

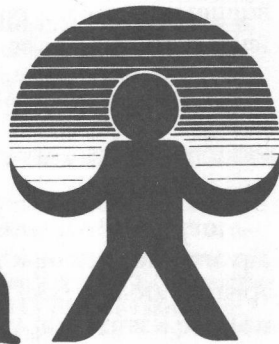
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Oregon's Children



Letters for parents of infants and toddlers: Letter 1

Oregon's Children



Letters for parents of infants and toddlers

One of life's greatest experiences is the arrival of the first baby. Parents are filled with wonder over the new family member and the changed dimensions of their life. During the first months you'll be getting acquainted with baby, making adjustments in your routines, and experiencing new emotions. Some anxiety is normal as you realize the responsibility of being a parent, how much there is to do, and how much there is to know about babies. Raised on stories about the joys of parenthood, young parents often feel inadequate and guilty if they feel tired, overwhelmed, or resentful.

Most expectations about parenthood come from the mass media and from family memories. Smaller families since the late 1950's mean fewer young parents have had responsibility for young children. Taking care of younger children was a part of family life and provided training for the later role of parenting in the large families of the past.

The mass media presents unrealistic images of babies. Often older babies are photographed as newborns. Pictures in magazines, on TV, or baby food labels show beautiful infants with perfectly shaped heads, rosy coloring, and alert eyes. New parents expect baby to be smiling and ready for play from day one.

Childhood memories aren't reliable guidelines for parenthood either. They are based on an immature child's view of occurrences. Parents tell amusing stories about life with you as a child. They seldom dwell on the stresses or tensions they might have been having at the time. It's natural to discard less pleasant memories and idealize images of the "good" parent and "fun" child. It's nice if pleasant memories and high standards are passed on to you, but images of perfect families are impossible to imitate. If your standards of competency and efficiency for yourself are too high, you are paving the way for disappointment. Disappointment leads to feelings of inadequacy and frustration when baby

demands, fatigue, or changes in economic or social conditions seem overwhelming.

Transition to Parenthood

Understanding a new baby is challenging. However, an awareness of changes in attitudes, relationships, and goals that occur in partners as they make the transition to parenthood is equally important. No matter how much the role of parent is desired, there are questions about the ease with which men and women adapt to the role or whether it just "comes naturally."

While planning for and anticipating their first baby, most young parents are unaware of the changes that will occur within themselves and in their marital relationship. Sociologist Alice Rossi suggests young parents are tragically uninformed about how parenthood brings more abrupt changes in lifestyle and personal values than any other previous life adjustments such as marriage or work. Most other changes, including a new job, allow time to learn the tasks and practice the skills needed. Parenthood arrives in a matter of hours.

Books, articles, and classes for parents place children at the center of attention. They assume that if you know enough about children, you will be able to carry out your tasks. Usually they suggest enough tasks and worries to keep two parents hovering constantly over baby. This is neither necessary nor productive. While a child's need for adequate parenting is total and, at times, demanding, there's equal need for parents to continue their development as interesting, productive adults.

Developmental psychologists now say life is a series of transitions. A transition occurs when an

event, such as parenthood, causes sharp changes in your usual routines. In all transitions some things are lost. New responsibilities and feelings about the self are gained. A transition does not mean abandoning everything from your old life, but some things will lose their importance in your new status.

There are individuals and marriages that strengthen with the bond provided by children. Others buckle under the strain of an added dependent person. For one thing, baby creates a triangle in which time and attention must be divided. It's often the husband, used to full-time attention, who suffers from jealous feelings. Some husbands complain about a loss of sexual attention. It's difficult to talk about this because feelings of hostility toward a tiny baby are not acceptable. Fathers who are a participating partner at birth are less apt to feel this way. They usually feel baby is as much theirs as the mother's.

The coming of baby complicates the wife's role also. An enormous amount of physical energy has gone into pregnancy and delivery. The never-ending tasks of baby care are fatiguing, leaving mothers irritable and often depressed. In addition, young women today are accustomed to stimulating activities outside the home and freedom to pursue their own interests. Before long, baby's presence makes them feel trapped at home; they miss talking with other adults. Being on call with baby 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, was not their life's goal.

Children bring other problems too. They interfere with casual conversations and spontaneous loving moments parents previously enjoyed. Important conversations are interrupted or postponed by baby's screams. One young father said, "I wonder if I'll ever sleep the same in my bed again." Babies have no respect for privacy, a good night of sleep, or your free time.

One of the most serious difficulties partners encounter revolves around "pet ideas" about child rearing. Most of these beliefs do not surface before children arrive. Ideas about who's in charge, discipline, punishment, money, and child freedoms are major causes of marital conflict. While baby is still young, discuss how you feel about the following statements:

- questioning and disagreement between parent and child should be encouraged
- spare the rod, spoil the child
- children should not be frustrated
- children learn more by what parents say than what they do

What can you expect while you're in the transition to parenthood? Here's a few symptoms you can discuss with spouse or friends to relieve anxiety:

- chronic tiredness
- loss of income of the mother and increased economic pressure on the father
- additional household work
- guilt in not being a better parent
- worry over self-appearance and body changes

Bonding and Attachment

A remarkable relationship is developed between parents and infants during the early months of life. No one is exactly sure about the mysteries of bonding, but in the hours after birth mothers, fathers, and newborns start falling madly in love with one another. Some hospitals place newborns in mother's arms, next to her skin, breasts, and the sound of her beating heart. Fathers hold and caress their newborn.

Although baby's attachment to mother does not instantly occur, observers report some infants show preferences for mother's voice as early as the third day. It is believed that the soothing effects of mother's handling, feeding, and care of baby promotes attachment to her.

Attachment is a special relationship between a child and adult that endures through time. They need a continuously responsive adult who meets their need for positive interactions and responds to distresses of hunger and discomfort. Infants need to be constantly reassured that the world is a good place in which to live. That assurance comes from dependable caregivers who may be a parent or an adoptive parent. Parents of ailing babies should be encouraged to handle their infants in the nursery as much as possible so bonding will occur.

The skills of mothering and fathering do not require special knowledge or social graces. They do require awareness and a decision on the part of parents to give a child the best start they can. Smiles, gentle pats, kisses, and hugs give baby a different message than frowns, impatient handling, and little touching. Your manner of attention tells infants how worthwhile they are. Infants' responses are limited at first. But sometime in the second month, don't be surprised if baby stops in the middle of feeding to look lovingly at you. In later months, you will notice that your infant, who has had steady, gentle attention to cries and

is picked up and handled frequently, will fuss less and be more alert than those who haven't had this advantage. Some things seem to go together—attention from parents and trusting, confident children.

Psychologist Eric Erickson maintains that during the first year a sense of trust or mistrust of the world and people develops. Infants whose needs are promptly met, are played with and talked to, get the idea that the world is a safe place, and people are helpful and dependable.

How do parents build attachment and trust?

- respond promptly to baby's cries
- talk to babies all the time telling them what you're doing
- hold babies securely while bathing as you let them feel the warm water around them
- play with baby's toes, fingers, hair, cheeks, legs
- cuddle baby closely while feeding and relaxing together
- concentrate on smiling at baby's face when dressing or diapering

Will all this attention spoil infants? No. Catering to infants in the first year usually results in a happier, more alert one-year-old. Infants act to satisfy their needs of the moment. The more adequately needs are met, the more satisfied they become. Crying is normal, waking at night is normal, and curiosity is natural and desirable. A great-grandmother who seemed to know what scientists are just discovering said, "The first year baby is boss, after that parents take over." Infants have a hard time if parents expect them to understand directions and obey rules before they are able. Lots of child abuse occurs to children under two. Parents become angered when infants do not remember or behave according to adult expectations that are beyond baby's capability.

It may seem that caring for baby is all you're expected to do. Attachment does not require parents to spend hours looking at and attending to an infant. Parents and infants need a balance of attention and time alone. Too much attention, body contact, or talking are not necessarily good for either of you. Infants like to hear that you are near, but it's not necessary to do what one mother said about her first baby, "We nearly wore the poor little thing out rearing him."

Infant attachment increases during the first year. By six months infants begin to recognize that some faces do not belong to their mother or father. They may show shyness, but it will disappear. By one year they can be extremely upset when left with strangers unless they have a

warm-up time and gradually learn that when you leave, you do come back. If mother works outside the home, find a caregiver who will continue the warm, attentive care you wish for your infant.

Baby's Temperament

You may think all this advice is fine but what should you do if your child has been screaming and kicking since birth? It's even worse if the neighbor's child is charming and cuddly and sleeps through the night. Think of the adults you know. Are there aspects of their personality that resemble these babies?

Two psychiatrists and a pediatrician became interested in the personalities of infants in their hospital nursery. They watched some babies until their adolescence to determine what aspects of temperament, if any, are present at birth. Their conclusions show that individuals are born with a basic behavior style or temperament. The qualities that are inborn include: activity level, regularity in sleeping, eating and eliminating patterns, readiness to accept new people and situations, adaptability to change, sensitivity to light and noise, general mood of cheerfulness or unhappiness, intensity of responses, and persistence.

Infants show a mix of characteristics and some combinations of traits make some babies more demanding of parental tolerance and patience than others. Because parents have an image of the "perfect baby," infants who enter the world with predominantly intense reactions such as high activity level, a general mood of unhappiness, and longer periods of wakefulness are most likely to be misunderstood. If your infant is like this you'll need all the imagination you can muster to be the consistent, loving playmate baby needs.

Knowing about the characteristics infants are born with keeps parents from blaming themselves or feeling guilty about baby's behavior. If your baby is a poor sleeper, poor eater, a constant cryer, and stiffens in your arms when you're trying your best, it's just the way baby is. Much of the spark of this infant's temperament will remain but by the end of the first year and by mid-childhood many of the characteristics will have changed or modified. Like any other infant, adjustments to life depend on your loving attention to bring about a transformation in baby's less convenient behaviors.

Prepared by Marcelle Straatman, Extension human development specialist, School of Home Economics.

Dear Parents: There is no apprenticeship for becoming a parent—you're suddenly one. It's one of life's most gratifying experiences but requires many adjustments to new patterns and routines in your daily life. In addition, infants bring a new but exciting and challenging personality into the family circle. For more information and help to work effectively with your child read the paperback book, *Your Child Is A Person*, by Stella Chess, Alexander Thomas, and Herbert G. Birch.

Sincerely,

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