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# Understanding Babies and the Changing World

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## Understanding Babies and the Changing World

by Glen Palm

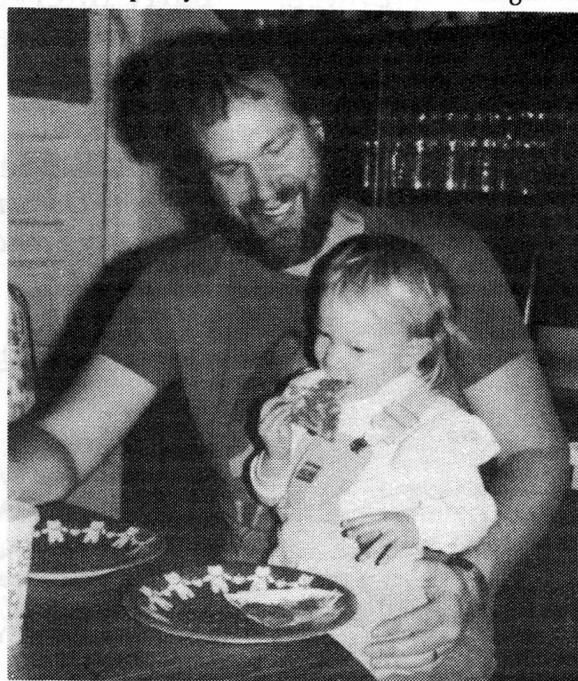
This issue of *Views* focuses on infancy and our growing understanding of the amazing capabilities of infants. Researchers over the last 30 years have created a new image of the competent infant who perceives and interacts with the world in a purposeful manner. This new knowledge of infants demands that we interact with infants in a more sensitive and thoughtful manner. The article by Nelson alerts us to the sophisticated capabilities of the young infant. Sroufe stresses the importance of the parent-child attachment pattern that emerges during the first year of life.

A second theme that can be gleaned from the articles is a new appreciation of the role of parents in infant development. To help infants grow and develop in a healthy way, we must understand and support the needs of parents and families. Blaska explores this idea with families of infants with disabilities. In her model, professionals must move beyond the individual child to the larger focus of the family. Pearson describes a parent education program that focuses on the infant's capabilities at birth. Helping parents to understand infant capabilities and communication is critical to establishing a secure attachment. Parent education is an important vehicle for promoting understanding and skills in new parents.

An interesting omission in many of the articles is the role of the father in infant development. Changing family lifestyles have placed fathers into a more active caregiver role in many families. While research has explored fathers' influences, the design of our programs has not kept pace with these new realities. To support father involvement at this important stage we must explore and develop parent education initiatives for fathers.

A third theme is the rapidly changing social environment beyond the family and the impact of these changes on the quality of infants' lives. The most obvious change is the increasing care of infants by non-parental figures. The growth of the child care industry (national and local chains as well as cottage industry home day care) has been phenomenal. As a child care worker in the 1970s, and a teacher educator in the 1980s, I have seen tremendous growth and sophistication in our day care programs for infants and toddlers. As a parent, I have struggled with finding good quality care for infants. As an advocate, I am concerned about the quality of care and the mixed messages from research. Do we know what is best for babies? Can parents make the best choice for their individual children? This latter question assumes that good choices exist for parents. Information and referral services for parents have improved. The challenge to create quality care for infants and real choices for parents may be the most difficult one we face in the 1990s. Changes in medical technology improve the survival rate of infants but will continue to raise ethical questions and challenge our education, health and social service systems to provide services for infants with disabilities and their families.

Increased understanding and respect for infants and their families have improved services, but changing family lifestyles, economics and technology will continue to raise new issues about the best ways to raise and care for our babies.



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The Editors