Newborn behavioural observation: helping new fathers and their babies

Joanna Hawthorne, director of the Brazelton Centre in Great Britain, and Emily Savage-McGlynn, a researcher at the National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit at the University of Oxford, look at how newborn behavioural observation can help fathers become involved with their new baby.

The arrival of a new baby brings many changes to family dynamics. ‘Transition to parenthood’ is a term often used to identify this normative crisis in the life of the family. Research has shown that babies need to experience a secure attachment to their main caregiver, most often their mother, in order to become confident, emotionally stable and good learners. Fathers also have an important role to play in the early days of a child’s life, though there are fewer research studies on the long-term effects of fathers’ involvement during pregnancy, birth and early parenting.

The relationships that are developed between an infant and his or her caregivers in the early days, weeks and months of life can have long-lasting effects upon the child’s cognitive, emotional and social development. Sensitivity to an infant’s cues and communications is a crucial component in strengthening this attachment relationship. It involves the ability not only to perceive and interpret the infant’s cues accurately, but also to provide an appropriate and timely response.

While much of the research has focused upon the effects of the bond between mother and infant, there is increasing interest in the long-term impact of the relationship between an infant and the father. Traditionally fathers spend less time with their infants, which may affect the strength of the attachment relationship. Fathers also tend to interact differently with their children: where mothers tend to spend their time nurturing and displaying calm, sensitive warmth, fathers are more likely to focus on stimulating, exploratory and boisterous types of play. For the developing infant, the more energetic and active nature of play with their father provides an opportunity to develop their playful and explorative behaviours, allowing children to push their comfort boundaries and stretch their limits. Over time, children who have developed secure attachment relationships with their father are less likely to have behavioural problems and show higher levels of sociability.

Paying close attention to the subtle, shifting infant cues and communications as the pace of play quickens is crucial. In order to provide optimal development and learning opportunities for that child, both parents need to monitor and match the needs of their child so as to interact at a pace that the baby is comfortable with.

Observing the baby’s responses
In the last 20 years, an increased understanding about the development of the infant’s brain shows that how we respond to babies is very important. Parents and caregivers need to observe all the baby’s efforts to communicate, such as their cries, smiles, quiet vocalisations and arm movements. The baby’s efforts to show how they are feeling, such as colour changes, yawns and sneezes, imply that they may be feeling over-stimulated.

Other signals, such as a calm, bright-eyed, alert look show us that they are interested in playing or feeding. Supporting parents as they work to read their baby’s signals and cues is an effective way of providing a preventative intervention with parents. With respect to the energetic play that often takes place between father and child, being aware of and understanding baby’s cues and signals is very important to optimise the attachment relationship.

Infant behavioural strategies
The Newborn Behavioural Observations (NBO) is a tool used to enhance the practitioner-parent relationship and the parent-baby relationship, highlighting the infant’s behavioural states, reflexes, social interaction, motor activity and signs of over-stimulation. It is based on over 30 years of research from the Neonatal Behavioural Assessment Scale, and is a supportive intervention for parents and a research tool used in more than 900 studies. The Brazelton approach has been recommended in the Healthy Child Programme by the Department of Health, and has been used widely in the UK for the last 15 years. The NBO is not an assessment, but an introduction to infant behavioural strategies and signs. Along with the parent, the practitioner looks at how the baby manages sleep (by shining a light and shaking a rattle when the baby is asleep), how the baby manages crying and self-soothing, how the baby shows reflexes and how he manages social interaction using the caregiver/practitioner’s face and voices.

After participating in an NBO session, mothers report that they felt they knew their baby better, had a greater understanding of their baby’s cues, and that they felt more confident with their baby. Further, the NBO has been shown to enhance the mother’s sense of competency as a parent and reduce the likelihood of depressive symptoms developing.

A study was conducted in Wales where the health visitors carried out six weekly visits, implementing the Brazelton approach. Compared with mothers who had only been visited once by non-Brazilian-trained health visitors, the intervention mothers were significantly more confident and had higher levels of attachment with and lower levels of hostility towards their infant.

The importance of fathers
Fathers of new babies can often feel marginalised, but including them in the NBO session can help them to feel that the baby knows them, and they are important to their baby. A classic study using the NBAS in 1989 with fathers showed that fathers who were present at the NBAS session with their newborn were more involved with their caretaking at one month old.
Many practitioners report that the father is particularly amazed when the infant responds to his voice, and it seems to make the father feel proud and valued. Information from practitioners who have taken the two-day NBO course in the UK, and use the NBO to enhance their practice, reported feeling more confident in discussing newborn behaviour with parents.11

In summary, a strength-based, relationship-based intervention in the newborn period using the Brazelton theory and concepts through the NBO and NBAS, carried out with both mothers and fathers present, appears to make a positive difference with families by affording them the skills to respond effectively with their infants to ensure their optimal development.

Practitioners can develop their own awareness of baby cues by attending relevant courses (see box-out) and through further reading.

References

Train in NBO
Two-day training courses in the NBO are available across the UK. Please visit www.brazelton.co.uk/training.html for further information.

Resources for healthcare professionals and midwives
www.nctprofessional.co.uk or call 0845 8100 100

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