

Parent/Fetus (Baby) Relationship Based Interventions

The definition of pregnancy is “being with child” yet most of society talks in terms of “when the baby comes.” But a baby begins his/her earliest stages of development to the outside world during the weeks leading up to birthing from within the mother. Today’s research on the environmental impact of stress on the fetus, cellular memory of the unborn child and what is traditionally called the “psycho-social tasks” of pregnancy supports the need for intervention beginning in pregnancy. By listening to the mother’s and partner’s perception of their unborn child, the principles of relationship based care can guide educational intervention. This helps parents consciously understand the baby “is already here” and learn ways to trust their intuitive knowing of the baby’s wellness.

Break-Up: Conception to 12 weeks gestation

- The first weeks are a time of “disequilibrium as the baby forms and the mother’s body takes on the pregnancy.
- Discover how the parents feel about the pregnancy.
- Explore their family of origin messages around pregnancy.
- Assess support system for both mother and father.
- By 12 weeks of gestation the formed baby displays all the behaviors observed at birth, just at an immature level of development.

Listen to where parents’ are in accepting the pregnancy. Reflect back feelings, recognize some parents will be overwhelmed, not open to discussing the pregnancy so let them lead the intervention. At the same time, pay attention to words they use and how they are changing. Whether in a committed relationship or not, a third person has been created. It is important to acknowledge not wanting a pregnancy can be very different than not wanting a baby once he/she is born.

Sorting Out: 12-24 weeks gestation

- This is a time of decision making as parents “sort out” the reality of the pregnancy.
- Ask who they’ve shared the news with and how they might involve other family members.
- Prenatal testing is offered and parents must sort out the pros and cons.

- Provide information on fetal competencies; during these weeks the baby begins to hear and has an awareness of the outside environment.
- Imagine with the parents how the baby perceives the world. By the 20th week, lanugo and head hair appear, and the skin is coated with vernix caseosa.
- Imagine the comfort and protection that nature provides for the duration of the pregnancy.
- When greeting the mother ask: “What changes have you noticed this week?”

Within your body

With the baby

- Between eighteen and twenty weeks mothers may feel “flutters” of movement. Begin teaching about changes in the mother’s body to help parents learn the difference between fetal movement and uterine contractions.
- Reframe the mother’s need to rest as taking time to “feed the baby,” visualizing each breath of the mother as an opportunity to rock the baby.
- Encourage other family member involvement. Unborn babies sense the different touches of people so often stop moving when someone other than the mother’s hand touches the abdomen. Wait patiently for movement and tell the baby whose touch it is.
- At this early stage the baby’s cellular memory is developing. Research confirms a baby responds to parent’s stress level. Remind parents that stress is a part of life. Discuss “sorting out” ways to decrease the stress in their lives. Even in the uterus it is helpful to give babies the words for the feelings they experience.

Inwardizing 24-32 weeks gestation

- Acknowledge the presence of the baby, not just being pregnancy. “Look how much your baby has grown!” rather than “You are getting so big!”
- Continue assessing their understanding about the difference between fetal movements and contractions. This helps mothers learn to recognize bodily changes and brings an awareness of the baby as a separate individual. “What have you noticed about your baby this week?”
- The baby is learning about the family he/she will be born into. Assess how this information feels for each parent. This can be frightening to some.

- Parents may be less open to suggestions and interventions. Their tasks are focused on “inwardizing” their lives. Gently allow parents to be where they are as you move them forward in getting to know their baby and how the mother’s body is protecting the baby.
- Encourage parents to involve siblings and other family members in talking to the baby.
- Explore the benefits of doula support in labor and birth.

Expansion: 32 weeks to birth

- Parents are usually more open to information and help regarding labor and birth concerns.
- Continue to ask about the baby’s activity level, when he/she is most active and changes in the baby and the mother’s body.
- Remind mothers the abdominal breathing and relaxation they have been using during the pregnancy can also be used during labor.
- Provide information on the baby’s role during labor and birth; how the baby participates with each contraction by pushing and extending down into the pelvis.
- **Healthy babies do not stop moving or slow down before birth.** When the baby’s head enters the pelvis the movements will change but will never slow down. Sleep-awake cycles are established and similar to what will be observed after birth.

Neurotic fitting together: Birth through the first six weeks of life

- Transition to the outside world.
- The baby and parents move into “disequilibrium” from parenting during pregnancy to parenting postpartum.
- Parent-Infant Pathways Course
<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/CEED/onlinecourses/pip.html>

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