



Chapter 1 – Being Held in Another’s Mind from *Concepts for Care: 20 Essays on Infant/Toddler Development and Learning*

Edited by J. Ronald Lally, Peter Mangione, Deborah Greenwald

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1 Being Held in Another's Mind

By Jeree Pawl, Ph.D.

What does it mean to be held in another's mind? Why does it matter, and how does such a feeling develop? Everything that we know about babies leads to the conclusion that they seek human connection, not only to survive but for its own sake. They are born looking for us. Given a choice of what to look at in their first hours, it is always the human face they choose.

Babies begin to put their worlds together immediately. All of the rich sensations they have are recorded in their bodies, their feelings, and their brains. Just from the natural feedback from her body, a baby becomes aware of being a “doer” (a waving arm) and of being “done to” (lifted, touched). All of the images, sounds, sensations, and smells of each caregiving experience commingle — and they remain with the baby even when she is alone and resting. Repeated experiences evoke memories, and they blend with immediate sensations; gradually, as these experiences accumulate, a sorting occurs and begins to create order. The baby begins to anticipate: a snapping sound, a light, a voice, then food. The hungry baby now stops crying when he hears only the sound. He grows increasingly able to anticipate, react, join in mutual feelings and turn-taking, and attend with someone to things in the world, like books, toys, or a panting puppy.

But sometime around seven to nine months, something new is happening. The baby’s mother points at something and, instead of staring fixedly at her mother’s hand, the baby looks where her mother is pointing. Soon the baby — who frequently has stretched out her

hand towards something that is out of reach, grunting as she strains — points instead. She turns to look to see if her mother gets the idea. She does. The baby has made the discovery that her mother has a mind! The child can now have the intention to affect someone’s mind and to be a reader of minds. The baby now knows her wishes and intentions can be in someone else’s mind. The powerful wish to know and be known becomes more possible. This is a complex achievement that emerged from the child’s experiences. All along this child has felt noticed, responded to, and has been aware of her impact in the moment and over time.

In most circumstances there is an ongoing development of the sense of being held by another — a sense of continuousness. Responsiveness in caring creates this sense over time. A baby sits contentedly with her back toward her parent for a long time, absorbed in play with small cups. For the baby, there are sensations, cues, and memories of all kinds that are part of this one occasion. A child feels safe and contained when those cues and memories evoke a sense of being with someone that is positive. This feeling will persist even when she is alone in her

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crib. She carries it with her — this sense of nurturance, of the parents' presence even in absence, and her existence for them. She is held in the parents' mind. This feeling continuously deepens.

However, there are some parents to whom a child exists so peripherally that the child has needed to do most of the adapting. He has been attended to only around the edges of the adults' schedule and concerns. He is often missing from their awareness — rarely held in mind. A baby with so little voice in what his experiences are has little sense of impact and little sense of even knowing what he needs or wants. His sense of being with another is impoverished.

When a parent is too-much missed, too-long absent, the child is overcome by yearning and sadness. Images, feelings, and memories usually so assuring provoke, increasingly, unhappiness and despair. It is not that the image of the mother is not maintained but that the comforting image of mother is overwhelmed and replaced with feelings of anxiety and loss. The child no longer feels held, but abandoned. The sense of safety, containment, and continuity is lost.

This is extremely relevant to child care centers and family child care homes. Some children arrive as small infants. In these circumstances the teachers who care for the baby play very similar and complementary roles to the parent. Yet the relationship is not the same because the feelings a parent has for a child are different from the feelings a teacher or caregiver has for the child. The meaning of the child is different to each. The teacher would not feel the same connection to and passion for the child that the parent does. The child is fully equipped to feel and respond to this very important difference. The sun beams down on her when her adoring parent smiles. Other smiles, like the smiles of her teacher, will be just a very, very nice day.

But the issue is the same in regard to the child's need to be noticed, appreciated, attended to, and to feel effective. With this necessary responsive care, the teachers, too, will become an assuring, containing, and continuous presence. The child receives from the teacher what she needs to maintain her sense of connection to the parent in the parent's absence.

Toddlers and preschoolers, whether they have had long experience in care

or have just begun, have the same need. They need help not only with being reassured of their parents' whereabouts and existence but also with reassurance that they exist for their parents. Often we quite properly remind children that their parents are somewhere and that they will surely come — that their parents are not lost to them. As important, however, is helping children with the fear that their parents have lost them.

A child's sense of being held in the mind of a parent is supported and confirmed if there has developed a parallel sense that he exists in that way for the teacher. The teacher notices, sees, and responds. The child exists for the teacher when he is not immediately with her. He feels that strongly, through his sense of being seen and known. The teacher conveys this sense to him by understanding and knowing him, by reading his mind and behavior, by perceiving a need and offering something to him before he had

directly indicated that he wanted it, by remembering what the child likes and dislikes and what they have done together. These things create, in a child, this important sense of his being in the mind of the teacher.

In the parents' absence, helping the parents exist for the child and helping the child know she also exists for the parents are important aspects of good care. There are many concrete and imaginative ways to do this. For example, a teacher says, "Mommy is getting all her papers and going to the bus — she'll be here soon," or, "Daddy is wondering right this minute what you are doing," and this is elaborated. Still, it is the quality of the teacher's relationship with the child that is the guarantee that these important feelings can be sustained. To be a part of a process so vital to a child is a wonderful privilege. To be held in another's mind is a precious thing. Equally precious is to hold another in one's own.