



COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MOTHER AND INFANT

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Pregnancy and birth form the beginning of and on-going interaction between mother and infant which involves intersubjective communication (Stern, 1985) and that evolves with the growing and interrelated perceptual, cognitive and motor capacities of the infant.

The early post-natal development of most non-human primates occurs in an environment formed in large part by the mother's body. Closely attached to her, the infant must become closely acquainted with the tactual, kinaesthetic, auditory, visual, and olfactory stimuli that she provides. To some of these stimuli he responds as soon as he is born. As he develops further, his mother's body is his first toy, and many of his waking hours are spent in its exploration. In addition, the manner in which the mother holds the baby makes it easier for the baby to learn her features. She likes to look into her baby's face, and tries to get the baby to look at her. Being held and rocked may not only soothe a crying baby, but also alert it, and when the infant is at the breast, its mother's face is at about the distance at which it can focus most clearly. (Let us remember infants are myopic at birth and that their visual focal distance is barely 25-30 cms.).

As regards the auditory modality, there is evidence that infants exposed to the sound of the human heartbeat gain weight better than do infants not so exposed: the tendency of parents to carry babies against the left breast rather than the right may be related to this.

One of the most outstanding communication features deployed by mammals in general and humans in particular are distress signals. Human infants cries adopt different patterns: in hunger, it progresses from an arrhythmical low-intensity cry to a louder and rhythmical form; an angry cry, somewhat similar in form but with the components of the sequence differently emphasized; and a pain cry with a sudden onset, a pause, and then a series of gasping cries.

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