

Nursing and the Parent Child Relationship

Keren Epstein-Gilboa MEd, BScN, RN, FACCE, LCCE, IBCLC, PhD (Candidate)

One of the most important developmental tasks of early life is to learn how to form relationships with others. The parent child relationship is a template for later relationships and therefore, the quality of this relationship is very significant. Nursing plays a valuable role in facilitating the establishment of healthy parent child relationships.

“Nursing plays a valuable role in facilitating the establishment of healthy parent child relationships.”

The quality of the early parent infant relationship is dependent on the ability of the parents to understand their infant’s needs and to answer them appropriately. When infants needs are responded to sensitively, they gain a positive feeling about themselves, others and relationships. Nursing offer parents many opportunities to learn how to read their children’s signs and to respond to them effectively.

Nursing sessions optimally commence after infants send signs to their parents that they need comfort. In a like manner, nursing sessions cease when infants demonstrate that their needs for comfort have been satisfied. Discomfort might be due to hunger, thirst, fear or any other reason. Infants do not always differentiate between their needs. Parents learn to read their babies’ signs and to perform the appropriate action. The reduction of infant distress is often accomplished by bringing babies to the warm and accepting breast. The frequent manner that nursing takes place enables parents to practice and to develop enriched skills in infant cue reading.

Following latching, nursing mothers and babies are provided with additional opportunities to read and to send cues back and forth to one another. Interactions during nursing are complex, intricate and unique to each couple. The proximity of nursing facilitates the appearance of many interactional components, including tactile elements that are not found anywhere else in nature. As infants sense that their mothers reciprocate their signs, they learn that interaction is a positive experience. Similarly, mothers gain a sense of competence as they learn how to react to their infants. This facilitates the continuation of mutually satisfying interchanges during and also in between nursing sessions.

The positive feelings that infants gain through their interactions during nursing are carried through to interchanges with others that care for them in between nursing. The diverse anatomy, physiology and psychology of mothers and fathers, ensures that parents take on different roles with their young baby. As such, fathers do not provide nutritional substances to their infants. However, father may enhance their relational skills by watching interactions during nursing and then emulating them in between nursing sessions. For example, the father and infant relationship is enriched by body contact that mirrors tactile components that are displayed during nursing.

“Fathers and mothers alike advance their understanding of child development by responding to the changes in the evolving nursing relationship.”

Fathers and mother alike advance their understanding of child development by responding to the changes in the evolving nursing relationship. As babies mature they use their mothers and nursing as a safe base from which to explore the environment. Older nursing children continue to interact with their mothers and nursing in the same way as their explorative territory enlarges. This includes the need to include others in a more active way in their interactions. Fathers reflect this by becoming more active in their nursing children’s lives. When both parents watch their children’s cues and encourage child led weaning, children gain a positive sense of self that contributes to their ability to interrelate with others.

“The nursing relationship provides both children and their parents with valuable relational experiences.”

Thus, the nursing relationship provides both children and their parents with valuable relational experiences. Parents learn how to respond to their infants in a unique manner that optimally matches individual traits. Children learn that they can depend on their parents to satisfy their needs and that it is enjoyable to be with them. In addition they internalise tools for interaction and a positive feeling about themselves in relation to others. This in turn enriches their ability to continue to engage in satisfying relationships within the family realm and beyond.

Suggested Reading:

Epstein K. (1993). The interactions between breastfeeding mothers and their babies during the breastfeeding session. Early Child Development and Care.87:93-104.

Epstein-Gilboa K.(2000).The psychological reality of breastfeeding. IMPrint. 28:18-21.