Infant and Mental Health

V. MALA REUBIN

INFANTS become children and children become adolescents, passing through their parents lives and disappearing into adulthood, full fledged persons with lives and futures of their own. Throughout the period of growth and development children need parents, or substitute parents to survive. The parents need help in understanding the usual steps in an infant's development, which can be provided by the Nurse.

It is rarely that a newborn baby is brought for psychological assessment, but first year of life is the most important in the development of the psyche of the infant. The neonate's and infant's psyche and mental health depend upon the growth and development of: The neonatal reflexes; Motor development; Sensory-perceptual development; Language development; Cognitive development; Psychosocial development.

Reflexes: New borns exhibit many reflexes which can be elicited in a number of ways. Neonates are born with abilities to perceive and respond to some parts of their world in an organised and effective way. Reflexes that are in place at birth permit the neonate to grope or root for the breast, to suck when an object is placed in his mouth, and to swallow milk and other liquids. These reflexes are essential to feeding.

Motor reflex, tonic neck reflex, grasp reflex, plantar grasp and Babinski's reflexes provide an accurate information of the maturity and intactness of the developing nervous system and reflect the following developmental progress and determine behaviour.

Motor Development: Neuromuscular growth and development: by the age of 2 months, the infant's capacities and behaviour begin to show significant changes. Infants can lift their heads before they can sit up and can sit up steadily before they can stand. Most babies first learn to move from place to place by crawling, lying on their stomachs and pulling themselves ahead with their arms.

Creeping on hands and knees involves coordination of arms and legs. Such mobility increases the world the infant can explore, giving the child new experiences.

Sensory and Perceptual Development: All the senses function at birth. Newborns see, hear, smell, taste and respond to pressure, motion, temperature and pain. Perception is also present at birth and is selective. Their perceived world is simple and not confusing.

Language Development: It begins to develop at birth, as babies communicate with noises and gestures and practise babling. Infants understand and say a few words towards the end of the first year.

Cognitive Development: Piaget (1970) developed the detailed theory of Cognitive Development and called it the Sensorimotor stage. The infant's ways of knowing the world are sensory, perceptual and motor and Piaget called each specific way of knowing a 'Scheme' – an action sequence guided by thought.

Psychosocial Development: Theories of infants' emotions: Freud called it 'oral stage' because he thought the mouth is the infant's most important source of sensual gratification. According to him, it is the main source of pleasure – sucking especially at mother's breast is a joyous sensual activity for babies. Freud believed that infants who are frustrated in their urge to suck might become frustrated adults still trying to get oral satisfaction by excessively eating, drinking, chewing, biting, smoking or talking. He also theorises that oral people tend to be generous, disorganised and habitually late, that is, they act 'babyish' so that someone will mother them.

Erikson's Theory: 'Trust *vs.* Mistrust': Erikson emphasises the significance of the mother-child relationship in the achievement of the developmental task of the oral stage. Erikson theorises that if the infant's great need for love and attention is met consistently and unconditionally by a loving mother he will learn to trust her. If the infant's experiences with his mother are characterised by inconsistencies and anxiety he will learn to mistrust her. If basic trust is strong, the child develops a sense of hope, optimism and confidence. An affectionate loving mother who gives consistent high quality care provides the basis for the development of trust.

Bowlby and Spitz: 'Maternal Depriviation': Bowlby and Spitz concluded that any break in the early mother-child relationship causes severe emotional, intellectual and social consequences (Bowlby, 1952). Those who lost the care are depressed, physically

The author is Lecturer, College of Nursing, CMC, Ludhiana

and mentally retarded or delinquent. Their state is the result of maternal deprivation.

Bowlby (1973) believes that a mother can be physically present but emotionally absent with tragic results. Spitz (1965) also concluded that babies suffer maternal deprivation if their mother is emotionally disturbed. In this case the mother's personality acts as a disease provoking agent, as a psychological toxin, poisoning the development of the child. He blamed poor mother-child relationship as being responsible for psychogenic disorders of infancy.

Dennis: 'Stimulus Deprivation': Dennis described that the children who had no opportunity to see, hear or interact and had restricted learning opportunities with anyone or anything, were slow in developing basic motor skills. These children were also severely retarded in talking and in other cognitive and social skills.

Adjustment Problems

Infant Feeding Problems: These are expressed as digestive discomfort as colic, vomiting, constipation and diarrhoea. The child may be distressed, irritable, prone to cry and show 'difficult child syndrome'. Responding calmly, parents can lower the risk of later behavioural problems.

Reactive Attachment Disorder of Infancy: 'Failure to Thrive' syndrome is a lack of emotional and physical development of growth in the infant over the period of time. When the child is neglected, abused or poorly stimulated, he shows apathy, lack of normal social interest and stunted growth despite adequate nutrition.

Thumb Sucking: According to Psychoanalytic Theory an infant takes to thumb sucking if he lacks sufficient oral gratification. It is taken as maladjustment in the child. If the child does not develop a positive sense of self and trust in others, he is likely to develop problems in later life such as mistrust, depression, superficial relationships and dependence.

Delayed Speech: This indicates less interaction and reinforcement by the mother or mother figure.

Rumination Disorder: It is common among infants between 3 months and one year of age. It means to 'chew the cud'. When there is an insufficient emotional gratification and stimulation for the infant, the child regurgitates and seeks pleasure by 'chewing the cud'. He will suffer with loss of weight and may die also in process of regurgitation.

Pica: There may be a persistent ingestion of non-nutritive substances in the child, to compensate the unmet oral demands

Other Behavioural Disorders: Such disorders like schizophrenia are due to the disturbance in ego organisation. By a disturbed mother-child relationship the child is unable to achieve a mature ego and develops behavioural problems in later life. Sense of 'good me' and 'bad me' is derived from the experiences of good and bad mother in the oral state.

Mother-Child Relationships are significant factors in the development of gastrointestitinal (GI) disorders. Incongruency in mother-child relationship may interrupt the hunger-crying-feeding-satiation-sleep sequence of infancy and may give rise to psychic tension. People with GI illnesses exhibit oral character traits and conflict around dependence/independence. Some present as dependent, passive people while others deny their needs and appear highly independent, self-reliant, aggressive and overactive.

Promotion of Mental Health Disorders

The Nurses can play a vital role in educating the parents and family members regarding the care of the children on the following aspects:

- Ensure adequate preparation for parenthood and their expected role.
- Family and genetic counselling will help reduce incidence of mental retardation and mental disorders
- Early and ongoing assessment and care of an expectant mother and her developing foetus.
- Care during intranatal and postnatal periods are an important aspect in prevention of physical and mental handicaps in infants and children.
- Rooming in provides close contact between mother and infant and it contributes to development of strong mother-child relationship.
- Breast feeding strengthens the bond between mother and baby by bringing them into frequent close physical contact and the child feels more secure.
- Love and security is communicated through words and actions. Sense of self-esteem develops from unconditional love, thus it increases attachment behaviour and prevents feelings of insecurity.
- Play and stimulation promotes neuromuscular control, intellectual development and the child gains a sense of mastery. Human interactions with infants in the use of toys is essential for psychosocial development.
- Precention of infections (meningitis, encephalitis, etc.) and accidents should be taught, Anticipatory guidance and health education are of prime importance in preventing mental retardation and handicaps at any age.
- Health supervision, immunization and thorough ongoing assessment of the child physically, developmentally and behaviourally is required.
- Adequate nutrition is a most important aspects of brain growth. Babies who suffer malnutrition, but survive, develop stunting of brain growth

since the period of fastest growth of brain is from about 5 months before and 10 months after birth. Children of malnourished mothers also show serious deficits.

- Helping the parents understand physical growth and emotional development.
- Assisting the parents with problem behaviour will prevent mental disorders and promote mental health.
- Spacing of children and adopting family planning will enable the family to have more interactions and meet the necessities.

Bowlby concluded that it is "essential for mental health" that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, continuous relationship with his or her mother (or mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment.

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