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### The social baby

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# Reviews

## The Social Baby

Lynne Murray and Liz Andrews

*CP Publishing 2000*

Reviewed by Margaret Rustin

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This immensely attractive volume is intended as an intervention in the field of mother, father and baby relationships. Lynne Murray, director of the Winnicott Research Unit, whose work is well-known to the readers of this journal, has teamed up with a research health visitor, Liz Andrews. Together they have written a lavishly illustrated book, primarily intended for parents, about how to understand babies' communications. From this starting point flow many observations on the care of young babies. The tone is very carefully judged: the aim is to facilitate parental curiosity, intuition and reflectiveness, and to this end a very calm, straightforward, informative and sympathetic text accompanies the stunning photographs. The pictures will delight anyone interested in babies, and are remarkable.

The idea the writers wish to convey is that if we watch babies carefully, we can understand the meaning of their behaviour, which is not random but communicative, and that this enables us to provide the sensitive care which is optimal for infant development. There is a consistent stress on the individuality of babies and the great differences between them – statistical norms about babies' behaviour are nothing more than averages. Hours of sleep, preferences about forms of comfort, amounts of crying vary across a wide spectrum. The concept of the specially 'sensitive' baby is used to describe a range of problems parents may encounter – the baby

who is easily startled awake or finds it difficult to settle to sleep, the baby who does not like to be cuddled or who seems exceptionally easily upset by new experiences and so on. The recent paper in this journal by Pamela Sorenson (2000) on 'transition-facilitating behaviour' in mothers is a more theoretical version of the underlying line of argument found here.

The book is organised in a form consistent with its conceptual framework. A long first chapter on the baby's social world is followed by briefer chapters on the baby's physical world, crying and consoling, sleeping, developing a sense of security, and two final chapters on the support of parents and choice of lifestyles. The Winnicottian influence is enormously present in the emphasis on the holding of the baby and the looking at and by the baby. The absence of a chapter heading referring to feeding is something of a shock given the centrality of feeding as an aspect of the mother-baby relationship, but it follows from the decision to emphasise the baby's total capacity to relate to mother and others and the exploration of the diverse modes of relationship. It is the field of vision which is privileged, and the baby's eyes are more important at root to these researchers than baby's mouth. The observation of babies recorded in the book is primarily visual – hence the huge importance of the photographs – and in this respect it differs importantly from the kind of psychoanalytic observation to which this journal is mainly devoted. There is little reference to the anxieties of either baby or parent, although the occasions when unconscious anxiety does surface in the text (for example, a mention of a baby's fear of falling apart, and a very cautious hint at the complexities of parental identifications with their infant and their origins in the past) give pause for thought. The psychotherapist's longing to take things a bit further was stirred in me, but one can also sense a fine judgement about how much to say in a book clearly aimed at a wide market.

The central chapters provide a short introductory text putting forward the argument which is then exemplified by picture-stories spelling out the processes described. The inclusiveness is impressive – the very beginning of life is recorded for both a full-term baby and a baby born at 28 weeks. This latter tells an encouraging story, since this premature baby was established at the breast after only 3 weeks of tube-feeding. Research findings – the importance of mother's smell and the sound of her voice, the baby's preference for looking at faces, the right distance for the baby to be able to focus and so on – are woven in to the text artfully. Some of the descriptions of early infantile behaviour – particularly of Trevarthen's pre-speech, and of Winnicott's mirroring behaviour, and their function – are almost poetic in their clarity. The pages on early games and the exploration of the baby's active capacities to make and break contact are especially good, as

is the differentiation between games involving baby and a partner and the later elaboration in which the game is 'about something', a something more than patterns of contact between two. Psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the importance of the third element and its significance for the infant mind's symbolic development belong in this area.

The reader is all the time being introduced to thoughts about the baby's own developing resources – for self-soothing behaviour, for benefiting from routine, for expressing herself in many different ways. Baby behaviour is indeed made wonderfully full of meaning – one excellent section on possetting as a response to feeling intruded on, for instance – and one's admiration of Liz Andrews (and longing to have had a health visitor like that!) is immense.

It is exciting to realise that many of the fundamental values of baby observation are reaching a very large audience through a book like this, as also in the BBC 2 programme on infant and young child observation in the Tavistock Series. This clearly represents an important counter-weight to some of the alarming features of current policies about the care of young children. The book would be a delightful possession for any expectant parents and should also be very useful for educating professionals concerned in supporting parents. It includes a clear statement about the need for parents themselves to be supported, and that they have a right to such support. Although its tone is positive and determinedly reasonable, it does in fact represent quite a challenge to health service provision as well as a colossal and important rebuttal of any form of baby-care based on behavioural training. It is a great achievement to have combined wisdom, sympathy, scientific knowledge and political edge so elegantly.

## References

- Sorenson, P.B. (2000) 'Observations of transition facilitating behaviour – developmental and theoretical implications', *Infant Observation* 3: 46 – 54