

Book Review

TRANSFORMING INFANT WELLBEING
Research, Policy and Practice for the First 1001 Critical Days
Edited by Penelope Leach Abingdon, Routledge (2018)
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The overall development of society in the last 50 years has been inimical to the nurturance of children and we have allowed it to be so Dr Penelope Leach, Editor of this volume.

There is a keen sense in this book that this situation must be changed during the *next* 50 years. One hopeful element in recent times has been the *1001 Critical Days* campaign. This developed into a gathering of professionals, academics and interested cross-party MPs who, from 2013 onwards met in Westminster on a regular basis to voice concerns and share strategies for improvement concerning the well-being and life prospects of children from Conception to Age Two. In the lecture series which followed papers reporting research activities were delivered by a range of academics and practitioners: Psychologists, Consultant Perinatal Clinicians, Public and Community Health Directors, Paediatricians and Social Policy experts.

It was felt imperative to capture this ground-breaking material. And who better to do this than Dr Penelope Leach, a research psychologist of considerable standing specialising in early child development? Dr Leach is the author of many books of significant influence among those who really care about what happens to children in the knowledge that infant experiences and relationships reverberate throughout life. Her work is increasingly informed by neuroscience.

Transforming Infant Wellbeing is a collection of 25 papers, impressive both in range and scientific provenance. Whilst each paper is its own springboard for action, there is remarkable synergy in the underpinning messages and strategies proposed. Sadly for our children, the book casts a spotlight on a 'less-than-child and family-friendly' UK context – most certainly on a measurement of human flourishing. Indeed, former UK Children's Commissioner, Professor Al Ainsley-Green, reminds us of the BMA's 2016 analysis of the state of the children's health which found that: 'Politicians have been failing children on a grand scale by not giving them the priority they deserve in political ideology, policy and resources'.

This is a timely book, usefully divided into sections. However, some important cross-sectional themes emerge. Below are brief summaries of a selection of these, with reference to the authors' details.

The Infant Brain

Several contributions are provided by clinicians working with women at pre-natal and at the 'perinatal stage' - the few weeks before, and few weeks after birth. The focus in these particular chapters is primarily on the health of the mother, including her mental health, her life situation, past and present, and her feelings about the experience of childbirth, also her perceptions of impending motherhood. From the research findings presented, it is clear that a pregnant mother's state of health during pregnancy, most especially mental health, has significant potential for impacting on her child, in utero – for better or worse. For example, Pawlby *et al.* in Chapter 6 tell us about what is emerging from research in their field of Perinatal Psychiatry in clinical contexts. Critical points are highlighted including how 'maternal experience in childhood can be the single most powerful predictor ... of clinical depression during pregnancy'. Of additional concern is the impact on the unborn of maternal depression creating specific vulnerabilities for these babies, once born.

Some longer-term impacts of mothers' pre-natal problems are considered in a chapter by Vivette Glover, Professor of Perinatal Psychobiology at Imperial College. Here Glover explains how mental/emotional conditions, such as stress during pregnancy, may impact significantly on the biological mechanisms underlying the foetal programming of the baby. Professor Glover describes how the ensuing neuro-developmental issues for children can, later on, present as 'emotional and

behavioural problems, including anxiety and depression, ADHD conduct disorder, autism spectrum disorders and cognitive difficulties.'

Several chapters highlight the astonishing brain growth that takes place in the early months of life meaning that soundly reliable and sensitive one to one care for the child is absolutely critical - not just for healthy brain growth, but for positive personality development. Indeed, whether any child's generic potential is fulfilled *at all* is highly dependent on the input and quality of care available in their immediate environment. This is because in the early months of life, as Leach reminds us, 'the primary attachment figure *is* the infant's environment'.

The important factor of early care for healthy mental and emotional well-being is highlighted by Robin Balbernie who develops his discussion in Chapter 3 from a psycho-therapeutic perspective. The reader is reminded that the brain is at its most plastic during babyhood, with a peak of synaptic formation between one and two years. At that stage, the child will be highly sensitive to the quality of her care experience, for better or worse. In this regard, Balbernie cites Teicher and Samson's (2016) study who found that (high and persistent levels of) 'stress can compromise all areas of a child's pro-social development, casting a long shadow of unhappiness on both individual and society'.

Attachment

Sound attachment is a 'genetic imperative' Penelope Leach

Matthew Sanders, Professor of Clinical Psychology and Founder of the Triple-P Positive Parenting Programme in Queensland, Australia in his chapter writes that infants' healthy development can only happen in safe, engaging and nurturing environments. Sound early experience builds strong bonds reverberating into the future, not least through the child's ability to self-regulate and relate positively to others. Whilst recognising that, as parents, we don't all get it right all of the time, Sanders is clear that effective nurture is founded on parents' own sense of personal agency for which they need 'support' to achieve and sustain.

Attachment will be secure if the baby feels the mother is physically and psychologically available says Patrick Fearon, a Director of the Doctoral Programme in Clinical Psychology at University College, London and a specialist in parent-child interactions. Fearon explains that clinicians' strategies for early interventions to support maternal/child bonding now make increasing use of a growing availability of resources. One of the most successful is the Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) programme developed by Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IZendoorn and Juffer (1998) at the University of Leiden.

In their chapter, 'Video Interaction Guidance: promoting secure attachment and optimal development for children, parents and professionals', Hilary Kennedy and Angela Underdown from the Warwick University Infant and Family Well-being Unit describe how the programme works. In the VIG process, 'micro-moments of video' are recorded of mother/child interactions. Awareness is raised and sensitivity enhanced following the Trainer and the Parent viewing and discussing the video clips together. A focus on the positive elements alerts the parents to examples of 'attuned interactions' with their child with a view to developing nurturing awareness, skills and confidence. Kennedy and Underdown inform us that a meta-analysis of 29 studies of the VIG approach demonstrated 'significant improvement in parenting sensitivity'. They quote Celibi (2013): 'VIG intervention changes neural pathways and internal representations by creating moments of connectedness which impact on internal chemicals'.

What must be done?

MP Timothy Loughton, has been highly committed to the 1001 Days Critical Days project since its inception and is the current Chair of the APPG. In the concluding chapter he celebrates the achievement of the project's cross-party Manifesto and the cross-party support for the series of parliamentary hearings when the papers were presented which have formed the basis of this book. However, Loughton is clear that this knowledge must be translated into policy and funded action. 'What we must aim for is that more children arrive at school well attached and well-rounded in the first instance, and *that*, as we know, requires a holistic parent and baby solution' (my italics). Loughton feels this will not happen in a present governmental culture of departmental separateness and self-protection, limiting a shared vision and penetration of sound policy into action. He cites evidence, for example, of the diminishing number of Health Visitors and the closure of Children's Centres - hardly inspiring optimism that children's and parents' needs are fore-grounded in policy. Components of the essential conditions for holistic and healthy early childhood development are neatly summarised by Chris Cuthbert, Development Director for A Better Start, in Chapter 9. These include a healthy pregnancy and birth; sound family relationships; effective support for parents; safe

and stimulating environment for baby. With respect to Cuthbert's first essential condition, the stark example of a shortage of midwives to support women in pregnancy and labour could have contributed to an increase in medical interventions and an increasing number of mothers having traumatic birth experiences stripped of dignity and control. Perinatal Psychotherapist, Diane Speire in Chapter 12, observes that in such cases the new baby is often perceived as part of the 'trauma' - a pathology causing interference with the bonding process, thus undermining the second of Cuthbert's 'Better Start' essential conditions.

And there is work to be done with Fathers too as Domoney *et al*, working at the Mental Health Unit in the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at Kings College, London and contributors to this volume, make clear. They cite evidence of between 5-10% of fathers suffering from (mostly untreated) post-natal depression and this figure increases when the mother also has the condition. As with mothers, fathers' uncertainty about their parenting role and subsequent feelings of inadequacy can contribute to their negative mental health states.

The success of projects with high-risk families such as the Norfolk Parent-Infant Mental Health Attachment Project, recorded by Smith *et al* in this volume, are to be welcomed. However, overall, several contributors advocate planning and targeting **preventative** resource a generation ahead. Here, preparation programmes would begin with the Pre-parents - girls and boys in schools. Some contributors call for a re-grouping of energies to encourage politicians across all departments to listen and to develop the will to think strategically about setting in place *child-focused policies*, over and above any other concern.... One might ask why The Treasury does not register a lack of logic in spending so many millions on 'service intervention' to put right what inevitably goes wrong when children's early needs are not met...

Just as sound physical infrastructure facilitates economic growth, MP Timothy Loughton contends we now need to invest in children's 'mental infrastructure' so our youngest citizens can flourish and lead productive and fulfilling lives, benefiting both themselves and society. Universal, as well as targeted, provision is recommended by several contributors. It is clear that considerable resources and support are needed to supply the necessary economic, emotional, social and psychological input that parents of our youngest citizens so desperately need. It seems we should work to transform the underpinning values that currently drive policy if we are ever to *transform infant well-being*.

In this book a great deal of scientific research is made accessible to a wide readership. It is indeed something of a triumph for Leach to have assembled so many evidential chapters authored by an impressive range of distinguished researchers and practitioners from an eclectic range of disciplines all with the same critical purpose – that of achieving conditions to realise the potential of all our children.

After engaging with the important evidence presented in this excellent book, there can no longer be space for the view, still persisting in some quarters, that worries about today's infant children constitute a 'moral panic'. The science here gives clear message what must be done, and done quickly. Our nation's children will continue to register the condition of UK society. What are they telling us? What *will* they tell us? Leach's book presents irrefutable evidence that action for improvement must be taken now.

Dr Carole Ulanowsky (February, 2018)