

#PERSPECTIVE

Can you spoil a baby?

Daunting as it is, there is no denying that our babies depend on us for everything. This means that we need to be available to them whenever they need us. However, does this inherently natural act of reaching out to our children mean we are spoiling them? Or is there a better argument out there?

Plenty of new and old parenting guides will tell you that you can spoil babies by holding them too much. Or rocking them to sleep. Or co-sleeping. Or cuddling and kissing. Fortunately for babies and for parents who are constantly pressured to fight against their natural instinct and hold off on responding to their children's cries, science says you CANNOT spoil babies.

Child development experts overwhelmingly agree that babies are wired to crave parental touch and attention. It is crucial for them because the world is still unfamiliar territory and they expect known sounds such as those of their parents, or a familiar touch such as that of a father or mother, to make them feel safe and connected. Giving in to their demands, therefore, cannot spoil them. It can, at best, meet their needs and lend them an air of security.

Babies are non-verbal for a good few months after they are born. During this time, if they are hungry, tired, overstimulated or uncomfortable, they only really have one option available to them, and that is to cry. Contrary to everything that has been said about training babies to become self-dependent, child development experts are leaning towards the act of giving in to their pleas, rather than forcing them to self-soothe.

According to them, a baby is no more capable of self-settling than they



are of riding a bike. While it is true that leaving the baby to cry it out can condition it to stop crying and go without parental input after a certain time, this does not always mean that the child is settled, soothed, or calmed.

In fact, doctors say that self-soothing is a developmental stage. This means that babies learn to soothe themselves when they are ready for it. When that happens, the act will not need to be taught; it can be as natural as learning to walk, eating solids, and sleeping for longer stretches at night.

The same argument can be applied to the myth of manipulation. Babies have needs and they trust parents to help them when something is wrong. At other times, they only want a snuggle. It is as instinctual for them to crave their parents as it is for parents to crave their children. This is

not manipulation. In fact, according to Dr Barbara Howard from the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, their brains have simply not evolved to the point where they know the complex art of exploitation. Babies cry out for familiarity, security, and affection.

Science tells us something wonderful about responding to children with love. A baby's limbic system (containing their hippocampus and amygdala) develops between years 0 and 3. Research has proven that children that have nurturing, responsive parents show a higher level of hippocampal volume, which is directly related to behavioural regulation and emotional processing.

Therefore, a child that receives love and attention from parents in their formative years thrives cognitively, emotionally and physically, and is more likely to display empathetic and prosocial behaviour later on in their lives. So, the next time your little bundle of joy cries out for you, go to them, hold them, snuggle them. Their futures will be better for it.

By Munira Fidai
Photo: LS

PARENTHOOD TIPS

The psychology of sharing a bed with your children

Bedsharing has got to be one of the most debated topics in modern parenthood. While safety experts continuously warn against it, more and more child development research suggest that the practice is beneficial for children, both biologically and psychologically.

From suffocation to overheating, attachment issues and even spoilt children, sharing a bed with kids has been blamed for almost everything under the sun. Here's the thing, while it is always better to err on the side of caution when it comes to child safety, there is another, perhaps more forgiving way to look at the concept of bedsharing; one rooted in caution, as well as in core human instinct.

Over time, people have been conditioned to please others, chase top grades, and relentlessly look for their "dream careers." They have read too much into the productivity myth — hustling 24/7, and stretching themselves as thin as possible without breaking under pressure. The higher the burnout, the stronger they feel. Along the way, people find themselves losing their abilities to unwind, live in the moment, and cherish their closest relationships.

This seemingly impersonal approach to



life, of course, goes for a toss once there is a baby in the picture. One of the most natural, yet transformational changes that parents go through is when a baby starts to rely on them for its very survival and stakes claim on all of their time and space, right from the word go. Babies need to be picked up, fed, cleaned, and rocked to sleep multiple times a day and as non-verbal beings, are designed to respond only to parental touch, sound, taste and smell, as opposed to external stimuli, at least for the first few months of their lives.

Suddenly, formerly busy executives and creative heads have to slow down and pay attention to what's important, especially if it's being communicated in howls and whimpers. In an era that promises a picture-perfect parenthood, with babies sleeping through the night, monitors keeping guardians aware of their every move as they work, and parental guide books that offer a world of control, these headstrong, temperamental bundles of joy make the caregivers realise that parenting was never meant to be as detached or

scripted as all that.

Babies need proximity to their fathers and mothers, not gadgets. And it takes a good minute for the hard-wired, techno savvy brains of today, to wrap their heads around that.

The Japanese believe that shared sleep not just benefits children, but also parents. It generates a deeper bond between the two, and regulates sleep patterns and heart rates. Contrary to popular opinion, co-sleeping does not spoil children. Rather, it encourages feelings of safety in them, provides parents with space and time that is solely reserved for their children, and is largely, an enjoyable part of the day for both parties.

Apart from the apparent physiological benefits of co-sleeping, the practice also forces parents to slow down, and enjoy moments which they would miss on a baby monitor or while at work. It helps them find joy in the mundane and the ordinary, reconditioning them to pay attention to the more important things in life, especially those that lie outside their daily grind.

By Munira Fidai
Photo: LS