

## **BELIEVE IT OR NOT . . . YOU CAN'T SPOIL AN INFANT**

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Controversy abounds when it comes to the subject of spoiling babies. For our purposes we are limiting this part of the discussion to children under the age of one year. Arguments on both sides are related to behavioral conditioning, or teaching a child to respond to a certain event by repeatedly exposing the child to that event, i.e. event-crying = response-holding and soothing. Most people on both sides of this argument have some common objectives and interests. One of those is to get the baby to stop crying. Another is to determine if there is an underlying need that is causing the baby to cry, and to meet that need.

Most of us want to assure our babies that we will be there to meet his or her needs. And almost all of us want to raise a child who will not grow up to be needy, overly dependent, whiny, given to excess, without limits, and in a word . . . spoiled.

Since the majority of us can agree on these objectives, the issue in question seems to be: can a baby be comforted, cared for and nurtured consistently to foster a sense of attachment and trust without becoming spoiled.

To answer this question we must first agree on some fundamental concepts. Those who ascribe to the philosophy of attachment theory recognize the importance of the parent/child bond that is fostered through nurturance of the child's emotional and physical needs. Others who ascribe to the behavioral school of thought believe that consistently responding to a baby's demands leads the baby to expect that response. While attachment folks would probably agree with this, these same people want their baby to expect them to consistently respond to their needs for emotional and physical care and nurturance. According to attachment theory, this is critical to making the child feel safe and secure and to trust others to meet his/her needs. Those who are concerned with conditioning their children to expect consistent attention at his or her every whim are usually concerned that the baby will become overly dependent and fail to learn to self nurture and meet their own needs.

In essence, both of these are realistic expectations and concerns. Yes, consistently responding to a baby's needs will foster feelings of safety, security and trust . . . crucial elements for good mental

health and healthy relationships. Yes, children need to learn to meet their own physical and emotional needs, and develop as separate, independent individuals . . . another key ingredient of good mental health and healthy relationships. It is the stage of child development that determines which of these approaches are most appropriate at the time and which objective we should be working toward, attachment or individuation.

The need for attachment, feelings of safety, security and belonging is the first, and many believe the most important need of an infant. The emotional goal of infancy is to develop a sense of trust, which comes from having your needs met consistently. Those needs include physical and safety needs, as well as emotional needs. By meeting a baby's need for food, clothing and shelter, as well as closeness, love, safeness, etc. we condition them to trust . . . to expect their needs to be met. This step is the first in a series of developing an emotionally healthy child. The steps that follow are not successful until these first needs have been successfully met and the infant feels totally secure in his/her state of total dependency.

Once that state of total dependency has been achieved, the next step, becoming a separate individual capable of meeting one's own physical and emotional needs can begin, but not until those "dependency needs" have been met. Otherwise, children spend their whole childhood, youth and adulthood trying to get those needs of security, belonging and safety met through others. Failure to move to the next stage, emotional and physical separation, or independence can cause the same problems. With this in mind, the issue seems to be at what point a child's attachment needs are met to ensure that movement toward individuation will be successful, rather than choosing to foster independence or attachment.