

Boost Your Child's Achievements

a hands-on guide to good parenting

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& Dr David Cowell

edited by Simon Jackson

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Introduction

Our objective when writing *Boost Your Child's Achievements* was to create an easy-to-read hands-on guide to good parenting.

As this book will show you, the scope for parental intervention goes beyond the limits imposed by the child's genetic endowment. Parents can shape their offspring into happy, self-assured, well-rounded and attractive individuals.

Although there is no universal consensus on the best method of bringing up children, we have—with the assistance of authoritative institutions—recorded state-of-the-art findings on the subject of child development.

Parents generally are not interested in arcane concepts and are put off by scientific jargon. Quite frequently both parents work—which imposes time constraints—therefore a practical hands-on guide is called for.

So what makes a good parent? You know that good parenting can make a huge difference in the way children turn out, but how do you go about it? You know how to deal with the basic needs of the growing infant, i.e. healthy food, safety precautions, medical care and love. But what then? How can you help to ensure that your child reaches their full potential?

This book will guide you. It is intended to be a hands-on manual, avoiding general platitudes and unnecessary use of scientific jargon. Where the use of scientific terms is unavoidable, they will be defined and explained.

The first step of good parenting is to understand what you are looking at. An infant is not an empty sheet of paper on which you can write your specification for the future, nor a lump of putty you can shape. The infant is a ready-made human being in miniature, waiting to mature along a pre-determined path. Your baby is an organism whose future development is determined by the combination of inherited traits and acquired experiences.

It is important to realise that good parenting can make a massive difference in boosting a child's potential.

BOOST YOUR CHILD'S ACHIEVEMENTS

You, the parent, can play an important part by providing mental stimulation during the formative years when a child is most receptive.

Boost Your Child's Achievements not only tells you how to achieve this, but in the process, might also broaden your horizon.

Dr Erwin Brecher

Dr David Cowell

1. Bonding

It is easy to assume that a parent buying this book would not need to be told how to form a loving attachment with their child.

However this subject is of such importance for the emotional development of an infant that it deserves detailed attention.

Bonding is generally defined as forming a relationship. More specifically, it is the bond between mother and child. It was once thought that the main element in forming this attachment was because it was the mother who was feeding the child. But while this has been established as being the primary reason in animal behaviour it has been ruled out as a major factor with humans.

The unique mother-child bond has its beginnings even before birth. The depth of feeling often transcends any other emotional attachment and can present a threat to the relationship between the parents themselves. It is important to overcome this for the sake of the parents as well as the child. Infants even at an early age are very sensitive to disharmony between their parents. Frequent displays of affection between parents in the child's presence have a lasting beneficial effect on the child-parent relationship.

Alternatively, studies on the negative effect of divorce or separation have indicated the irreversible damage suffered by children—particularly boys—who may become more aggressive and less sociable. Studies undertaken at UK universities followed 20 pre-school pairs of siblings whose parents had been separated for over a year. These children's attitude compared to those of a control group led to the conclusion that parents' separating leaves a lasting effect on the child. But it was noted that it may bring these brothers or sisters closer together, particularly if they are of the same sex.

In addition to the distress caused by their parents separating, anxiety can be caused by the fear that separation may occur in the future. This anxiety is aroused if the child is subject to ongoing parental disharmony. The effect

can be severe enough to lead to emotional suffering and parents are advised to avoid conflict in front of the child.

The concept of bonding is central to the emotional development of the infant, but what is the critical period?

Even brief separations of the baby from its mother can produce long-lasting detrimental effects. This is particularly crucial between birth and eight months. But the critical period is the first three years. Maternal deprivation during this time can have severe and often irreversible effects on development.

Separation anxiety

Signs of distress in the child when the mother, nanny or other carer leaves and relief when they return have been observed. This presents a problem to working mothers. A large photograph of the primary carer's face within sight of the baby may alleviate distress.

Physical contact

Some researchers have concluded that skin-to-skin contact is most important during the first twelve hours after birth, while others stress the bonding process builds up gradually over several months. The latter is the more likely situation as the older infant's reaction can be more reliably observed.

Other attachments

Although the majority of babies show their major attachment to the mother, one third form a bond primarily with the father, and one sixth to another member of the family. Surprisingly, the determining factor is not the time spent with the infant but the interactive contact between child and adult. Feeding, changing, playing, communicating, talking to the child slowly and deliberately, have a strong bonding effect and will be rewarded with a smile or with a facial expression of concentration.

Resisting bonding

While most babies liked to be cuddled, some to the extent that nothing else would keep them quiet, there were others who actively resisted being held. This intolerance to physical contact persisted even when the infant was tired or unwell. All other outward signs of attachment were still in place.

They would seek eye-contact with the mother or get a grip on her clothing when frightened, but shy away from being hugged. Researchers found that this unusual behaviour was not caused by any lack of motherly affection but appeared to be a type of inhibition of genetic origin. Such children are likely to have problems with relationships in later life. Mothers are advised to disregard this perceived rejection and continue being affectionate without forcing the child into close physical contact.

Bonding with father

Historically fathers have played a secondary part in the child's development. Infants suffered much less by short-term separation such as absence during office hours. Indeed the father's daytime absence often meant the child looked forward to their father's return. Longer separations, however, can be stressful. A father's relationship with the young child is less important and yet often more intense, provided that the child enjoys periods of the father's undivided attention. Researchers have found that most children aged between seven months and 30 months preferred fathers to mothers as a playmate.

Early physical contact

Mothers and babies benefit from the effects of immediate contact after birth. Giving the baby to the mother soon after birth and allowing the mother to hold the infant for a few hours each day will secure a lasting bond.

Emotional range

Newborn babies have a surprising range of facial expressions: anger, fear, pleasure, joy, sorrow, grief and disgust can be expressed within a few months of birth. Parents should try to interpret the signs and react effectively.

- **Smiling.** In the early weeks smiles are not caused by outside stimuli and so do not signify pleasure or contentment in any real sense. They are triggered by nerve impulse and contain no message to the mother. Only after a month or two will external stimuli, mostly visual, cause the child to smile in a social sense. Looking at the mother's face it will often react noticeably if the smile is returned. It has been suggested that this conscious smile signals a new awareness, such as recognition of a familiar object.

- **Laughing.** The first audible laugh can be observed after about three months. Vigorous stimulation such as tickling and bouncing will produce a laugh if the baby is in the mood. If not, mothers should desist. The most desirable effect is achieved if there is interactive stimulus between the mother and child. This interplay can become a game much enjoyed by the baby.
- **Crying.** During the first six months this is the most frequent sound heard. Before a mother can take effective steps to pacify and soothe the infant, she should identify the reason for the child's displeasure. Fortunately, mothers can often diagnose the cause and take appropriate action.

The easiest cry to deal with is a hunger cry. Feeding times, however, should be regular and systematic. Some babies dislike being naked and start crying when undressed. Infants prefer room temperatures slightly above normal. From 78 to 80°F will protect them from distress and induce deeper sleep. Some babies resort to blackmail and cry out of boredom, with the sole aim of being picked up. This is habit-forming and should be resisted. Baby's motives can be discovered by trying other methods. Continuous rocking can give comfort, as can attracting the baby's attention by unusual and unexpected rhythmic movements of the hands. Looking at and softly talking to the baby will often succeed. This is the period of transition to social interaction.

Other simple soothing techniques include:

- Put your baby in a sling and walk around with it
- Give a gentle massage
- Play soft music
- Sing
- Read a poem, modulating your voice
- Switch on a fan directing a gentle airflow to baby's face

Further work has been done on the sleeping habits of babies. Researchers investigated 64 mothers and their babies aged between 14 and 18 months. They discovered 27 of them had sleeping problems of which 13, according to Dr Morrell, had an insecure relationship with the mother. The test of insecurity proposed is not entirely persuasive. The researcher suggested the mother leave the room after three minutes, and then a stranger to the child comes in. After

some minutes the stranger leaves and mother returns. It is concluded that babies who are secure become upset when the mother goes. They will stop playing and then want to be near her when she returns. On the other hand, insecure babies would not react to mother's leaving or returning.

The implication that it is the mother's fault, for having neglected the bonding effort, if her baby cries excessively, is rejected by other psychiatrists. How then should one deal with extreme sleep disturbance? The 'leave them to cry' method is generally rejected. As an alternative to the pacifying action suggested previously, 'control crying' has been recommended. This involves letting the child cry for a few minutes at a time, then entering the room for a short while, leaving again, and letting the intervals become longer until the baby falls asleep. Persevere for a week, and it is likely to work. As a last resort the National Childbirth Trust in the UK, and similar institutions in the US, will provide post-natal support to mothers who find it difficult to cope with babies' extreme sleep disturbance.

For more information on sleeping patterns refer to the Do's and Don'ts chapter, under the heading 'Sleep'.

One-to-one

The value of one-to-one talk between parent and baby for the infant's development is widely acknowledged. Researchers carried out a study of 140 young children over a period of seven years. They came to the conclusion that a face-to-face dialogue with the infant of at least 30 minutes each day can speed a child's cognitive development by up to fifteen months. To be more precise this means the child is ahead of its age by fifteen months, and this would translate into a correspondingly higher IQ rating. Dr Ward also found that there was an enormous difference in the level of the average intelligence of the intervention group. The tests appeared to demonstrate that nine of the children in this group had an IQ of more than 130, placing them in the exceptionally high category, which none of the children in the control group achieved.

While we do not doubt the test results we certainly must reject the conclusion, without in any way questioning the benefits to the child of a daily one-to-one dialogue. These include:

- deeper bonding
- improving the use of language
- accelerating cognitive development
- strengthening self-esteem.

Dr Ward believes that an environmental exercise such as the one-to-one dialogue can increase the child's level of intelligence. Our objection concerns the proposition that a genetic trait such as intelligence can be increased beyond its biological limit. We share the view held by most researchers that intelligence is a genetic attribute which is pre-programmed to its maximum capacity. During the formative years the growing child acquires the ability to make increasing use of its cognitive competence which is available in various degrees to each individual. This process can be accelerated, and brought to fruition, by appropriate parental intervention.

2. The Early Years

When should a baby be able to do what?

During your early parenthood you will hear many differing opinions on your child's level of development. But don't be confused—no rules are cast in stone and no two infants follow precisely the same development pattern.

Please consider this timetable as a general guide only.

- At the end of the first month a baby lying on its stomach should be able to raise its head and retain this position for a few seconds.
- By the second month a baby will hold this position for about ten seconds. Lying on their back they will kick their feet and wave their arms about and should respond by returning smiles from adults. The baby will start to babble.
- By the third month a baby should be able to support itself on its forearm and lift head and shoulders slightly. Lying on one side baby can roll onto its back and will start to grip onto small objects.
- The fourth month will see a baby holding toys firmly and looking at them from all sides.
- At the end of the fifth month, when lying on its tummy, a baby will make swimming movements.
- At six months the baby will roll about and when out of the cot should be constantly watched to prevent injury. If you help the baby into a sitting position they will keep their head up and be able to lift their legs. The baby will also follow moving objects with its eyes and reach out for them—mostly with both hands—and put them into their mouth. At this age babies turn their heads to locate sources of sound. They laugh, chuckle and squeal. They are still shy with strangers.

- At seven months the babbling will become more pronounced and sounds like 'Dada' will be discernible. Baby can sit up without help and turn their head if called.
- By the eighth month a baby can distinguish the faces of parents and strangers. He or she can pull themselves up to stand on their knees, using the cot for support. If left alone on the floor, they will try to crawl. They can use hands for eating.
- At nine months a baby, with hands supported, can stand upright for a few seconds. They become visually alert and are able to manipulate objects, but have difficulty in releasing them voluntarily. Babies begin listening intently to sounds, and understand 'No' and a few other words. Beginning of memory is demonstrated by retrieving hidden objects.
- By ten months, a baby will enjoy crawling about and stand upright for up to a minute if supported.
- At eleven months they can take the first steps.
- At the end of the first year will react positively if called by name. Vocabulary will extend to a few words used to convey complete, but often contradictory, messages. Thus 'milk' could mean 'I want more' or 'I've had enough.' What is meant at that particular time can be easily tested. Children can hold small objects securely, bang them together and release them. They will babble meaningfully to themselves and say two or three words.
- By the fifteenth month they can stand unsupported and walk a few steps. Vocabulary has increased to ten words, building up quickly.
- At 18 months infants can walk well, pick up objects, and walk upstairs with one hand held. They can hold a pencil and scribble. They start using one hand more than the other. They can take off their shoes and socks. Their social behaviour can sometimes alternate between a show of affection and struggling to break free from being hugged.
- At 20 months infants should have a 50-word vocabulary. Single words begin to be replaced by two-word combinations, consisting mainly of nouns, verbs and very few adjectives.

From this stage forward, the main development lies in the rapid progress of

mastering language. Physically, there is steadily increasing sure-footedness and the child's hands have a firmer grip.

- By two years a child's vocabulary contains an average of 300 words, and will begin to understand words such as who, what, how and where. An infant will start walking, unaided and with increasing confidence. As your toddler has now become an adept walker, it is time to give them some physical tasks to perform. 'Take these keys to Daddy in the sitting room!' On successful completion, it is best not to praise the performance excessively. A simple 'thank you' will do. This will make a child feel that they have become a useful member of the family. Keep the momentum going by requesting increasingly difficult tasks. 'Darling, please bring me the newspaper from the kitchen.' You will see an enormous advance in motor skills! Just make sure the paper is on a chair and not on the table, beyond reach, to avoid frustration.
- The next stage lasts until the age of four or five years. The child should be able to count to ten. More advanced children will know numbers up to 100. This is the time when they should start using computers and improve their oral skills. Sentences are becoming longer and more complex. A surprising development is the child's ability to assimilate basic rules of grammar.

A demonstration of this rule-learning ability was carried out whereby children were shown a picture of a fictitious creature called a 'wug' and were told, 'This is a wug.' The children were then shown a second picture in which there were two of these creatures, and were told, 'Now there is another one—there are two of them.' They were then asked to complete the sentence, 'There are two ____.' Children three and four years old could successfully supply the correct answer 'wugs', although they had never seen one of these creatures before and certainly could not have been imitating anybody else's speech. Clearly they were applying a rule about how to form plurals.

To assist in this development, parents should engage in long conversations with the child. They should resist the temptation to use baby talk. A child's source of language information is the speech it hears, and ungrammatical speech will lead to confusion. Even so at this stage children, being sub-consciously aware of the concept of grammar, often make their own

rules with a tendency towards simplification. Words such as 'childs', 'geeses', 'wented' etc. are the result. There is also a tendency to over-generalise by calling all men 'daddy' and all four-legged animals 'doggie'.

The question of how children develop language involves us once again in the nature-nurture issue. An important pointer is the observation that deaf babies babble in the same way and at the same age as hearing babies. This is an indication of the important genetic contribution towards language development.

At five years a child's personality starts to emerge. They are physically mobile, can copy letters, and draw recognisable objects. They are interested in the meaning of abstract words, and understand the concept of time. The child enjoys companionship and dialogue.

Keep in mind that babies develop at different rates as far as acquiring skills are concerned. Do not worry if your child is slower in some areas, as it might catch up and be ahead of its age quite quickly. However if you find that your child lags substantially behind this timetable, you should seek professional guidance.