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Antonella Sansone

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REVIEWS

Mothers, babies and their language

ANTONELLA SANSONE

H. Karnac (Books) Ltd 2004. Reviewed by Ferelyth Watt.

The rapid growth of interest and research into infancy has provided a fruitful meeting ground for clinicians and researchers, from different disciplines, to contribute to greater understanding of this highly complex and emotionally charged phase of development. Sansone's work as a psychologist, yoga teacher and baby massage teacher places her in an excellent position to research the psychophysiological relationship between mothers and their babies. Sansone has worked closely with Peter Walker, the pioneer of baby massage in the United Kingdom, and also Dr Yehudi Gordon, Consultant Active Birth Obstetrician. She has also had the good fortune to work in the Birth Unit at the St John & Elizabeth Hospital, London, where careful attention is paid to uterine and neo-natal experience and development. Sansone also makes useful reference to cross-cultural perspectives on mother-baby attachments and development.

Sansone has written her book with evident passion and fascination for the ways in which mothers and babies develop a relationship in which the aspects of the physical self are privileged no less than aspects of mind. In fact, Sansone understands infantile development and bonding as an all-encompassing process. She writes, 'The two levels of our being are inseparable and a circular relationship exists between them. They are split only by language and concepts' (p51). Sansone uses her clinically informed, detailed observations of the interactions between mothers and babies, to elucidate the complex interrelationship between the physical and psychological aspects of the mother-baby couple. Sansone's observations and her analysis of these are integral to the therapeutic interventions she provides to mothers and babies in which breast-feeding and baby massage are central.

The content and the style of writing seem to be designed to encourage a wide readership. Whilst inclusive the book succeeds in maintaining good coverage of key clinicians and theoreticians from a psychoanalytic perspective, from psychology and neuropsychology, as well as neo-natal medicine and body therapies.

Sansone tries to remove what she calls her 'adult mask' (p. 2) 'in order to get in touch with my inner child and to be able to understand the baby's language better'. In the opening chapter Sansone goes on to develop this idea saying 'Only by rediscovering their own inner child through primary body language – eye contact, touch, smell, facial expressions, movements and gestures – can parents get closer to their baby's feelings and needs and to the basic anxieties that infants and young children inevitably encounter as a condition of

life.' (p. 2) The reader is taken through the baby's eyes, as it were, looking first at infant responses to parental contact, emphasising the importance of the adaptive fit between the baby's bodily expression of internal states and the mother's responses to this by means of her own body. One example is assisting the baby in regulating its own temperature and respiration rate.

Chapter Two presents a more theoretical perspective on the theory of emotions. The book then expands significant aspects of this theoretical model, for example, by emphasising the importance of all the sensory systems and their active correlates, like skin and touch. This is likely to be familiar to many readers, but here Sansone makes a departure from the psychoanalytic domain and moves into the physical domain. Sansone smoothly introduces the use of baby massage as a therapeutic tool for working with mothers and their infants, referencing familiar psychoanalytic models as she does so. Sansone has reached the conclusion that 'baby massage has the potential to contain the primitive anxieties and fears of the new-born's non-integrated states.' Sansone also makes a slight departure from Winnicott's 'good-enough mother' (Winnicott 1960, 1963). She introduces the idea of a 'receptive mother' as one who 'contains her perceptions of the self and body, her physical and psychic skin, her own feelings and inner child and her attitude to her bodyself image.' This concept, she continues, 'implies her perceptive awareness of the baby'.

In Chapter Four, Sansone develops the concept of a bodyself, taking up Ruggieri's integrative model of body image in which the distinction between body image and body schema is seen as invalid. This area of interest is clearly one in which there is tremendous scope for further research and development from a multi-disciplinary perspective. In Chapters Five to Nine the significance of other sensory modalities and means of communication for the development of the bodyself are further developed, for example, the voice and facial expressions. Sansone also considers emotional, practical, social and cultural aspects of breast-feeding, and makes reference to case material to illustrate the benefits of breast-feeding.

Finally, Sansone, like the baby, moves towards the father considering the receptiveness of the father and the important role that he or a significant other may play in the continuing development of the bodyself.

My own reading of Sansone's book is coloured by having also been fortunate enough to have been taught baby massage by Peter Walker, of having been a participant at Active Birth sessions and having massaged my own children as well as seeing the benefits of baby massage for others. Sansone's interest also happens to coincide with some of my own views about complexities of early infantile development and the relationship between mother and baby that defies words. I welcome Sansone's book as an attempt to grapple with this intricacy. I think it is unfortunate that Sansone has reiterated points that were already well stated and that perhaps this repetition might lose the interest of some readers.