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Riding the rollercoaster: an infant observation of a teenage couple and their baby

Frances Roper*

This paper describes a one-year infant observation of Matt, who was the first baby born to a teenage couple. The family struggled with many ups and downs in the course of the year, as the parents were faced with the challenges of new parenthood on top of the challenges of their own adolescence. At times the reliance on projective identification, so expectable at their age, posed problems for this couple’s capacity to co-parent. Mother and baby developed a close, loving bond in the early months, but as he grew over the course of the year, some aspects of Matt’s development were experienced as very rejecting by his mother. This may offer some clues as to why teenage mothers tend to become less communicative with their babies as they grow.

Keywords: infant; observation; adolescent; parents; teenage; mother

Introduction

Matt was the first baby born to Caitlin, who had just turned 18, and her partner Dominic, who was 17. The couple had met in high school, and had been together for two years when they conceived Matt, although they had not married. The pregnancy was not planned, but had not been exactly avoided either – Caitlin wanted children, and as the oldest of four had been very involved in her siblings’ care. Many of her school friends had had babies in their teens, and her own mother had Caitlin when she was 17. Dominic too had wanted a baby since the age of 14.

The family was living in one-bedroom flat when I met them for the first time. It was quite an introduction. I arrived at the flat and Caitlin – a short, overweight girl with dark hair in a pony-tail – met me in a rather distraught state, and told me that Dominic had gone to retrieve the baby from his parents’ house a mile away where the baby had stayed overnight. It was now pouring with rain, and as they had no car, he could not bring Matt home and was ‘stranded’. She was desperate to be with the baby again, and I – being rather desperate to start the observations – found myself offering to take her in my car, to collect her baby and partner.
We drove across town to meet Dominic – a tall, skinny boy – standing on a street corner. He was carrying Matt, a small compact baby with a thatch of dark hair, sound asleep in a car-seat. It then transpired that Caitlin and Dominic had locked themselves out of their flat, and a brief but explosive argument ensued between the couple. Then they managed to calm themselves down and decided to recruit the help of Caitlin’s best friend (also Matt’s godmother), a girl called Susie. We now drove to Susie’s place, collected her and then drove back to the flat. As hoped, Susie managed to break into the flat using a hammer poked through the letterbox.

Matt slept soundly throughout, snugly wrapped in blankets in a car seat. I felt breathless at the precariousness and confusion of the world around him, and stunned at my own willingness to jump into action on the family’s behalf. I also had a strong sense, from the beginning, that this baby and his parents lived in a complex social world of extended family and friends – Matt had grandparents, step-grandparents, aunts, uncles and a godmother living locally.

**Early weeks**

This sense of a highly social environment was borne out during early observations. Although Dominic, who worked for a flooring company, had to go back to work very soon, mother and baby were seldom alone. For example, at three weeks I arrived to find the Health Visitor doing a check-up, while his grandmother, godmother and a visiting teenage girl watched Caitlin give him his bottle.

**Matt at three weeks**

Caitlin concentrates on Matt despite the other conversations; she gazes at him steadily until he stops drinking. Now she says ‘he’s had enough,’ and takes the bottle from his mouth, which has gone slack. He looks sated. Caitlin sits him up, rather squishly, and leans him forward over her right hand while she rubs his back gently. Matt produces a huge burp suddenly, and the whole audience goes spontaneously ‘Aah!’ in relief.

Matt was clearly borne into a highly social world, and yet despite all the friends and family there was sometimes something rather bleak underneath all this apparently warm contact. This extract is from an observation at four weeks, when I arrived to find Caitlin washing up:

Matt is sitting about three feet away from the television in a car seat. He seems over-stimulated: his eyes screw up in mild distress, he turns his head away from the television and gives a little cry. Caitlin comes to sit by him and immediately offers the dummy. Matt pushes the dummy out firmly with his tongue and gives another cry. Caitlin keeps persisting with the dummy, pushing it back into his mouth. I find this painful, as my own impulse would be to pick him up. But after a few more attempts Matt accepts the dummy and begins sucking. ‘There you go, there’s your comforter,’ says Caitlin.

Strangely, Caitlin felt that the dummy was a better form of comfort than a live human being – just as a bottle was seen as better than her breast. She had
similar faith in an electronic chair which rocked the baby, or the television which, constantly on, was a reassuring artificial presence. I think this was because she felt real people, including herself, could not be relied on to respond when needed. When Matt was five weeks old, she told me ‘Matt loves being held really close, like this, but I don’t do it too often in case he gets too used to it’.

This lack of trust in the human environment may have had roots in Caitlin’s childhood. She had had to leave her mother’s house at the age of five – it was unclear why – and lived for several years with her grandmother, only returning ‘home’ at the age of 11. Her three siblings had been born to several different fathers. Caitlin told me once she wished she could have had a baby alone, without having to depend on Dominic.

So Matt in these early weeks had a mother who did respond to his cries, but often responded by offering objects instead of holding him herself. At this age he did not protest much. Was this because he was temperamentally ‘easy’ – he was clearly a good-natured baby from the start – or because he understood, from Caitlin’s insistence, that this was an essential adaptation? At all events, he did adapt. When Caitlin did not pick him up, he followed her face intently with his eyes, and his face turned towards her as she moved around the flat, like a flower tracking the sun.

The father

When Matt was five weeks old I accompanied him and Dominic to the shops to pick up a ‘baby gym’ ordered in advance. Standing in the queue, Dominic suddenly told me that he had ‘something to live up to’ for Matt. He described how his own father had left Dominic’s mother when he was a baby, and nowadays only showed up occasionally to ask Dominic to buy him drugs. His stepfather, however, was ‘the bollocks – just brilliant’ – and had stuck with Dominic’s mother through thick and thin. Fatherhood seemed to offer Dominic a choice: to be the good father who sticks around, or the drug-dependent dad who lets everyone down.

I was struck at how differently the sales lady treated Dominic – a skinny youth with purple studs in his eyebrow – from the way I would have been treated. Although he had the receipt for Matt’s gym, she suspiciously demanded ‘proof of identity’. Dominic took this good-naturedly, explaining he had none except for Matt, sleeping in the buggy. ‘He’s my proof of identity,’ he said proudly.

I think that what Dominic told me about himself and his two fathers explains in part why he had chosen, so early, to try to settle down and raise a child rather than sowing teenage oats. At some level he dreaded making the same, damaging mistakes as his biological father.

But what about Caitlin? What had induced her to have a baby at 18, rather than carry on with her education, for example? Pines (1988) comments that the adolescent mother may want a child in order to be really loved, as she may not have felt loved herself in infancy. She may fantasize, when pregnant, about the perfect love her baby will feel for her, fulfilling every hungry wish for nurturance.
craved during her own childhood. Pines notes that the reality of the actual baby, in contrast to the ‘dolly’ fantasy, demands a substantial adjustment on the mother’s part. Past fantasies have to be integrated with the actuality of her lived experience, if her baby is to be cared for adequately.

In the early weeks, Caitlin did sometimes seem to view Matt as a kind of adorable living doll she could play with. She had spoken of ‘dressing him up’ in a Santa suit for Christmas; how she would give him ‘a treat of chocolate, when he’s been a good boy’ like a child playing with her pretend baby. She had seemed quite preoccupied with a view of Matt as needing a lot of food, ‘a hungry baby,’ and excitedly described the ‘proper meals’ she would make for him when he was older. At the same time, ‘I don’t want him to grow up too quick, ’cos he won’t need me anymore,’ she had said, candidly, when he was five weeks old.

But as the weeks went on Caitlin did seem to adjust to the reality of her baby, coping with Matt’s smelly nappies and his first cold, although the crowds of admiring visitors disappeared. And Matt was a delightful baby. He obviously adored his mother, wriggling delightedly when she kissed his bare tummy, and greeting her with smiles and gurgles. She and Matt began at seven weeks to have conversations, especially when she dressed or changed him – Matt vocalizing in response to her talking, and Caitlin responding to him. Now she could enjoy his growth as a more separate person, telling me how she heard Matt wake up in the night and ‘talk’ to himself until he fell asleep of his own accord.

This growing sense of his own separateness seemed to help Matt cope, increasingly, with frustration.

Matt at seven weeks
Caitlin stirs a rusk into a bowl of warm milk, making sure there are no lumps. Matt begins to make upset little noises, which gradually build up. I feel tense. Caitlin says to him, kindly, ‘Frustrated, aren’t you. It’s coming in a minute’. To me, ‘This is the worst part, ’cos he’s had a big sleep and not much to eat in the night, so he’s really hungry’. When the food is ready she starts spooning it into his mouth. Matt starts gulping it down, but he’s also waving his fists, and this keeps causing the bib to fly up into his mouth, blocking the food. He begins to cry. Caitlin disentangles him from the bib patiently, and keeps a steady rhythm of spooning into his mouth. Gradually, a peaceful feeling comes over the room, Matt looking up into Caitlin’s face as he eats.

This shows Caitlin’s ability, under good circumstances, to ‘contain’ Matt’s experiences, and how Matt was able to feel contained by her. There is a sense of what Benedek (1959) calls a ‘good feeding mother and a good feeding baby’ (p. 393) – a happy couple taking in a good experience from each other.

Coping with unpredictability and loss
‘When Matt was three months old, catastrophe struck the family. Dominic lost his job, and the couple’s (always precarious) sense of security was thrown into jeopardy. Caitlin talked of going back to work herself as a carer, or a café
manager, or a hospital worker – the plans changed from week to week as she went on job interviews. Underneath was a sense of panic about her impending separation from Matt.

Research suggests that young fathers who are unable to provide financially for their families – like Dominic – feel tremendous anxiety about failure, and are in fact most likely to disengage from their families under this pressure (Elster & Hendricks, 1986; Zeanah, 2000). Instead, Dominic threw himself into the task of parenting Matt while Caitlin was job-hunting. He seemed to find relief from his own anxieties, in encouraging Matt to achieve new physical skills such as rolling over or crawling.

Matt obliged by rising to the challenge. He did not cry or panic when Dominic wanted him to ‘try standing’ by leaning him against his chest; he enjoyed being tossed in the air or ‘walked’ by Dominic.

**Matt at 19 weeks**

Matt lies on his back, looking up at Dominic and excitedly waving his arms. He imitates Dominic’s open mouth, making sounds to copy him. His vocalizations today are more vigorous than with Caitlin – he makes a strong squealing, almost singing sound. Dominic tells me proudly that Matt can almost completely roll over now, and that he can sit up, unsupported, for 15 seconds or so. I realise he’s been timing him! Matt waggles his feet at Dominic, and Dominic grabs a foot and gently pops it into Matt’s mouth, making Matt laugh. ‘Little bastard,’ says Dominic affectionately, and then, under his breath, says he’s going to have to stop swearing as Matt is getting older.

But this enjoyable play was sometimes driven more by Dominic’s agenda than Matt’s – and Dominic, no matter how good his intentions, was still an 18-year-old boy. If he got interested in a television programme he would ignore Matt’s attempts to engage him. At other times he could be worryingly impulsive.

**Matt at four months**

Dominic says that Matt has managed to pee on his shirt, and undresses him. Matt, naked, pees onto the carpet. It’s only a small amount of urine, but Dominic is suddenly furious. ‘You little shit!’ I’ve heard him say this as a joke, but now the tone is serious. He swings Matt up into the air and almost throws him onto the couch, then stomps out. Matt is completely confused: mouth open, he tries to look round and see where Dominic has disappeared.

This volatility, over time, seemed to make Matt a rather cautious baby, who eyed things and people up carefully to get the measure of them. His own impulsivity was carefully controlled: he did not move too hastily when trying to roll over or crawl, and he learned early not to bump or knock himself. He became dextrous in bracing himself with a hand or arm in case of tumbles.

This resembled, in a way, a reaction of mine. I learned early that the family were often out, or even asleep, when I called. I found myself managing my potential disappointment by curbing my enthusiasm about the observations,
reminding myself on the way that they might not be there, and it would not be a good idea to feel too excited in advance.

**Projective identification**

It has been noted that adolescents inevitably make use of projection and projective identification – not as a pathological symptom but in order to sort out their own emergent sense of identity (Hindle & Smith, 1998; Waddell, 2002). At an unconscious level there is a fluidity of boundaries within the teenage group, with different members containing different parts. Amongst Dominic and Caitlin’s peer group, this felt like a constructive give-and-take. Dominic took phone calls for a friend who was also looking for work, even pretending to be the friend if necessary. Caitlin and Susie continually lent each other makeup items and clothing, taking turns to be the responsible one who provided.

But both parents projected not only into others, but into Matt in such a way that it was sometimes difficult for them to see him for the baby he was. As described above, Dominic often made Matt into the strong, precocious saviour who would bolster his own inadequacies, and could not bear him to be a messy, urinating baby. Caitlin’s cravings to be taken care of were frequently projected into Matt, to whom she offered ‘treats’ – such as a Milky Bar chocolate Advent calendar when he was only 15 weeks old. Matt himself seemed to have little genuine interest in this treat.

**Matt at 15 weeks**

Sitting next to Matt, Caitlin holds the chocolate to his mouth. ‘He loves this, he’ll go crazy when it’s finished’. Matt sucks carefully on the chocolate, doing his best to absorb it, but it takes a while. He has to cope with the claggy, adhesive quality, and it sticks to the roof of his mouth and his tongue: I can see him working to get it off, with a look of concentration. ‘He’ll get upset when it’s all gone,’ says Caitlin excitedly, but in fact he doesn’t protest when she wipes the last of it from his face. I feel quite depressed.

At this time when she must have been desperate for some ‘treat’ herself, Caitlin seemed to lose sight of Matt’s own needs. These forceful projections make it difficult for a baby to have room for exploring his own sense of self, his own wishes. I was acutely aware myself of the difficulty of observing Matt, when his parents seemed to require so much of my attention.

Moreover, relating through projection and projective identification often seemed to be incompatible with the task of co-parenting. For example, Caitlin projected inadequacy into Dominic with some force, undermining his competence as a father; she would comment scathingly on his failure to put on Matt’s socks or prepare his meal, as if he were letting Matt freeze or starve to death. This must have been when Caitlin could not bear to think about how inadequate as a mother she sometimes felt, and shoved the feeling into Dominic instead. He often retaliated: addressing Matt, he frequently described Caitlin as ‘your bloody mother’. Both of them wanted to feel competent and capable, but
such a feeling was often achieved at the other’s expense. Since both parents were oldest siblings in their own families, this factor too may have intensified the competition to be ‘top parent’ (Weil & Boxer, 1990).

Waddell (2002) suggests that, even under good circumstances, teenagers only develop a capacity for true mutual caring – the capacity to form a couple – in the later stages of adolescence. Prior to this, they inevitably use each other for the purposes of projective identification. I shall try, later, to show how difficult this made it for Matt to separate from either parent.

**Separation at six months**

When Matt was just under six months old, Caitlin got a job working 15 hours a week in a local shop; she was gone for four or five hours at a time. Matt was cared for sometimes by Dominic, at other times by his grandmother or godmother.

Matt did not seem, on the surface, distressed to be with other carers whom he knew: the extended family had always had a share in looking after him. I felt Caitlin’s absence painfully, however, and realised how much her presence had been an emotional anchor in a fairly turbulent world. Was this Matt’s experience too? If so, it could not be acknowledged. Caitlin seemed unable to think about the impact of her absence on Matt, telling me ‘He doesn’t get upset when I leave – good thing, I don’t think I could stand it if he did’. She seemed afraid of feeling overwhelming pain about the separation.

Matt’s overt response was to learn to crawl, at only six months. He had been setting up little challenges for some time in order to achieve this goal. He would gently throw his toys a little distance off and then try to retrieve them, reaching towards them with all his might, rocking his body forwards and stretching his fingertips as far as he could go. I wondered if he was grappling with the problem of separation, and how to stay in touch with an absent object.

Once crawling, he became increasingly rebellious towards Caitlin, and would rage furiously at her when she dressed him. Perhaps he was protesting over her continuing absences at work; she certainly felt him to be rejecting her and this was very painful for her. ‘He’s everywhere now, it’s all gone so fast,’ she said as Matt scooted, with increasing confidence, around the flat. It seemed inconceivable to her that Matt still had any remnants of his baby self inside him, or would ever need her comfort again. She treated him accordingly: while in the past she had held him on her lap for a feed, she now handed all Matt’s bottles to him, for him to carry off; she provided a mat for him at nap time, rather than tucking him up in his cot. She was treating him as a much older child.

By contrast Dominic seemed to be growing into his role as a parent, and I was astonished at how patient he could now sometimes be with his son. As he was less volatile, Matt could expand his own range of behaviour, including being provocative. Here, Matt had begged loudly and insistently for food which Dominic had made up for him:
**Matt at seven months**

Having been so impatient for his food, Matt now seems to lose interest. He takes a mouthful of porridge and swings round to stare at the kitty. There is no sign of the starvation child he appeared to be, minutes before. Dominic waits, spoon at the ready, but Matt’s not that excited about food any more. Dominic waits. I wonder if he feels irritated by the ‘wind-up’? Eventually Matt takes another bored spoonful before turning away again. Dominic makes a funny, exasperated face and leans forward until his chin touches the tray. Matt laughs, and grabs Dominic’s ears, hard. It looks painful, but Dominic only makes a growly noise, which Matt immediately imitates. Dominic is delighted: ‘Oh, I love it when I teach him things,’ he says.

This process seems to illustrate Benedek’s comments about a mutual introjection between parent and child, conducive to growth on both sides. ‘The father, like the mother, repeats with each child, in a different way, the steps of his own development, and under fortunate circumstances achieves resolution of his own conflicts’ (Benedek, 1959, p. 400). So Dominic clearly enjoyed the experience of feeling a capable parent with Matt, taking in a more hopeful view of himself and finding new capacities for tolerance and patience. At the same time Matt’s imitations of Dominic – reproducing facial expressions, noises and indeed Dominic’s general liveliness – suggest a process of identification with his father: ‘[I]mitation is a means of interpersonal communication by externalising what has already been internalized . . . . In imitating the parent, the child charges his own actions with the wonderment and admiration he feels for adults’ (Benedek, 1959, p. 408). Matt’s increasing physical confidence, as he now struggled to stand and to walk, suggest that this identification was a real spur to development.

Sometimes this mutual pleasure in masculine accomplishment was heavily tinged with contempt for the feminine. By projecting weakness or incompetence into women, father or son could win a sense of masculine prowess, often tinged with a manic, teenage/toddler energy:

**Matt at seven months three weeks**

Dressing Matt, Dominic pops the shirt over his head, and makes a game of getting one arm into a sleeve, saying ‘OK, arm in, go-go-go!’ Matt laughs, gazing delightedly up his father, and I remember Caitlin dressing him last week and having a terrible time. As if reading my mind, Dominic says, rather smugly, that he’d be howling by now if it was Mummy. Dominic puts Matt’s dungarees on his head. ‘We don’t like dungarees, do we,’ he says, and Matt reaches up to grab them vigorously, pulling himself into a standing position by using Dominic’s chest.

In contrast, Matt continued to test Caitlin’s patience with rebellious behaviour, ignoring her when she tried to set limits.

**Matt at seven months**

Matt turns his back on us and crawls towards the DVD player. He pulls himself up to stand and puts his hand on it; it opens up at his touch. Caitlin, sitting across the room on the couch, says ‘No, Matt. Play with your toys,’ and she gestures at the heap of toys.
on the floor. Matt looks back over his shoulder at her, and resumes exploring the DVD player. Caitlin says ‘No, Matt,’ again. However, she doesn’t move from the couch. ‘He’s tired,’ she says to me, as if in explanation for his disobedience, but it seems as if she is the one who has run out of energy today.

Caitlin seemed to be at a low point. For a few weeks she kept trying out different hairstyles, and it struck me that at her age, most young women are able to be far more narcissistic, experimenting with their body image. Caitlin was stuck at home with a baby, one who did not seem to want her anymore. At nine months he walked around the flat going ‘Pah! Pah’ to himself – a cross, powerful noise like spitting. When Caitlin told him not to make the noise he increased it. Perhaps he wanted to spit out a bad, persecuting Mummy who had abandoned him for work, and now failed to engage with him. This in turn made her feel more rejected, and when she did manage to play with him, it felt like a heroic effort to rise above her feelings of irritation and his.

Developmental research suggests that teenage mothers, although initially responsive to their babies in the early weeks, talk much less to them at six months, or one year of age, than older mothers (Culp, Osofsky, & O’Brien, 1996). It is suggested that they may talk less and less to their children as the first year progresses (Barratt & Roach, 1995) and their conversation is increasingly less responsive to the children themselves (Pomerleau, Scuccimarri, & Malcuit, 2003). This feature of adolescent parenting has given a lot of concern, since it is associated with more restricted progress in their children’s mental development (Pomerleau, Scuccimarri, & Malcuit, 2003).

There are wide variations in the ways teenagers parent, and it is impossible to draw conclusions based on one family. However, it was clearly much more of an effort now for Caitlin to engage with Matt, and this seemed to be partly because she experienced his rebelliousness as such a devastating rejection of her. This made it difficult for her to contain his ‘bad’ behaviour, or meet it with understanding and firmness – she was feeling too defeated.

A major separation at nine months

When Matt was nine-and-a-half months old, Caitlin got a job working two nights a week as a hospital cleaner. This meant that she was sleeping for most of the following days, and effectively did not see Matt for almost 24 hours at a time, during which Dominic looked after him. We rearranged the timing of my visits around her new work schedule, but because the work nights changed continually, our observation times changed too. My summer break compounded the sense of upheaval.

Matt became very constipated shortly after Caitlin began this new job. On my return I heard about this from Caitlin, who had taken him repeatedly to the doctors’ office, and had tried many alterations to his diet – including laxatives – to no avail. There seemed to be no medical reason for the constipation, which clearly caused him pain, and distressed Caitlin. Was he trying to cope with the
new separation from his mother, by ‘holding on’ to his faeces, as he could not hold on to her? Certainly he seemed less sunny these days – more fretful, anxious, and wary of the world in general.

His impressive physical achievements, paradoxically, now seemed to make it harder for Matt to revert to babyhood, to a comforting state of regression when under stress. In his parents’ eyes he was defined as a toddler; they registered his achievements and were proud of the fact that at 10 months he could throw and even kick a ball, but they did not seem aware of his need for comfort and dependency. When (at 10 months) he found his old changing mat under the couch and pulled it out, questioningly, Caitlin said ‘Oh, you don’t want that old thing,’ and pushed it firmly back again. She and Dominic may have felt uncomfortable at the idea of any slipping back into babyhood, because their own status in the adult world of jobs and responsibility was quite precarious.

**Matt at eleven months**

Matt picks up the teddy bear. He sits down on Caitlin’s shoes and drops the bear. Caitlin comes over and picks up the bear. She cuddles it to her shoulder and kisses it. Matt watches in fascination – I feel there is something wistful about the possibility of being a small baby, cuddled and kissed. Caitlin gives him the bear and tells him to kiss it. He puts his face tentatively near the bear, in imitation of kissing. ‘That’s right,’ says Caitlin, ‘that’s your baby’.

Cuddling a baby was a substitute for the state of being a baby. It was as if Matt, in his aggressive and upset toddlerhood, had completely lost the tender mother-baby relationship of early months, and Caitlin’s thought was that he could retrieve it by becoming a mother himself, in fantasy. Was this how Caitlin had coped with her own feelings, as a child, about leaving her mother? Perhaps she had taken on the role of childminder to her siblings as a way of looking after her own projected needs.

In Caitlin’s long absences at work, Matt was cared for by Dominic. But Dominic did not help him to hold on to a sense of a ‘good Mummy’ during these times. (One thinks of how a lone parent, whether mother or father, can keep the idea of a loved and missed partner alive in their own mind and the child’s.) Instead, he denigrated Caitlin’s authority, just as she had denigrated his contribution at an earlier period. Presumably he, like Matt, missed her presence and he coped with it by putting her down. In the following extract Dominic was about to look after Matt for the afternoon, while Caitlin went out to work. As she was going round the flat getting her things together, Dominic dug into her handbag and removed a packet of crisps she had packed for herself; he proceeded to share these with Matt. Caitlin said nothing about this open attack. Instead:

**Matt at ten months**

Caitlin comments that her friend’s baby, due to be born by Caesarean that morning, will probably have arrived by now as they were booked in for eight am. Dominic snorts contemptuously, and says rubbish, there’ll be hours of getting ready and injections and what-not. Caitlin, sounding defensive, says that the hospital people will have talked to her
friend about what’s going to happen and then give her an epidural. ‘Oh, right, you had a Caesarean so you know all about it,’ sneers Dominic. ‘No, but she’s told me about it,’ says Caitlin. Matt crawls out to the hallway, and I follow, glad to escape the bickering.

Their competition must have weakened Matt’s ability to hold to a secure sense of a good object, a valued Mummy, in the face of Caitlin’s absence, and of course that makes real separation very difficult to achieve.

First birthday
Shortly before Matt’s first birthday, Caitlin told me that she and Dominic had decided to move back into her mother’s house. They could not afford the rent on their flat, and although the move would mean a sacrifice in terms of space, they hoped that they would save money for a future ‘fresh start’. ‘We’ll do it properly then,’ she said. Dominic found another full-time job at last, and Caitlin was able to give up her exhausting overnight shifts in favour of shorter, daytime hours. As she became more available to Matt, his constipation ended and he grew more comfortable and gregarious in her (and my) presence. In the last observation:

Matt at one year
Matt goes back to Caitlin who is on the couch next to the laundry basket, and puts his arms up to her. She bends down to lift him onto her lap. ‘Give us a kiss,’ she says, and holds him against her breast for a cuddle. ‘You know, he’s just doing this to get up here with the bloody laundry,’ she says to me cynically. ‘That’s what he’s after’. But Matt ignores the laundry basket; he lies back in her arms baring his tummy for a tickle, apparently wanting to resume the earlier horseplay. Caitlin obliges by blowing on his tummy, and he laughs, wriggling his body.

It was tempting for me, as the observations were ending, to view this as a happy resolution. In practice so much was unpredictable – whether Dominic could hold the new job, how the family would cope with cramped quarters in Caitlin’s mother’s house, and so much more. If only briefly, however, it was a relief to see Matt and his mother make contact again, and I hoped that future separations could be mitigated by their capacity to reunite.

Conclusion
A baby growing up with adolescent parents clearly faces particular difficulties, as does his observer. During this rollercoaster of a year I had felt frequently buffeted by Caitlin and Dominic’s needs and changing circumstances, and this had sometimes made it hard for me to keep Matt himself in view. So the volatility and unpredictability of the adolescent world leave less space for a baby’s own ups and downs to be felt or thought about by his parents. Instead, Caitlin and Dominic often resorted to the expectable adolescent defences of projection and projective identification, as a way of managing their feelings. It was often hard for them to recognise Matt’s own age-appropriate needs and limitations, and this
left him struggling alone with many anxieties about his aggression and his needs for nurturance. This must have made it more difficult for him to develop a sense of a ‘good object’, and complicated the process of his separation from Caitlin.

Nevertheless all three were also, at times, sustained by feelings of goodwill towards each other. This was most obvious in Matt, whose sociability was evident from the first weeks – but his parents also had reserves of tolerance and understanding which were sometimes astonishing at their age. My own feelings of hopefulness and goodwill towards the family, although probably in part a defence against the anxiety I felt about them, also testify to their capacity to foster good feelings and warmth in those around them.

References


