

Raising a Healthy Child

Childhood is an experimental, flexible and robust transition, more robust than as adults we are liable to recall. In contrast with the conventional attitude of 'protecting' childhood medically, Naturopathy promotes a child's exposure to life while ensuring that health and confidence is built up from within.

Preparation for parenting, an investment Life makes through us - viewing pregnancy not so much as wanting a child, but receiving one; the birth of a child as incarnation.

The intensity of childhood reflected in the occasionally dramatic nature of common illnesses - Naturopathic experience suggests that symptoms are associated not only with eliminative activity but are part of a child's growing process that ensures a vigorous and spirited individuality.

Difficult children or children in difficulties? Overcoming insecurities, misunderstandings and temper tantrums – and the other challenges parents present to children.

"The predicament of the human situation begins not only in infancy, not only before birth, but also in the physical, psychological and spiritual preparation of the parents before conception."

Laura Archera Huxely (1)

Pregnancy

We have reliable and detailed knowledge about the raising of animals, the breeding of pets, farming the land and propagating our gardens. It is perplexing then that so little focus is put into the preparations for child rearing, until more than a few pregnancies have been unsuccessful.

Although in the overdeveloped world we have come to accept contra-ception as a norm. even those who are ambivalent about having babies rely on others to have them for their extended needs. Actually, the only real contraception is physical avoidance; modern methods of birth control are technically 'terminations' and all seem to involve natural repercussions. Of these, failure to ultimately conceive may affect both partners.

- To create the best possible circumstances for conception, the egg (which was created before mother was born) ripens for approximately three months before hatching; the male sperm that will fertilize this egg is grown two months beforehand. The most important factor in the survival of these materials is nutrition.
- Oral contraception in particular is best avoided at least twelve months before wishing to conceive and increasing consumption of vitamin rich foods, especially vit C and B (e.g. soaked seeds and nuts) is recommended) (2)
- It is not necessary to overeat: replace 'eating for two' with breathing for two
- The baby's eating preferences will be positively influenced by flavours associated with mother's diet that pass into amniotic fluid (3)

Psychology

While pregnancy should be approached enthusiastically, over-enthusiasm can compete with conditions conducive to 'settling down' to raise a family. A too conscientious life style, a demanding occupation or serious sporting commitments can all create unwelcome pressures on procreative energy.

Furthermore, when age or material concerns seem to conspire against a pregnancy, there is the temptation to become desperate in 'trying' to conceive. Many couples have discovered this is a formidable form of contraception. Ironically, amongst the 'tryers' who have given up and gone for formal adoption procedure, no sooner than a child is welcomed, a pregnancy ensues! (4)

- Relaxation is more useful than exercise, – especially ill-conceived stressing of postural muscles – although tone is important, the baby is actually conveyed by internal structures best influenced by hydrotherapy. (5)
- Take a holiday from routine - however 'healthy' - in the twelve months before considering becoming pregnant.
- The 'trying to conceive' mentality is a form of end-gaining, an attitude that has been exposed as counter-productive. Enrol in a course of Alexander Technique lessons. (6)

Birth

In today's culture of 'organic', the birth of a child is probably the most authentic experience of nature. In this sense all births are natural no matter where and how they take place. Of course, prebooked C-section deliveries are becoming fashionable but even within the 'natural' community there is an inclination towards intellectual planning.

The idea that a birth can be planned overlooks the fact that the principle player is not easily consulted. And by the time labour is established it is by and large the manner of pregnancy that will have determined how delivery might take place. Perhaps to reduce the many factors that are involved in the creation of a life to a Birthplan, invites an unfair and potentially guilt-inducing responsibility.

- If a birthplan appeals as a stress-relieving project, make sure you plan for the unexpected.
- If you can acknowledge that acute anxiety is behind the birthplan, drop the plan and work on fear. (7)
- No matter how delivery occurs, insist that the baby is brought to your breast without delay, cord intact until pulsation ceases.

Endeavour to take at least nine months to recuperate from your pregnancy, father included.

From Birth - Six Months

A baby quickly learns to recognise the outside environment, especially in relation to mother. The realisation that she is the same person is in the vital link of breast milk. Other experiences are best reinforced through sensitive handling, a form of communication that the baby possesses from the first moments of birth – via a receptive skin. Although for a first baby parenting can be tentative, for most the first few months are the most straightforward for all concerned. Provided babies are fed and loved, they seem to thrive in almost any environment.

- Simple fruit and vegetable juices can gradually supplement a baby's diet until teeth appear. (Grain starches are not required until nine months). (8)
- Avoid giving baby tap water (9)
- Rather than with manufactured objects, stimulation by the elements – water, air and sunshine (not on the head), awaken a baby's intelligence.
- Mother can sleep night and daytime together with baby.

From Six Months - Two Years

An accelerating development marks this phase. Parenting gets correspondingly interesting and for the first time will be confronted by the baby's emphatic 'no' and 'yes' (in that order!) Evidence of teeth, mobility and speech confirms inclinations and traits that will characterise an emerging personality that will provide (during daylight) hours of genuine entertainment.

But this phase also heralds issues of confrontation and discipline, as well as delicate decision times for parents, not least in response to common childhood illnesses.

Naturopathy has always considered this stage of life to be the birth of our assertiveness, and the beginning of a weaning more comprehensive than usually defined. It is a time of showing, whether in the form of reactivity in temperament or physical symptom, that although still dependent, we are individuals. Ironically, at a time when parenting needs to be at its most intuitive, conventional support is all too readily offered in the form of mass medication.

- Be reassured - a child's body is composed of materials that have been tried and tested positive by nature for millions of years!
- Babies held mostly within family atmosphere up to six months do not require a sterilised atmosphere. Let baby eat the washed skins of organic fruits.
- A baby can be encouraged to experiment with food, as nutrition and amusement. Washed skins of organic fruits can be given for chewing before starches introduced at nine months.
- A baby will roll around and sometimes appreciate a reclined seat, but it is important to allow the spine to erect naturally through the crawling/scuffling phase.
- Increasingly even within conventional medicine, common childhood illnesses are being viewed not as diseases but as eliminative efforts, and from a naturopathic standpoint, often stress-relieving. (In UK, earaches are now not treated as infections unless persistent for 3 consecutive days). Allowing babies to fast on water or juices is an accepted response to many upsets and is successful modulator of high temperatures.

- The escalation of pharmacologically induced immunity is controversial in the medical mainstream. Some parents, while willing to take risks with potentially lethal oral medicines, find injection of foreign matter directly into a child's bloodstream at odds with medical advice on avoiding germs. However, whatever decision is made concerning medications, proceed with confidence – baby is probably aware. (10)

Into the Third Year and Beyond

We are not certain if it really was a Jesuit teacher who first asserted that given a boy until he is seven years old, *"I will give you the man"*. But we can be sure that it was the English poet Phillip Larkin who wrote *"They f... you up, your Mum and Dad!"* (11)

Alas, modern psychology informs us that the human mould is set within the first three years. And not far ahead is the steadily encroaching pressure from popular media, where children are being targeted as miniature adults. (12) We could feel daunted from the outset or is this realisation not an incentive to put all our care and attention into child raising in the earliest years? Certainly efforts at this stage require much less time, money and soul searching than trying to put 'right the wrongs' in ten, twenty years or even later.

But perhaps the onus to make everything well is not all on parents. The aim of naturopathy is to minimise interference in child-raising, allowing the spontaneous development of natural ability. If a child's behaviour reaches disturbing levels, there may be reasons beyond comprehension but this does not mean failure on anyone's part. Patient understanding at critical times may be repaid in kind later, when the tables turn and parents themselves reach the dependent stage of life!

Ultimately, raising children is a finely poised family affair, delicately summed in a prayer offered on Children's Day in India at 14th November each year:

My hands are small; please don't expect perfection whenever I make a bed, draw a picture or throw a ball. My legs are short; please slow down so that I can keep up with you.

My eyes have not seen the world as you have; don't expect me to see things the way you do.

I'm only little for a short time, please take time to explain things to me about this wonderful world.

Don't scold me for my inquisitiveness. Treat me as you would like to be treated.

I need your encouragement to grow. You can criticise the things I do without criticising me.

I am a special gift from God; please treasure me as God intended you to do, disciplining me in a loving manner.

Permit me to fail so that I may learn from my mistakes.

Please don't do things over for me. And please don't compare me to my brother or sister.

Please set a good example for me to follow. I enjoy learning.

Don't be afraid to leave for a weekend together. Parents need vacations from kids just as kids need vacations from parents.

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