

The correspondence from Sebastian Kramer/Peter Toolan is most worthy of reading. Please take time to read.

Dear Jane and colleagues

Friday's gathering was inspiring, and got me thinking about how people get interested in early years. In my case it was from becoming a parent 35 years ago. This surprised me in almost every way. The only thing I had any confidence in (which I suppose counted as a plus) was how to hold a baby, because I had trained in paediatrics ten years earlier. In the intervening years I'd sat at John Bowlby's scholarly feet and done infant observation and therapy trainings which gave me a language to describe processes that are essentially primal and preverbal, yet none of this was much use for the task in hand. My only real preparation for parenthood had taken place forty years earlier, and that was not enough, but I didn't quite know that yet *.

Most people assume that love and good will are sufficient conditions for parental competence in the very early years, and that having some money and practical information are helpful extras. It is not welcome news that this tiny fragment of life is so significant for our own development as parents. "Being a very small child is temporary and soon forgotten, but it is by far the most impressionable time of our lives." <http://bit.ly/2wqLusj> It should not be surprising that the critical importance of early experience is generally minimised.

But it isn't only lack of developmental knowledge that keeps these magic months in obscurity. We can tell people about the scientific revelations of the past sixty years or so, but it is not digested in an emotional way. As long as they are objectively 'out there', these discoveries are interesting, but don't make much difference to people's feelings about parenthood or babies. Anyone who tries to imagine *what it's like to be a baby* draws a blank as far as the story goes. There is no narrative memory, only the subliminal echo of emotional/bodily events, which for some are not pleasant. Infants are uniquely disenfranchised because none of us can remember what happened, and some - especially many in public life - would not want to.

Bucking the trend here is Frank Field MP in Friday's Guardian :

"Intensive home visiting programmes that seek to improve maternal mental health, strengthen the bonds between parent and child, and create a home environment that enables babies and infants to develop, are being piloted, but only on a relatively small scale. Such interventions hold the key to equalising children's life chances during those crucial first years of life which all but determine whether or not they will grow up to become poor adults." <http://bit.ly/2OoU05m>

This says what we all know, but hardly anyone else wants to talk about. In the same edition of the Guardian there is a report of £750m cuts – *more than a quarter of the total* – to local early years provision in the past five years <http://bit.ly/2Omft50> which ought to be a national scandal, but is not; it doesn't register. It's a bit like trying to persuade the world that climate change is doing us harm; those who agree (who may even be in a majority) forget their assent within minutes. Because these things cannot be fully imagined, neither global warming nor the essentials of infant development can be thought about for long enough to concentrate the public/policy mind.

An online antidote to this is the new AIMH website, promoting knowledge and trainings. What deal can we do with Routledge to get extracts/synopses of chapters from Penny's brilliant edited text *Transforming Infant Wellbeing* <https://amzn.to/2OjoF3D> onto it? Penny writes: "a healthy newborn's brain has all the neurons she needs. She does not need to make any more now or in the future. What she needs is not more neurons but *more connections to link them up and make them work for her*" (p5 *italics added*)

In order to make this happen we can say more or less the same of the baby as an embodied person; that she needs, besides a loving and thoughtful primary caregiver, a handful of caregiver-partners and

skilled supporters who can make *more connections with each other* that work for the child. A key finding from the massive Oxford child care study was, in Penny's words: "The most significant variable in satisfaction with child care was 'communication with the caregiver' and this was not communication about the child or the care but communication between parent and carer as people" (2012). (Perhaps rocket science is actually easier to understand than the primacy of *relationships* in human development!)

From a star studded list of forty contributors to her book there is, as Penny said on Friday, a clear consensus about the core principles. If nothing else, her seven-page summing up ("Themes arising" chapter 25) should be required reading for all of the AIMH committee and be posted on the website. Here are some highlights:

- **"promote a trans-disciplinary science of human development"**
- **"perinatal mental health interventions should be a public health priority"**
- **"proportionate universality can provide the social advantages of universal services with the economic advantages of selection"**
- **"what is needed now are mentalising education, health and social care systems that can reach out to parents, and which parents are able to reach without shame, obstruction or undue delay"**

Integration of – or meaningful collaboration between – services is the goal. That is an enormous undertaking, given that researchers and providers are often rivals in the musical chairs bidding for attention from funders and service commissioners. Some contributors to *Transforming Infant Wellbeing* were aware of this tension:

- "A major weakness with the 'what works' culture ... is that an explicit consideration of the impact of the context for joint working is not built in to the evaluation of its performance" (*Ruth Gardner and Camilla Rosan, p.191*)
- "In early intervention relationships have a more significant effect than techniques, a nightmare for those who commission since the person will be more important than the procedure and those who are good at making therapeutic relationships will be refractory to policies." (*Robin Balbernie p 182*).

and to deal with necessary differences of viewpoints (and indeed rivalries) at the front line here is the Norfolk Parent-Infant Mental Health Attachment Project (PIMHAP):

- "there is a need for reflective supervision which explores the role of unconscious processes. A weekly reflection group provides an additional space for sharing video work, making links and reflecting on what is evoked in member of the team".

and

"While PIMHAP was a central intervention it was most often in combination with other service, notably children's centres" (*Verity Smith et al, Norfolk Parent-Infant Mental Health Attachment Project : working towards integration in attachment, mental health and social care, p 266*)

While the target of intervention is intensely intimate, efforts to make it happen are intensely political: "a social justice dimension to the case for investment in prevention in early childhood" must be added to the evidence from developmental science, says Chris Cuthbert (*p.72*) who reports a strong correlation between perinatal stress and lack of access to social support, friends and grandparents (*pp 81-2*). He dismisses any idea that it is only an 'underclass' that needs targeting, as if everyone else were ok with new parenthood, noting that better off women are more likely to drink too much when pregnant (*p.75*).

My point simply is that the accumulation of good evidence is simply not sufficient. As we see every day, politics is not evidence-based, but in the present turmoil there may just possibly be an opening for noticing infant mental health. But we need alternative routes to consciousness raising.

Besides rousing words there are other media (including music?) through which to tell the story. Though it took *decades* of campaigning, film helped to overcome baffled and hostile resistance to James Robertson's observations of children separated from their parents <http://bit.ly/2OXgcAr>. Amanda Jones TV programme 'Help me love my baby' <https://ab.co/2OYqH6v> is very powerful - but less accessible; and note how prohibitively expensive all these recording are. The film about Sophie contains the perfect illustration of 'the ghost in the nursery'. She tells Amanda that her tiny baby 'wants to kill me' and goes on to say that she knows this from the look in the infant's eyes which is just the same as the one in her mother's eyes when she was beating Sophie as a child; a more immediate and powerful revelation even than Fraiberg et al's classic and poetic 1975 paper <http://bit.ly/2Oj3gYD>.

On YouTube there are extracts of 'A two-year-old goes to hospital' <http://bit.ly/2OXOaEY> and the second of Amanda's films <http://bit.ly/2OY0OUg>. It would be good if the AIMH website could have these links on it. The short film from a Dutch neonatal unit <http://bit.ly/2O17sXD> of baby Naseera inside her father's T shirt as he sings to her is very moving (I am hoping to send you some of this film shortly). Maybe we can get permission to show it.

Best wishes Sebastian

Dr Sebastian Kraemer
Hon Consultant Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust
sebastiankraemer.com
07986 186 855

Dear Sebastian,

Thank you so much for your brilliant and elegant thoughts. I particularly appreciate the historical perspective which you bring regarding our collective resistance to remembering the most developmentally significant time of our lives. This is so evident in the repeated evaporation of political initiatives promoting the best start for babies. The evidence for the importance and effectiveness of early intervention is compelling internationally. Successive governments have been aware of this for decades but there is overwhelming systemic amnesia and fear of acknowledging the consequences of not supporting inter-generational repetition of trauma and neglect. It is as though to do so would mean sustaining an unbearable degree of hope for a better and more decent society. I very much liked your quoting Chris Cuthbert's dismissal of the idea that it's only 'an underclass' that needs supporting - a perspective misunderstood I think, by Zoe Williams in her Guardian article in April 2014. I am increasingly persuaded that the idea of a universal infant mental health strategy is about human rights and social justice, no wonder that cross party cooperation on such an aspiration seems to be struggling to take root.

Kind regards, Peter

Peter Toolan, Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychotherapist. Clinical Lead NEWPIP

And link below to Early Intervention Foundation's Annual Report 17/18

<https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/eif-annual-report-2017-18.pdf>