Loving Baby: From Preconception & Beyond  
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Reflection
- Contemplation
- Self-awareness
Theoretical Foundations
- Pregnancy & early parenthood
- Infant/very young child & family-centered practice
- Relationship-focused, therapeutic practice

“There is a tribe in Africa where the birth date of a child is counted not from when they’ve been born, nor from when they are conceived but from the day that the child was a thought in its mother’s mind.

And when a woman decides that she will have a child, she goes off and sits under a tree, by herself, and she listens until she can hear the song of the child that wants to come. And after she’s heard the song of this child, she comes back to the man who will be the child’s father, and teaches it to him. And then, when they make love to physically conceive the child, some of that time they sing the song of the child, as a way to invite it.

And then, when the mother is pregnant, the mother teaches that child’s song to the midwives and the old women of the village, so that when the child is born, the old women and the people around her sing the child’s song to welcome it. And then, as the child grows up, the other villagers are taught the child’s song. If the child falls, or hurts its knee, someone picks it up and sings its song to it. Or perhaps the child does something wonderful, or goes through the rites of puberty, then as a way of honoring this person, the people of the village sing his or her song.
And it goes this way through their life. In marriage, the songs are sung, together. And finally, when this child is lying in bed, ready to die, all the villagers know his or her song, and they sing—for the last time—the song to that person.”          Sobonfu Somé
What images come to mind after reading this passage? You may wonder what it was like in your family. If you are a parent, you might also be remembering what it was like with your baby.

Selestte Sanchez MSW, LMSW has spoken of what home visiting is all about and the importance of “loving baby.” When does a baby first come into a parent’s awareness? At birth? During pregnancy or during preconception like the beginning passage entails? And once baby is within their awareness, what are families doing to make their babies feel special? Additionally, when we work with families, how are we talking to them about their babies? We know that in home visiting, one of the five Long-term Outcomes in the Home Visiting Logic Model is “children are nurtured by their parents and caregivers.” How are we supporting parents to make this happen during pregnancy and beyond?

How can we use the screening tools to support parents in nurturing their babies? For example, the Peri-natal Questionnaire allows the perfect opportunity to talk with the mom about her pregnancy, labor/birth experience and well as those early days after the baby is born. Remember to include the dad in these discussions, if possible, as his experiences are just as valuable. When we are discussing Reflections on Parenting, be listening for or ask the parent what joys s/he has experienced as a result of becoming a parent, whether the baby has arrived yet or not. Likewise, the PICCOLO allows us to notice and point out to parents those times when they express affection towards their children. We could wonder aloud if they are aware of this and the impact it has on their child.

What about those families where you notice the parent-child relationship seems strained? Maybe the pregnancy was unplanned. Maybe the parents had a negative, even abusive experience with their own parents. Maybe their main focus is figuring out how to put food on the table as they have been unemployed for a while now. We need to meet families where they are at. In the same token, how can we have those conversations about these issues so parents are mindful of how it impacts their children, while maintaining a strengths-based approach?

When looking at the prenatal period, viewpoints vary greatly on what babies in-utero or prenates are capable of. Some interesting facts about prenates include:

- Just before 8 weeks gestational age (g.a.), signs of sensitivity to touch is evident
- Many studies show that voices reach the womb, in particular a mother’s voice because it is transmitted to the womb through her body. Reactive listening occurs as early as 16 weeks g.a., even more significant because the ear is not completely formed until about 24 weeks g.a.
- At 14 weeks g.a., tasting begins. Babies show preferences for sweet tastes by an increase in swallowing, with the decrease in swallowing for bitter and sour tastes
- Although eyelids remain fused close until the 26th week, fetuses with their eyelids still fused are able to detect the location of needles entering the womb
(i.e., amniocentesis) and respond by either shrinking away or attacking the needle barrel with a fist

- Research shows babies dream as early as 23 weeks g.a. as evidenced by observing rapid eye movement sleep (Chamberlain n.d.).

In thinking about this amazing phenomena, what are some ways that parents could start bonding with their babies during pregnancy? Some suggestions from the Theraplay® Institute include: 1) Talking and playing with your baby; 2) Telling your baby the story beginning “when you were brand new;” 3) Singing to your baby; 4) Telling your baby about the happiest times you’ve had together; 5) Telling your baby about his/her father or about his/her mother (from a positive perspective); & 6) Telling your baby about the people she/he will meet (Jernberg & Booth 1999). How would these activities differ, if at all, once baby arrives?

In summary, when we think about nurturing children, we need to remember that relationships with young children begin early. When we contemplate how we are supporting families with this process, our ultimate goal will be to “raise children who are healthy, happy and successful (New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department, May 2015).”

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- How do we have those conversations with families at preconception, during pregnancy and early childhood?
- What curriculum(s), screening tools and resources are we using that support these conversations?
- When thinking about father engagement, in what ways are we encouraging fathers to be a part of this bonding process with their babies?
- How can you balance your experiences growing up and/or as a parent with supporting families in their unique experiences?
- For supervisors, how can you support your home visitors around any triggers that may emerge around their own childhood experiences?
- Finally, how can we be mindful of our notions of how a mother or father “should be” & support families in terms of what they value.

References/Additional Resources


New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department (May 2015). New Mexico Home Visiting Program Standards.