A baby will tell us with frowns and tears when a legitimate need is not being met, and with bright smiles and cuddles when we meet her needs in a loving way. If parents can recognize and embrace this concept, parenting can be much simpler and more joyful than when the baby's communications are mistrusted and questioned.

Babies, programmed by nature, know instinctively what good parenting looks like. They know, for example, that touch is a need every bit as critical as feeding. They will protest loudly if we put them in the isolation of a crib to sleep, but will fall asleep peacefully when they have the security of human touch. They know that responsive parenting enhances trust and bonding - and will respond with anguish and fear when we ignore their cries. They know that breastfeeding offers critical immunization, nutrition and comfort, and will instinctively move to the breast on their own, just moments after birth. They know that breastmilk changes in consistency in accordance with their age, and will wean naturally when their nursing needs have been fully met. They know they are dependent on others for their very survival, and will react with terror if they cannot see us for even a short time. They know all of these things and more. Parents would be wise to learn from their babies instead of assuming that babies are always learning from them.<sup>2</sup>

Babies know many important things. What they can't know is that parents often receive harmful advice to ignore their babies' communications and disregard their critical needs. This is a dangerous experiment, and every newspaper we read describes the long-term results of not giving children a compassionate start in life.

A baby needs what she needs, and if we meet those needs, she will thrive. This isn't "spoiling" - it is trusting that the baby is giving us important information about her legitimate needs, as well as trusting our own natural instincts to want to respond to those needs. Trusting our baby and trusting ourselves, we establish a close bond and give our baby her best chance for a healthy and happy life.

The solution is so simple, and right in front of our eyes. Instead of trying to teach babies to accept parenting behaviors that are alien to their very nature, we need only allow them to teach us how to respond to their honest communication. They have so much to tell us, and they are the world's most diligent and energetic teachers.

The baby is the book. Read it - you won't be able to put it down!

<sup>1</sup> "Perfect Pregnancy and Beyond", Interview with Leslie Malicote, June 27, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Kirschner, Jan and Tracy. *The Little Goo-roo: Lessons from Your Baby*. Boulder, CO: Atlas Press, 1997.