

Birth of a parent

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“How old are you?” he asked his daughter.

“Twu,” she answered, still learning to form the sounds of human language.

“And me,” he asked. “How old am I?”

“Twu,” she replied. “Yuu twu!”

Before I had a child, a friend shared this story. It made me giggle.

Just a few years into the world, the little girl did not yet grasp the idea that her father had a life before her. The story portrayed the curious, often funny process babies and toddlers go through as they develop a sense of who they are in relation to other people.

Having since become a father, I reflect on this story differently. As Lucy Jones puts it in her article for this journal, it reminds me that when a baby is born, a parent is also born.

Over the last 50 years scientists have learned a lot about early childhood. Amid the growing body of research, I have always found the neuroscience particularly compelling. During the early years of a child’s life, the brain makes one million new neural connections every second. I love talking to people about this fact and showing them images of babies’ neural networks, which look like celestial bodies. I see their sense of wonder when they hear this information for the first time. I think science has helped us understand why our earliest experiences shape so much of the people we become. It has given us a powerful window into how the early years are written into our bodies.

These insights have made their way into the cultural zeitgeist. Parents now obsess about how interactions with their children today can shape their futures. We have become fixated on how we shape *them*. This has generated new thinking and interest about what babies and toddlers need to thrive. It has stimulated an immense body of popular literature on the topic of parenting and – in some countries – led to important changes in healthcare and education.

But all of this has not changed our understanding of parenthood in the same way. We have not put the same level of scientific and cultural energy into asking the question: how do *they* shape *us*?

“What if we looked at early parenthood in a similar way to how we have come to look at early childhood?”

Alongside the growing enthusiasm for early childhood have come new pressures and expectations of parents. This has taken place during a period in which women have joined the formal labour market and many of us have moved to cities, living further from our extended families. It may be the busiest time in human history to be a parent and it is arguably the first time our species has attempted to raise children in a team of just two people. The work parents do has changed, but the job description has not been updated. The story of parenthood needs retelling.

Introduction

→ Michael and his daughter Mila

To be fair, we have developed policies and institutions to step in and provide some of the help for which we used to depend on kin, but – with the exception of a small number of countries – neither the government nor the market has been able to fill the gap. This is beginning to change, but far too slowly. This is why we decided to devote this and the next issue of *Early Childhood Matters* to an exploration of the wellbeing of parents and other caregivers.

What if we looked at early parenthood in a similar way to how we have come to look at early childhood? A period of five years in which every dimension of our identity undergoes a metamorphosis. Our brains and bodies soften and reorganise. We learn and adapt with exceptional speed. Our web of social relationships transforms. We experience feelings for which we need new words that we struggle to pronounce. Our days and nights are in equal part awe and exhaustion.

What if we agreed that when a baby is born, a parent is also born? How would it help us reimagine what parents need? How might it change how we care for them?



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