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The power of reading with babies

Susan Straub*

Out of the blue cyberspace the mother of the baby I observed 30 years ago asked me to be her Facebook friend. I felt something akin to an electric jolt when she, and subsequently her two grown daughters, virtually popped up into my life after the 30-year absence. Memories surge: again I can see, feel, and hear their kitchen with the baby propped in her little baby seat on top of the kitchen table. I can hear Mother chattering on about the events of her day, family, baby, worries; her life.

Baby observation, infinitely more than merely a pre-requisite component of the Tavistock's child psychotherapy training course, turned out to be enormously significant for me. It was a profound, stimulating experience. On reflection it seems to have engendered my life's work, the core of which proved to be the way mothers and babies relate.

I know the baby observation influenced my own mothering. How could it not when I attended so closely to the unfolding relationship and child development for two years?

I heard myself explaining the world to my baby Ben. I wondered and thought aloud about how things appeared to him. I remember introducing him to his world by naming everything for him – this is your hand, nose, toe, your mother, bed, changing table, the cat Agnes and her bowl of water. I waited while he stared with big wide baby eyes taking in what I was telling him. I remember saying aloud 'I wonder what you're thinking about. All of this is so new'.

Very early on, I began to read aloud to him. His response was encouraging. We were launched. Reading picture books with my children became one of the best ways to spend meaningful and mutually pleasurable time together.

Reading children's picture books together offered us a quiet, focused time in the day when we could relax and enjoy the unfolding of a story. Even if we read the same story time and again, it was all good. It restored us to calm. It brought a quiet sense of accomplishment. It brought us to the same page.

Furthermore I learned things about my children because of their choices, their responses, their expanding awareness of things, people and feelings. They acquired vocabulary to describe their feelings and their lives. They knew what to expect from books, and in one striking case I knew that a book spoke for him. This story is worth telling because it contributed so much to my awareness of the

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power of picture books for pre-literate children that I have used in my work with other mothers and babies.

At two years, babies are trying out their independence. Ben sucked his thumb or a baby bottle full of apple juice. His favourite book was *The Story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf, with illustrations by Robert Lawson. He demanded that I read aloud this story of an independent little bull several times a day. One sequence particularly meant a great deal to him. On the page following an illustration of Ferdinand gesturing with his outstretched hoof for his concerned-looking mother to back off, the text continues: 'His mother saw that he was not lonesome, and because she was an understanding mother, even though she was a cow, she let him just sit there and be happy'. Each time I read that passage, Ben took his thumb or bottle out his mouth and said 'Good!' It became clear that he got me to speak these words many times per day so that we both could hear them. By rereading it out loud often enough I might understand something crucial my toddler needed from me. Perhaps, like Ferdinand's mother, I would develop a caring trust and allow my son to be himself.

Babies often choose a favourite book and demand to hear it frequently. Why? Besides enjoying its familiarity, I suspect the repetition is akin to the practising which leads to mastery. If the reader is the parent, the reader is helped to master the art of being a good parent. Additionally, because so much in a baby's day is out of his control, even chaotic, I think the faithfulness of a favourite book is reassuring. Furthermore, a baby waving a book for a shared reading is universally irresistible.

Reading was a constant and omnipresent activity for my family. Using the powers and pleasures of picture books, I developed a program to bring books as a tool into the lives of young families, especially teen mothers. Caught at a critically important moment of separating from childhood and from their family of origin, they often feel overwhelmed with the stressful, exhausting task of giving themselves over to the demanding needs of their newborns. What seemed missing for many was a healthy piece of pure pleasure beyond that of keeping the baby warm, fed, dry, and safe. Perhaps, as they did for me, picture books for children could help provide this desirable satisfaction. If mothers would take a little bit of time to share books with their babies, they would be engaging in a valuable activity for intellectual and mental health. They don't need to know how profound it is; they just have to enjoy it and make it a daily habit.

Although adapted to individual sites and families, the 20-year-old *Read To Me* programme is a series of hands-on workshop sessions, each of which offers a way in to the world of books for teen mothers – most of whom wish to give their babies better than they had themselves. Through sharing books with their babies, the mothers begin to empathize with their infants and understand the enormity of these simple, achievable experiences. Aspects of the work are being used in the US and UK by major public libraries and university researchers, pediatricians and early childhood educators.

Babies 'read' quite a lot way before an actual book is presented to them. Isn't a mother's face the first book a baby reads? So much is communicated visually,

unconsciously. Rarely, however, do young parents realize just how much the infant knows. In order to reawaken the mother's capacities to 'read' faces and pictures, *Read To Me* offers wordless or picture books written in a foreign (like Japanese or Danish) language. Usually the narrative imbedded in the illustrations is rich, often with a sly element or two.

Babies have the capacity to 'read' pictures with an intensity many of us never recapture. Watch where the baby's eyes focus while you read the text. The illustrations in *Ferdinand* create a fully realized character, sitting under his beloved cork tree, apart from the plains where the other little bulls practise butting one another. The lines of the drawings are both clear and suggest something far off, dreamy, and imaginative. There is perspective, information, emotional content.

It became clear to me that books needed to be shared. One didn't want to merely read a book *to* a baby/toddler but read a book *with* the child. The relationship is dynamic, interactive. A shared book is a shared object and clearly the inheritor of the earliest feeding experience. Ideally both parent and child look at the book from the same shared space. The book becomes valued by both mother and child as a positive way of being together, of containing something of each of them. The book relieves both mother and child from staring at each other, and provides them both with story and art to consider and enjoy.

Books address issues in a non-dogmatic entertaining way. One or more of the *Read To Me* sessions focuses on issues these mothers and babies are experiencing. Most children worry about being separated from their mother – from mother taking a shower, to leaving for work or going out socially without the baby, or dropping baby off at day care or at bedtime.

Perhaps the best book on separation anxiety is Martin Waddell and Patrick Benson's *Owl Babies* that describes how three sibling owlets deal with their mother's surprising absence in the night. Amazingly dark, this concise picture book arouses our empathy for the plight of the baby owls when faced with an absent parent. The illustrations show the torment in the eyes, the anxiety they feel in the dark night. Our empathy is engaged for each and all of the babies. The owlets greet the return of the mother with joy. This, we often discuss, is only one of an anxious, angry, frightened baby's possible reactions at the point of reunion.

Working with teen parents is especially difficult. In addition to their rebellious, independence seeking, risk taking and sassy behaviors, they have babies. Some of the moms have problems relating to their babies beyond the normal problems of most first timers. They are often living with angry parents, and without the supportive benefit of the baby's father. Frankly, I am not sure how one manages to attend school after a rocky night with a two-month-old infant.

When a book is brought into the equation it is possible to give the mother something she can feel good about doing with and for her baby. The baby looks up at her adoringly; the mother tells a story and points things out on an illustrated page. Reading gives the mother something to say in an enriched language, as opposed to one-word negatives and directives. For those of us who cannot think of what to say to our babies, books can come to the rescue. Everyone wins.

The babies can also demonstrate their maturing capacities to gain mastery of small tasks. All those interactive lift-the-flap books like *Pat The Bunny* invite us to 'put your finger in mommy's ring' and 'play peekaboo with Paul'. Toddlers joyously imitate the sounds and antics of barnyard animals. Taken together, all activities with books including mouthing, dropping, stacking, piling and playing with them contribute to a baby's experiential knowledge of books.

Research shows how hearing a variety of words daily from its parents significantly enhances the brain development of infants. Babies who are not read to as infants and preschoolers, enter school with a major deficit. The 'reading' babies are so far ahead and will continue to grow that the 'nonreading' babies really struggle to keep up. Perhaps, then, this is the key to making school successful for all of our children: get parents to read with their babies.

For more than 20 years I have taken *Ferdinand* and myriad other books into *Read To Me* programmes to open up new and marvelous stories and art for readers learning to share books with their babies. I observe the closeness of mothers with their babies, and see the pleasure each of them takes in this richly rewarding experience. There is nothing to replace it. Second only to feeding, reading is a major resource to help raise their babies.

The visceral surprise of being contacted by my baby observation family has passed. Not only am I reconnected to the mother and daughters, but also to one of the richest parts of my training experiences. Their Facebook friendships also prompted me to consider the deep impact baby observation has had on my personal and professional life. What a generous gift.

News from Brazil: psychoanalytic observation and its seminar group as a space for the integration of splitting aspects in the parent-infant relationship¹

Mariângela Mendes de Almeida*, Lilian Finkelstein**, and
Nathalia Teixeira Caldas Campana***

This paper initially describes a network of expansion and spreading of Esther Bick's contributions, mainly her infant observation method, among

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