

Let's talk about women

As those of you who have read elsewhere on this site know, I care for families with young children. It is exciting, fulfilling and rewarding work and I am grateful every day that life has given me the opportunity to share the lives of so many young families. One of the things I do is actively develop a woman's confidence and self esteem. It is important for the care that she can give to those that she loves that she believes in her skills, her intuition, her commitment and her plain simple ability to do it well.

It amazes me how many women come to me with low scores for self confidence and joy in their parenting. This is matched by high scores for frustration. The testing is in no way profound. It works this way.

Q1 Your self confidence in the strategies you are using for the babies sleep? Score out of 10.

Q2 Pleasure in the process of being a mother at the moment? Is this fun? Score out of 10.

Q3 Frustration scores at the moment? Score out of 10. Where 10 is very frustrated.

Now this is not very clever or scientific but the scores women give on themselves are very interesting. For the record the worst scores for the first two questions at a first visit are both minus 100. The record for Q3 is 100 out of 10.

It can be tough. That is not an issue.

What amazes and perplexes me is how many writers in the field of families with young children teach a gospel of fear and anxiety. "If you do it this way your child is doomed." "If you don't do that the children will be scarred for life." I am disturbed by the number of advisers that women have turned to who use guilt and anxiety as tools of patient management. Have your advisers left you feeling inept or guilty?

Ladies there is no place for this sort of anxiety and guilt. It is inappropriate, unhelpful and it is unethical.

Let's look at a few things.

Evidence.

As a traditionally trained Doctor I believe in the value of 'evidence' through appropriate research. Something should not be taught unless there has been research to demonstrate that the strategy of care is effective and safe. Evidence comes in various strengths. There is better and weaker research. As an example the weakest 'research' might be to obtain opinions from a small, random group of people at the supermarket checkout. The strongest evidence comes from randomised double blind controlled trials. As an example, this might be a test of a drug where neither the Doctor or the patient know whether the patient is receiving the active drug under test or the placebo. It is important that the advice you are receiving has a basis in 'evidence' and that the quality of that evidence is strong rather than a reflection of a range of opinions. In recognising evidence based research one of the characteristics will be an absence of emotion. The material being taught is just simply 'proven'.

The words 'may' and 'might'.

In much of the material that I read about child care there is not a strong basis in evidence or in evidence of high quality. When read carefully a common finding is the placement of the words 'may' and 'might'. The context here is "may cause a problem" or "might be dangerous". The author is being guarded in that there is not sufficient proof of the information being put forward but the overall message will still be that despite the absence of evidence you avoid their advice at your peril. The most common examples of this in my field are articles, books and television articles that so called controlled crying causes emotional damage. There is in fact no evidence that this is the case. When you are reading look carefully for these words 'may' and 'might'. This is particularly so where the writing contains a lot of emotion and there is a strong implication that is you use the technique that is being discussed you will cause emotional damage.

Are you the "right stuff"?

Self esteem is often low in the mums that I see for the first time. Let's look at this from a different perspective. Your mother succeeded in raising you to adulthood. Her mother succeeded as did her mother before her. This success continues into the depths of time in an unbroken line. It is a simple statement of fact that your heritage is unimaginably strong. Without exception, every single one of your ancestors got it right. In the dangerous, difficult and complex competition called life you come from a heritage of winners. No emotion, no further evidence required it is a simple statement of the obvious. You belong to a line of women who without exception raised their children successfully. You are highly likely to be good at this. It has quite literally been bred into you. You are made of the 'right stuff'.

Are you committed?

In recent times the advent of PET scanners (very sophisticated images of the body) have demonstrated more and more about the brain's functioning. One of these has been the profound changes that occur in the functioning of the brain as a consequence of pregnancy and childbirth. It is a little difficult to put into words but this process includes a number of elements. Love. You will love your child in a way which is amazing. It can be overwhelming. Positive but overwhelming. There is a strong desire to make this child safe. You will be quite conscious of the need to avoid danger. (Male pranks which involve risk taking do not seem funny any more.) Your mind will think about the baby and its well being all the time. It is a new state of mind and the PET scanners reflect this. As a child moves to adolescence and views the world differently so a woman becoming a mother undergoes a similar transformation. There is no going back and you will know without ambiguity that this is a superior state of mind. The best words that I have ever been able to put together are "wholesome completeness". It just seems totally correct to be looking after this wonderful human being who is your child.

Are babies resilient?

As a mother has been bred for success our children have been designed to survive. They will love us despite our flaws. Their ability to cope with life's ups and downs is pretty amazing. While delicate in many ways they bounce back as long as we get it sort of OK most of the time. Of course there are mistakes to be made and skills to be learned but the baby will come along for the ride. In the area that I am focusing on in this short paper that of emotional well being they are resilient. Emotional wellbeing is not created by one event but by the sum of interactions between the child and the whole family and even to society over a long time. Being a balanced human being is a sum of millions of experiences over a period of years.

Messages.

Ladies there are a number of key messages in this paper. I want you to write these in your soul in bold type.

- You are a loving and committed mother.
- You come from an unbroken line of women who have succeeded in their parenting. Every atom of your body and heart has been selected to be a successful parent.
- Your baby is strong and resilient and his or her future is not defined by the events of one night or one week or even by one year but by the sum of all your interactions over many years.
- We are imperfect parents and that is just fine. Your child is likely to forgive you your weaknesses and remember your strengths.
- If someone is giving you advice leaving you feeling inept or guilty perhaps they are not the right people to be talking to. If the material you are reading is littered with negative emotional statements and lots of qualifiers such as "may cause damage" or "might be dangerous" move on to better places for advice.
- You were born to be a successful mother who finds joy in her parenting raising children you can be proud of.

Conclusion.

Finally just to return to the three questions mentioned above. For the record the best scores that have been given at a second or subsequent consult where the parents had succeeded in getting

sleep and feeding under control are as follows.

Q1. Self confidence. 10 out of 10.

Q2. Pleasure in the process. Is this fun? For a long time the record was a million out of 10. Then I told a few women of this and it started a competition. So as I write the record is a "gazillion plus 1"

Q3. Frustration score. Zero out of 10.

www.silentnights.org with Dr Brian Symon