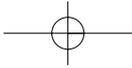


# **Self-Esteem and Early Learning**

**Key people from birth to school**





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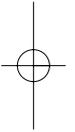
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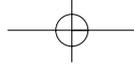
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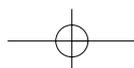
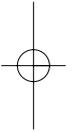


# Self-Esteem and Early Learning

Key people from birth to school

Third edition

**Rosemary Roberts**





*For my expanding family, with love*

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First published 2002  
Reprinted 2003  
This edition published 2006

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Paul Chapman Publishing  
A SAGE Publications Company  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave  
Post Box 4109  
New Delhi 110 017

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

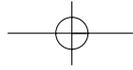
ISBN-10 1-4129-2280-1      ISBN-13 978-1-4129-2280-7  
ISBN-10 1-4129-2281-X      ISBN-13 978-1-4129-2281-4 (pbk)

**Library of Congress Control Number: 00 00000**

Typeset by Dorwyn, Wells, Somerset  
Printed and bound by xxxxxxxx  
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

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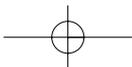
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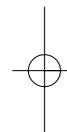
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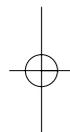
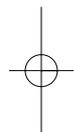
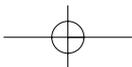


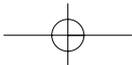
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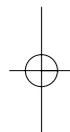
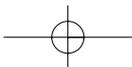
## Preface

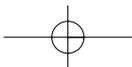
Rosemary Roberts is an experienced practitioner, well known among policy makers in the early years field. She has been honoured with an OBE for her work. In the updated third edition of this book, she has added to the 'self-esteem and early learning' of the title, 'key people from birth to school'; thus acknowledging the perspectives of children and adults together throughout the book which form the basis of the key person approach.

Rosemary has framed the book as a story about a family situation, weaving into the story the issues that families will meet. The story shows how each family is different, but also that each family shares with others some aspects of living with young children. The reader meets a variety of situations with the family, and explores these through the character of the teenage girl who lives with them. The author stresses the importance of children being unconditionally accepted, and being allowed to have bad feelings as well as good. She shows how adults can give children the support they need, while setting limits in ways which help children to develop and learn in their widening social network.

This third edition, with its chronological narrative and accompanying commentary, offers the reader those very perspectives and understandings that facilitate warm, appropriate key person relationships both at home and in day-care. It will be a particularly useful resource for all those training to work with babies and young children from birth to school.

*Tina Bruce, series editor*  
*June 2006*





## Acknowledgements

First, I want to thank the two families who welcomed me into their homes week after week for two years; especially 'Lily' and 'Joe' and their mothers. For all the insights and pleasure they gave me, I owe them more than I can say.

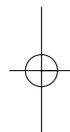
I am particularly grateful to Chris Athey, Daphne Briggs and John Howson for all their comments and help, so willingly given; and also for this third edition to Pamela May.

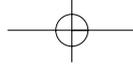
Above all, my thanks are due to Tina Bruce, whose suggestion it was that I should write this book. Her consistent encouragement, confidence and assistance enabled me to complete it.

Thank you to all the children, families and colleagues with whom I have worked and from whom I have learned so much: in various places, particularly at Elms Road and at PEEP.

Finally a special thank you to my own family and friends; for their interest and support and for all that they have taught me.

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## Preface for the 0–8 series

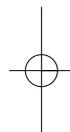
The 0–8 series has stood the test of time, maintaining a central place among early childhood texts. Practitioners have appreciated the books because, while very practical, the series presents a holistic approach to work with young children, which values close partnership with families and their communities. It is evidence based, drawing on theory and research in an accessible way.

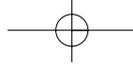
The 0–8 series continues to deal with the themes of early childhood which have always been of concern and interest to parents, practitioners and the children themselves. Each author has made an important contribution in their field of expertise, using this within a sound background of child development and practical experience with children, families, communities, schools and other early childhood settings. The Series consistently gives a central place to the interests and needs of children, emphasising the relationship between child development and the socio-cultural learning with which biological and brain development is inextricably linked.

The basic processes of communication, movement, play, self-esteem and understanding of self and others, as well as the symbolic layerings in development (leading to dances, reading, writing, mathematical and musical notations, drawing, model-making) never cease to fascinate those who love and spend time with children. Some of the books in this series focus on these processes of development and learning, by looking at children and their contexts in a general way, giving examples as they go. Other books take a look at particular aspects of individual children and the community. Some emphasise the importance of rich physical and cultural provision and careful consideration of the environment indoors and outdoors and the way that adults work with children.

I look forward to seeing the impact of the 0–8 series on the next decade.

*Professor Tina Bruce  
Roehampton University  
June 2006*





## Introduction

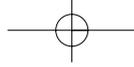
Parents, and other people who live and work with children, often say they mind about three things. First, that children are happy; second, that they are learning successfully; and third, that they are growing up into caring and responsible adults. This book is about these three things: children's feelings, their learning, and their place in society. It offers the reader a picture of attachment as the basis of mental health.

Running like a thread from chapter to chapter is the subject of children's self-concept and the development of their self-esteem. This is seen in this book to be at the heart of how children feel, how they learn and how they relate to other people.

Although the surroundings in which most children grow up have changed greatly in the course of the last century, diversity and bi-lingualism are increasingly the norm, and ideas of what to do with babies and children keep on changing too, nonetheless the range of young children's feelings remains the same. We cannot remember many of our own feelings in early childhood; but for all of us, our parents and our children, the emotional map was, and still is, the same. This is why it is appropriate to retain many references from the last century – those thinkers and writers much of whose work forms the foundations of our current thinking.

This book proposes the importance of some of the features of that emotional map in relation to our changing world and what we now know about how children learn. The book is written for the important people – parents, teachers, staff in early childhood care and education settings and integrated Children's Centres – who have, or will have, responsibility for children and who therefore, like it or not, have power and influence over them. The themes are common to all families and cultures.

The book's purpose is to use the realisation that 'we've all been there' to manage more successfully and happily the challenge of living with children and their feelings, at home or at work. It suggests that we look for a sense of balance in a range of complicated situations: for instance, understanding the child's point of view as well as our own; accepting the normality of bad feelings as well as good ones; finding ways of accepting feelings at the same time as setting limits for behaviour. Often we need to remember the other side of the coin, rather than being 'admirably single-minded'. Perhaps, as we strive for integration in early childhood, we need a new virtue for our time: multi-mindedness.



## How this book is organised

The book falls into six parts, covering the period from birth to school. The first chapter in each part is mainly about the *child's* point of view. The second chapter in each part focuses more on what it feels like to be the *adult* and on ways in which adults can make the most of opportunities to support the children with whom we live and work. The chapters consist of story episodes, key statements, and explanatory text. At the end of each part there are questions to think about, and also recommended reading – ‘good reads’ both for adults and for sharing with babies and young children.

## About the story sections

The chapters consist of story and comment. The story sections, always in italics, are based on the author's observations of children and their families from various cultural backgrounds, at home and at school; although none of the characters directly represents any particular individual.

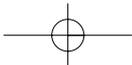
The story is told by Joanne, whose identity is explained in the Prologue (on the next page). Joanne is a young girl living with the family of the story, who narrates a series of reflective observations throughout the book and ends by deciding to go to College to study young children.

## About the key statements and postscripts

Each of the six parts contains three key statements. In the first chapter of each part these are considered from the child's point of view, and in the second from an adult perspective. These key statements are collected together in the Postscript at the end of each part, together with questions intended to generate further thinking and discussion.

## About the ‘good reads’

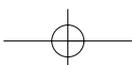
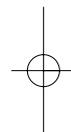
There are also suggestions for further reading: one ‘good read’ per section for practitioners, and two very special picture books for sharing with babies and young children. These picture books are intended for one-to-one sharing, where adult and child can cuddle up and share the jokes, the stories and the pictures together.

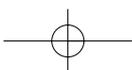
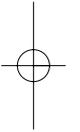
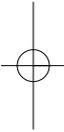
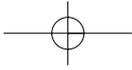


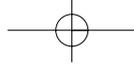
## Prologue

“My name is Joanne, I live with Mum and the kids, and their dad. Mum isn’t my real mum, although I wouldn’t mind if she was. The kids’ dad isn’t my dad either; he knew my real mum when I was a baby and she was very ill. My dad’s not around now.

I came to live with them three years ago, when I was fifteen. Joe was just born then and Lily was two.”

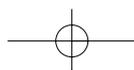
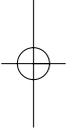


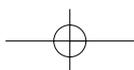
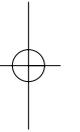




# **PART 1**

## **BABIES FIRST**





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# 1

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## Children learning to be lovable

### – INTRODUCING JOE –

*‘What do you want?’ Mum often mutters this to herself while she watches one of them with that friendly puzzled look. I like hearing her say that, I think it makes them feel safe. All the time I’ve been living with Mum and their dad, she’s been watching them; not in an interfering way but because she loves them and wants to know about them. That’s why they feel so safe. Sometimes I think she watches me a bit too. I hope so. ʘ*

*Once Joe and Lily (she’s his sister) were sitting in the big bath upstairs having a great time playing. I love the way Joe looks in the bath. His curls go even tighter; and his skin is lovely and dark like his dad’s. Mum was holding the towel and looking at his hair – it always looks like it’s a bird’s nest at the back these days.*

*‘Joe, what shall we do with your hair?’ He stopped playing and looked back at her.*

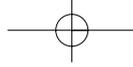
*‘What shall we do?’ she asked again. He filled the little pot he had in his hand with water and lifted it towards his head as if he was going to pour it over his hair.*

*‘Oh no, don’t get it all wet as well!’ Mum said hastily. Joe watched her anxiously holding the back of his head with his other hand.*

*‘Mum?’ he said, doubtfully. ‘Mum?’*

*‘We’d better wash your face,’ she said. Joe screwed it up to be ready for the horrible moment, knowing it would make her laugh. When she laughs, he knows she loves him.*

*The kids’ dad was really upset last week. I heard him telling one of his friends how awful it is when your baby doesn’t want you. I know Joe does love his dad, and they play lots of games, but Joe had been really miserable. Mum and their dad sometimes call him ‘Double Trouble’, and that day he was. The others were fed up too; Lily said she wouldn’t be so naughty. (Wouldn’t she just?) Mum said she’s never caught up on sleep since he was born, but he always used to be so good in the daytime that she managed the nights somehow. Mum said she can’t keep feeding him all night, but that’s what he wants, and now he’s being furious and miserable all the time. I saw him really hurt himself the other day when he wanted another biscuit, and Mum said, ‘No’. He was in such a rage that he banged his head on the washing machine by mistake and cried and cried.*



*Today was better; though. Mum and Joe and I were in the kitchen, and Mum was telling me about her friend who is having a new baby. I think Joe thought Mum was smiling at him, and he gave her a great big grin. When she noticed, she stopped talking and grinned back at him. The kitchen was really quiet, and Joe crawled over to where she was standing by the sink. He bent right over and rested his forehead on her feet and he looked so loving and helpless. After that, he looked up at her; and he was still grinning! So Mum picked him up and gave him a big hug. 9*

## **Babies and young children need to be accepted by their important people**

### **Mothers and other important people**

Who are babies' and young children's 'important people'? Of course, parents are important, and also – if there are any – are brothers and sisters; then there are other members of the family, friends, key people in day-care, teachers . . . and so the circle gradually widens. But let's start at the beginning – the very beginning. For nine months, the baby has been completely surrounded by the mother, and, although we are only beginning to find out about the baby's life in the womb, there can be no doubt that, when a baby is born, the baby and the mother have already learned things about each other through their bodies that no one else can possibly know. This makes the mother the first 'important person' (Winnicott, 1964, pp. 19–24).

The first important person usually, although by no means always, continues to be the mother. But what about fathers? And what about other key people? Many fathers would say that their baby knew them right from the start. We cannot be sure of the reasons for this, although it is certainly often the case (Brazelton, 1992, p. 35). Whether the answer is to be found in nature or nurture or a combination of both, one thing is clear: a baby must come to know someone before he or she is able to see that person as 'important'. As the mother is the first important person, she acts as the mediator for the baby's subsequent important people, who are, initially, substitutes for her, and who may sooner or later come to be just as important. This often happens with fathers who share much of the childcare and take over the role of the mother in many ways.

### **Early brain development: some tentative messages**

Awareness of the importance of development in the earliest years of life has risen dramatically over the period 1975–2005, especially in relation to brain development. Various factors have fed this awareness of the importance of the earliest years. In her Fulbright Lecture (2000) entitled 'The Brain Debate', Dr Anne Meade wrote:

*There is a convergence of findings from neuroscience, cognitive science, development psychology and early childhood education research. Generally, there is agreement that enriched environments such as are found in high quality early childhood settings facilitate the adaptive changes to children's brains. The enrichment of social relationships – of adult-child interactions – is especially important, remembering of course that the brain is malleable and the changes in response to relationship experience can be both positive and negative for the child.*

Meade suggested that brain research does validate and explain many observational/clinical findings, and that imaging research is showing where, when and what is unusual in brain functioning in people with learning and behavioural disorders. While emphasising that behavioural neuroscience is still in its infancy, she draws some tentative conclusions from research about appropriate early experiences for brain development which include the following:

- The quality of interpersonal relationships, i.e. adult-child interactions, is very important. An adult tuning into and responding to the child's mental state allows his or her brain to develop a capacity to balance emotions and thinking skills.
- Experiences for young children need to address their need for stimulation of all the senses and the associated brain regions. Multi-modal activity – involving the senses, motor skills and thinking – is important.
- Play addresses the brain's need for multi-sensory, multi-modal experiences. Animal studies suggest that the play needs to include social, complex and challenging experiences.
- Provision for the development of implicit memories is likely to be more fruitful than direct instruction, as the brain circuits for explicit memories do not mature until the age of 3 or 4 years. Implicit memories are built by diverse exposures to an array of inputs in naturalistic settings.

The authors of *How Babies Think* (Gopnik *et al.*, 1999), in a compelling opening paragraph, describe a newborn baby through the lens of our new perspective:

*Walk upstairs, open the door gently, and look in the crib. What do you see? Most of us see a picture of innocence and helplessness, a clean slate. But, in fact, what we see in the crib is the greatest mind that has ever existed, the most powerful learning machine in the universe. The tiny fingers and mouth are exploration devices that probe the alien world around them with more precision than any Mars rover. The crumpled ears take a buzz of incomprehensible noise and flawlessly turn it into meaningful language. The wide eyes that sometimes seem to peer into your very soul actually do just that, deciphering your deepest feelings. The downy head surrounds a brain that is forming millions of new connections every day. That, at least, is what thirty years of scientific research have told us. (p. 1)*

Certainly our perception of how children develop has shifted in important ways. Shore (1997, p. 18) offers a fascinating glimpse into how our understanding of young children's development has changed.

<b>OLD THINKING</b>	<b>NEW THINKING</b>
How a brain develops depends on the <b>genes</b> you are born with	How a brain develops depends on the complex <b>interplay</b> between the <b>genes</b> you are born with and the <b>experiences</b> you have
The <b>experiences</b> you have before age three have a <b>limited impact</b> on later development	Early <b>experiences</b> have a <b>decisive impact</b> on the architecture of the brain, and on the nature and extent of adult capacities
A <b>secure relationship</b> with a primary caregiver creates a favourable <b>context</b> for early development and learning	<b>Early interactions</b> don't just create a context; they <b>directly affect</b> the way the <b>brain is 'wired'</b>
Brain development is <b>linear</b> : the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses towards childhood	Brain development is <b>non-linear</b> : there are prime times for developing different kinds of knowledge and skills
A toddler's brain is much <b>less active</b> than the brain of a college student.	By the time children reach age three, their brains are <b>twice as active</b> as those of adults. Activity drops during adolescence.

What does all this mean, and is there a straightforward message for parents and practitioners? One researcher says that there is such a message, both for parents and practitioners:

*The bottom line message from research on the early years is that quality matters. This leads to a clear policy conclusion: policies should aim to support parents in providing good-quality care themselves, and in arranging good-quality child care.* (Waldfogel, 2004, p. 25)

And drawing on a range of studies and reviews (Blau, 2001; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Smolensky and Gootman, 2003; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000) Waldfogel says:

*For young children, what defines quality is that the care they receive – whether from a parent or a non-parental caregiver – is sensitive and responsive to their individual needs.* (p. 6)

These findings – focusing on the importance of close relationships in the earliest years – are clearly reflected in very many excellent summaries of recent brain

research, together with strong acknowledgements of their implications for parents and practitioners. The first four principles underpinning the UK's 'Birth to Three Matters' framework (Sure Start, 2002, p. 3) also emphasise the importance of young children's relationships:

- *Parents and families are central to the well-being of the child.*
- *Relationships with other people (both adults and children) are of crucial importance in a child's life.*
- *A relationship with a key person at home and in the setting is essential to young children's well-being.*
- *Babies and young children are social beings, they are competent learners from birth.*

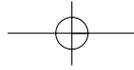
Focusing further, it is the third principle, 'A relationship with a key person at home and in the setting is essential to young children's well-being', which has particular practical relevance for parents and carers of the youngest children – those key people who make such a difference.

In *The Learning Brain: Lessons for Education* (2005) Sarah-Jayne Blakemore and Uta Frith look at what is known now about the developing brain, and examine implications for the wider sweep of education policy and practice. This book takes in a range of issues (for instance the resilience of the brain beyond the age of three, numeracy and literacy, the brain in adolescence, learning and remembering) that are relevant both to primary and to secondary schools. In contrast to the view that birth to three is the most influential period of the developing brain, this book emphasises the brain's plasticity; and in relation both to the environment in the first three years and to nutrition, the authors point out that 'in both cases . . . too little is damaging, but we know very little about the effects of too much' (p. 186). In summary they argue that 'learning is not limited to childhood . . . learning can be lifelong'.

However, a robust review of the research and its implications from the US (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000) has been enormously influential in its conclusion that 'what happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot . . . early pathways, though far from indelible, establish either a sturdy or fragile stage on which subsequent development is constructed'. (p.384)

Nurturing relationships is clearly the stuff of home life in a baby's first year (see the anecdote about Joe and his mum in 'Introducing Joe'); but what if Mum is at work and Joe is in day-care? This question has generated much of the emphasis that is now placed on the importance of the 'key person approach' in day-care, described by Elfer *et al.* (2003, p. 19) in *Key Persons in the Nursery* as 'an emotional relationship as well as an organisational strategy'. Edwards (2002) in *Relationships and Learning* offers a framework to support caring for children which also focuses on relationships.

Finally Sue Gerhardt, writing incisively about the implications of the research on early brain development, emphasises the importance of parents. Here she flags up the need for a sea change:



*To provide more children with the optimal start for being emotionally equipped to deal with life, we need to invest in early parenting. This investment will be costly. To bring about conditions where every baby has the kind of responsive care that he or she needs to develop well means that the adults who do this work must be valued and supported in their task. This in itself would involve a sea change in our cultural attitudes. (Gerhardt, 2004, p. 217)*

Now that we know more about children's brain development from birth to school, we still need to ask what it means. What are the implications for parents and practitioners, the 'essential key people' referred to earlier? What do we need to think about? This question is explored mainly chronologically (from birth to school) in a variety of ways, in the six sections of the book.

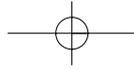
## Earliest learning

Babies can already do many important things when they are born. They can breathe, digest, protest, respond, interact and, most important of all, they can learn (Gopnik *et al.*, 1999). They are, however, completely dependent on others for food, warmth and love and they learn naturally in order to survive. In the womb, the rate of learning has been gradual, and the experiences relatively controlled; then, from the moment of birth, the rate of learning suddenly accelerates. Perhaps this accelerated learning is like a hectic toboggan ride. Starting steadily along the brow of the hill, the baby is suddenly pushed onto the steep slope and hurtles down, unable to stop or go back. Gradually adjusting to the breathtaking speed, the baby begins to make some sense of the surroundings as they flash by and starts to realise the possibilities of steering the toboggan.

In that first headlong plunge of the first year, the baby needs to feel safe, with some sense of being held and the knowledge that someone is there to steer for the time being. Within the womb, there was never, of course, any question about someone being there; but at birth, just when the landscape changes dramatically and the baby needs 'holding' most urgently, the mother becomes much less reliable. In fact, now that she is not attached, she sometimes even goes away. The baby needs food, warmth and love, and reassurance that he or she will not be abandoned (Purves and Selleck, 1999).

## Unconditional acceptance

Before birth, a baby is 'contained' – physically – by the mother; it is this containment that keeps the baby safe, so that he or she can grow. After birth, although that containment can never again be so absolute, the baby's mother and other important people continue to provide substitutes for it. It is reflected in the mother's physical care and also in the way in which she 'holds' the baby in her mind, accepting the baby's developing personality without judgement. For the baby, the mother's physical care



is also a psychological matter (Leach, 2003, pp. 142–4, and Winnicott, 1964, p. 183). Just as they are physically dependent, so babies and young children also need to have their feelings contained by their important adults until they themselves have learned how to manage them. In this way, they are doubly dependent; learning to be acceptable is important, for physical and psychological survival.

The sort of acceptance that babies and young children need from parents and other important people is acceptance that is independent of their behaviour; it is acceptance *of the child* without reservations and without judgements. Carl Rogers described it as ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers, 1961, p. 62). This is not to say that a parent or carer must suspend all judgements about the actions of the baby or child in question; it is simply that a parent or carer’s *unconditional* acceptance *of the child him or herself* is not threatened by these judgements.

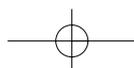
Babies learn that they are acceptable by experiencing, day by day, the results of that acceptance. Every time the father smiles at the baby, every time the mother is there when needed, the baby knows more certainly that he or she is accepted. And when the mother is not there, the baby is not so sure. Some babies take this uncertainty very calmly, while some find it intolerable. Every baby is temperamentally unique, with different responses to the whole range of emotions experienced in all cultures and places.

This kind of acceptance is important for all babies and young children and the bedrock of confidence that can develop as a result is especially crucial for those children who have a growing awareness that they are different from others. This may be because of an impairment, or because they happen to be in a minority in some way.

It is inevitable that sometimes a baby or young child will feel abandoned, and the sense of being acceptable and cared for will be threatened. Since being cared for is essential for a baby’s continued existence, the baby learns about how to avoid losing the carer (Miller, 1979, p. 22). When an ‘important person’ smiles at the baby, and when that person comes at the baby’s call, the sense that he or she is acceptable is confirmed. This is not simply a passive process; all the time the baby is learning by experience how to win the smiles, how to bring the person. Every experience is a learning experience.

### – JOE’S JOKES –

☞ *Joe made us laugh the other day. I love it that he’s so fun to play with; anything we do, he does it too – well, almost anything. Lily was sitting on the sofa watching the telly and trying to balance him on her lap. Her lap’s not quite big enough, and he was a bit wobbly but he was all right really. Anyway when Mum came near, he made this ‘I’m not really safe’ whimpering sort of noise and put on a pathetic face. When Mum saw it, she couldn’t help laughing, and nor could I. When he saw us thinking he was funny he knew it was a joke and laughed as well. It’s like when he sees you smiling at him, he always smiles back.*



*The way Joe thinks he's a clown and makes us laugh makes me wonder about that time when he just wouldn't eat. He was born in September; and this was round about February or March. Mum kept saying it was time to start that mushy stuff babies have, but she didn't really want to, it was everyone else saying it really. He was quite happy just with her feeding him, too. Anyway one day she decided she'd better give it a go, so she mixed some up, and he opened his mouth, and in it went. Once was enough, though! He looked so disgusted and astonished that Mum laughed but that was one time he didn't laugh too. He screwed up his face and shut his mouth really tight, and if Mum managed to get any between his gums he spat it straight out again. One time when she took the spoon away he risked opening his mouth and babbling at her crossly. It sounded exactly like he was saying, 'What are you doing this for? I've told you I hate it, why do you go on?' Quite soon after that, he opened his mouth really wide, but that was only because he got upset about it all and started to cry.*

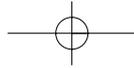
*I don't think Mum really wanted him to eat mush then, anyway – she just thought he ought to. Perhaps that's why he wasn't keen either.*

*Why did I start talking about that? Oh yes, it's the way he thinks. He thinks he's a clown, so he makes us laugh, and he thinks he's a baby so he drinks milk from Mum. He doesn't think he's big, like Dan across the road – at least, not yet – so he doesn't go to school and he doesn't think he's big like Lily – at least, not yet – so he doesn't eat things with a spoon. It all depends what he thinks.*

*I know what he does think though. He thinks he can talk. Ever since the day Joe popped out, Mum's been having conversations with him. She does it all the time. When he was only a few weeks old, I saw her having one of those chats with him that you have with babies. I remember thinking that if I'd wanted to make a film, I could have dubbed it and had him saying things so easily – the tone of voice and gestures were there, it only needed the actual words. Mum likes him to tell her things, that's why. She wants him to talk, she shows him how, she knows he will one day and he knows it too.*

*That was more than a year ago. He doesn't have any problems with eating now. Last week Lily had her friends to tea, and they're all gannets, Mum says, although she does like it when everything gets eaten. When she said, 'Who wants some more?' Joe waved his hand in the air and shouted, 'Me!' louder than any of the others. He ate it all too. I noticed he was watching Lily really carefully and when someone asked her a question and she nodded her head, Joe nodded his too, in exactly the same way. They love it when he copies them. He thinks he's one of them now. ʘ*

**How babies and young children learn to see themselves is significantly affected by their growing knowledge of how to be acceptable to us**



## Development of self-concept

'You're the best', children might say one day, with conviction; or, on another day, 'You're nasty', with even more conviction. None of us are immune from these judgements, and each one that comes our way is like another feature added to our internal picture of who we are. By the time we are adult, most of us have grown used to our internal picture, and have found ways of rejecting judgements that don't seem to fit, although sometimes a new one gives us a jolt.

*'Dan's mum says you're a better mum than her,' said Lily. 'But I don't think so.'*  
*'Hmm,' said Mum, looking thoughtful. 'I wonder why.'*

How do we build up our internal picture of who we are? An idea that occurs consistently in the discussion is that we learn about ourselves from other people and events. Particular reference has been made to the roles of 'important' people, especially parents and teachers, in the development of children's self-concept (Dowling, 2005 and Honess and Yardley, 1987).

Observation tells us that babies and young children experience a bewildering and often overwhelming range of emotions that they cannot understand or control. The mother and other important people can play an important part in seeing and understanding the infant as a whole person at a time when the infant's powerful sensations, feelings, excitements and furies act in a fragmenting way, splitting the infant's dawning self-perception (Klein, 1975a, pp. 190–2). If people respond so that the infant comes to feel wholly recognised and accepted, then the infant can recognise and accept him or herself as a whole person.

The mother's face and body are like a mirror to the baby. In this very early mirroring process, both know that they are accepted by the other. The mother's acceptance forms the basis of the baby's self-concept, and the mother's responses are the first 'brush strokes' for the developing picture.

## Body language

A mother cannot pretend this early acceptance, because her baby knows her intimately in a physical way, and a mother's body language will give her away every time. A baby knows about a mother, not only by how she looks, but by how she sounds, how her body feels, maybe even by smell and taste (Gopnik *et al.*, 1999, pp. 27–8). If, as sometimes happens, a mother's feelings for her baby are very mixed at this stage, it is not the end of the world. It helps if the mother can accept these mixed feelings in herself and not struggle against them; the baby or young child may need particular understanding and very explicit unconditional acceptance later on.

So babies learn about being acceptable with their first language: that is, not by the speech that we usually mean when we refer to language, but by body language. Babies develop this way of learning and communicating in order to survive, need-

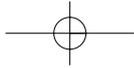
ing it long before they know the commonly accepted meanings of spoken words. They use body language before birth and, once this way of communicating is established, they go on using it, long after they know how to understand and use spoken language. For a while, children revert to using their original way of knowing whether they are acceptable to check what people say. At first, particularly because they tend to accept the literal meanings of what we say, they often find that spoken and body language are not consistent. This can be very confusing and upsetting for them (Donaldson, 1978 and Harris, 1989).

*'Why doesn't Dan's mummy ever smile at me when I go over there?' asked Lily. 'She said I was always welcome to go and play with Dan, but I don't think she really wants me.'*

In adulthood, and across cultures, we vary enormously in the extent to which we retain our original language – body language – for understanding and communicating feelings. Some people continue to rely on this to a large extent, some use both sorts of language, sometimes comparing the different sets of 'evidence', and others abandon the roots of their self-knowledge and put their faith in the spoken word. In the same way that we vary in how we receive communications about ourselves, we also vary in our conscious awareness of both what we actually feel and the messages we give about our feelings (Claxton 1997 and Rogers, 1961, pp. 338–46).

Babies need genuine acceptance – mothers and other important people cannot pretend. There is a very early balancing act in the interaction between the mother and baby: as the mother consciously and unconsciously shows the baby what she recognises and accepts, the baby learns to *be* the sort of person she will recognise and accept. If she is able to recognise and accept *all* the baby's feelings as important, then the baby will be able to recognise and accept them also. The baby's developing self-perception reflects that he or she is growing into a whole person who has a mixture of feelings. Initially, a mother may accept, and thus hold, some feelings for the baby until they are manageable. Then there will come a time when, because the baby *can* accept feelings of pain, anxiety and anger as genuine and legitimate, he or she can begin to learn to deal with them.

We often talk, though, of babies as being good, lovable, awful, or difficult. All the time, and unavoidably, we give babies and young children signals about what we love in them, what we approve of and how we want them to be. It is a natural way of showing them how to be acceptable, both to us and to the world in general. The child's developing self-perception is inextricably linked with learning to be acceptable; but being acceptable sometimes means not showing pain, fear or anger. So it happens that some children learn to exclude pain, fear and anger from their perceptions of themselves: unable either to control those feelings or have them safely accepted by someone else, they manage to 'lose' them in order to be acceptable (Winnicott, 1986, pp. 65–70).



We know about losing things from the work of Piaget (1953, p. 211). Just because you can't see something, that doesn't mean it has ceased to exist (see Chapter 2).

### – INTRODUCING LILY –

☛ *Mum's done the same trick with Lily as with Joe. Lily thinks she can read. I was watching her the other day sitting on the floor with her back against the sofa. The floor was covered with bits of jigsaw, heaps of books, her dolls, Joe's Duplo and lots of those old conkers and fir cones from last autumn, all mixed up together. Joe was off with Mum in the kitchen, hoping for another biscuit. Lily had the Nursery Rhymes book on her lap and she was kind of leafing through it like Mum does when she's looking for a good one to sing. Sometimes Lily sang one all the way through and she nearly always got it right. She put her finger on the words, too – not the right ones, though!*

*When she came to the end, she dropped it on the floor and picked the next one up off the pile, which was the one with the holes in it, about different animals. Not the caterpillar one – the one with a goat and a monkey. You're supposed to look through the holes as though the book was a mask and pretend to be that animal. When she did it, she got that far-away look, when you know she's thinking about something else completely. When she got to the lion, she started making fierce roaring noises, and thought she was going to tear us all to bits. Good thing it was a baby rabbit on the next page!*

*It reminded me of when she came home from playgroup pretending to be the grown-up. It was so clever of her; pretending to be someone else. She was really fed up with Joe because Mum's still feeding him. I reckon she thinks he's had Mum quite long enough, especially now Joe does more things like her – if she hasn't got Mum any more like that, why should Joe have her? Anyway she pretended to be the grown-up so that she could make Joe have the dummy that Dan's baby left behind. She knew that, as Lily she couldn't make Joe take the dummy. But as a grown-up – well, grown-ups can make anyone do anything, can't they? When Mum asked her to only pretend with the dummy and not do it for real, Lily just hit Joe. I suppose she couldn't think of another way to put him in his place – where she wants him, instead of where he is.*

*A couple of weeks ago, Mum had to go away for a few days. The kids' dad looked after them, and they had a great time. Lily's really funny now, though – she keeps acting like she's Mum. The first time she did it was when she came down and found me just taking my coat off. She put on this deep voice she uses to be grown-up and asked me if I would prefer tea or coffee! It made me feel really special, to think that she thought of asking all by herself. Then she took Joe outside into the garden and let him play with her dolls. She said they were off to visit the jungle, and when I asked what the jungle would be like, she put on the deep voice and said, 'It's got toys and dinosaurs in it'. Then she gave me a secret, laughing sort of look and added, 'and flying beds in the sky.'*

*The next day Mum came back, and Dan's mum came over with Dan and their baby.*



*Dan's baby is too small to play with Joe, but Dan and Lily play a lot. Mum had to go out, so Dan's mum was keeping an eye on things – at least, that's how she saw it. Now that Lily knows how to be 'Mum', though, she thinks she can be in charge. She did help Dan's mum, but I think she thought Dan's mum was helping her. Dan needed a blanket for his game, and Lily explained that they only had duvets now, but she said he could have a cushion if he liked. But when Dan's mum wanted to change Dan's trousers, she forgot about being Mum and ran off so that he would follow. Dan's mum was cross and said would they please come back and stop being so naughty. When Dan looked as though he might be going to wee on the carpet, Lily put on the deep voice and offered to run and fetch the potty. She was just in time, too!'*

### **Babies and young children generally behave according to how they see themselves**

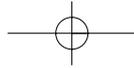
#### **Behaving in character**

On the whole, people behave 'in character'. In other words, what we do makes sense in terms of how we see ourselves (Curry and Johnson, 1990, pp. 27–8). When a person does something that seems 'out of character', the reason may be that the person sees him or herself differently from the way the rest of us do. Our knowledge and perception of other people is based on the evidence of what they do, what they say and how they look. Our self-concept is based on evidence, too, but how we see this is affected by the mirror process of how others see us. It is also affected by our ideas of what we *could* do if we chose – what we can imagine ourselves doing.

This works the other way around as well. We tend not to do things we do not think of ourselves as doing. 'I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing,' you might say, or, 'Nothing was further from my mind'. Although people sometimes surprise themselves by what they do, it is worth remembering that our minds work on a subconscious level for much of the time, and that subconscious wishes and needs can be even more powerful than conscious ones.

#### **Self-concept in relation to behaviour**

The idea that we tend to behave according to how we see ourselves seems at first rather a limited view. If we need to envisage doing something before we are likely to do it, how can we learn to behave in new ways? Of course, you only have to do something once, such as catching a ball or making someone laugh, to get the idea that you are now a person who catches balls and makes people laugh, and then you can do these things anytime (Erikson, 1950, p. 211). Sometimes this happens



by chance, but often someone else says something like, 'Why don't you have a go, I know you can do it'. A possibility in someone else's mind suddenly becomes a possibility in our own. As Joanne said about Joe:

*He thinks he's a clown so he makes us laugh . . . it all depends what he thinks.*

One important way that children learn to behave in new ways is in pretend play. By pretending to be someone else, they can behave like that person (Light, 1979, pp. 41–61). The rules are strict:

*'I am Mum today, so I can only do what Mum would do' or 'I am being the Bad Baby, so I can . . .!'*

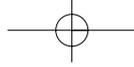
In their play, children often adopt characters from favourite television programmes or stories, and this can have a profound influence on their developing sense of self. They 'think themselves into role' as thoroughly as professional actors, but at a time when their own sense of identity is still in the making.

This 'trying on' of personality (remember we actually refer to children 'trying it on') is a wonderful, natural, safe way of exploring how to be acceptable – of rummaging about in the possibilities. Children 'try it on' with their important adults, as they do with each other. It is a way of trying out how to behave, without committing themselves; they are completely in control, ending the experiment at any moment by dropping the role. It also enables them to explore their reactions to painful and frightening situations – for instance violence or death – at the safer distance of one remove from reality. Children who have been able to do this are better able to manage those situations in real life.

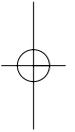
How children see themselves and how they behave as a result of their self-perception are such complex and interrelated aspects of self that it is helpful to find a way of untangling the threads and considering them one at a time. Then it becomes possible to get an idea of what is happening to these threads in individual children. Curry and Johnson (1990, pp. 5–9) suggest using four areas: acceptance, power and control, about values, and competence.

Between child and mother, between child and other important people, between brothers and sisters and between friends, the factor of acceptance is at the heart of self-concept. Infants and young children are starting on the struggle for the second factor, power and control. This is not only about exerting control over their environment; it is also about achieving self-control. The third area, about values, refers to the child's developing concept of good and bad, right and wrong. The fourth area, competence, relates to the child's developing social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills, his or her ability to solve problems and the resulting sense of competence.

Much of the most influential work on the very early development of self-concept was carried out between 1950 and 1980. Although there has been a great deal of



research and writing in relation to the brain and to the development of curricula, the earlier work on self-concept remains important today. It still appears that the development of behaviour and the development of self-concept are interdependent, and that in thinking about the development of one, we also need to think about the development of the other. Self-concept profoundly influences behaviour everywhere – in families, in schools, in our world.



## 2

# Being important adults

### – DAD’S HOME! –

‘We’re home,’ called Mum as she came through the door. She’d left Joe in his push-chair while she went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Lily trailed in after her, holding Christina (that’s her doll) by one leg, and looking hot and tired. It was Saturday and we’d been at the park nearly all afternoon. Lily always goes to the swings first, and now Mum pushes her really high, so the chains go slack at the top and the world stands still. She loves that. I never see her walk in the park, she always has to run, all the time.

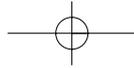
Mum went to get Joe out of his chair; and Lily took Christina into the back room. And guess what? There was her dad! He’d come home early and was sitting so quietly that we didn’t know he was there. He didn’t say a word, and nor did Lily – she just stood right in front of him and grinned at him, and he grinned back at her. I thought I’d be pretty happy if anyone was that pleased to see me!

‘Hello, Tiger Lily!’ He often calls her that, because of her bubbly gold hair; and because he says she’s fierce. Once they were looking at themselves together in the bathroom mirror; with dad’s black face and Lily’s gold one.

‘Definitely a tiger lily,’ he said to her; grinning and tickling her to make her laugh.

‘Been to the park?’ he asked. ‘What did you play on?’ She told him all about the swing and about the girl who wouldn’t go home when her brother told her to. (Though she didn’t tell him that she wouldn’t either, when Mum said.) Then he wanted to know about the rest of her day and what she had for lunch and if she’d enjoyed it. I think Lily’s lucky to have him for her dad. He asked her all that stuff to let her know he hadn’t forgotten her while he was out, and because he really wanted to know if she’d had a good day. Lots of dads ask because they want to know if you’ve been good or helpful or learned a lot. Then if you haven’t, they don’t want to know any more. ʘ

**Babies and young children need to be accepted by their important people**



## Holding

From the very earliest days, babies begin to build up their own internal ability to deal with their feelings. This ability is based on a growing feeling of internal strength, or wholeness, and a child's consciousness of being known and accepted is what helps that ability to grow (Bettelheim, 1987, pp. 146–65). Feelings of internal wholeness, and of disintegration, are reflected in the language we use to describe them. 'She's a "very together" person,' we might say, or 'I'm falling to pieces'.

Babies' actions often reflect their efforts to 'hold themselves together'.

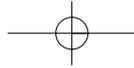
*Joe held the piece of orange firmly, first in his right hand, then in both. He put it very cautiously into his mouth and hastily removed it again after one tentative lick, screwing up his face as he did so. A second later, he tried again, this time tasting it for longer and screwing up his face less, as though he was getting used to the sharpness and really quite liked it. All this time he was holding it with both hands and looking at it carefully each time he took it out of his mouth. It seemed to make all the difference that he was holding something in both hands that also felt and tasted good in his mouth – as if the piece of orange was holding him together in some way, and without it he would fall apart and be miserable again.*

Sometimes the strain of 'holding themselves together' gets too much for babies and young children, and this is when important people can help. When they feel they are falling to pieces, they need a sense of being held, until they can manage again for themselves. There are various ways of giving this sense; it can come from physical action or from mental awareness. Who we are in relation to the child and where we are will dictate which ways are most appropriate. For a four-year-old at bed-time, a cuddle might be most appropriate; for the same four-year-old in the nursery setting, a pretend game inside a big cardboard box might be the answer; sometimes just not being forgotten is what is needed – the child needs to know that he or she is 'held' in the important person's mind.

## Knowledge and acceptance

Young children need to feel accepted, but, alongside that acceptance, they need to feel known. In terms of reassurance, acceptance only works if it comes with knowledge, and knowledge only works if it comes with acceptance.

If we are accepted by someone who doesn't know us very well, we fear that once that person 'knows the worst', their acceptance may turn to rejection. If acceptance is to work as the basis of positive self-concept, it must be based on knowledge. On the other hand, it is not reassuring to be well known by someone when their acceptance is in doubt; to be rejected, at any stage in life, by an important person who knows us well is indeed devastating. This is why being known but not necessarily accepted feels so precarious.



Rejection is a kind of loss, and, right from day one, babies and young children experience other losses which are a normal part of life. They lose the safety of the womb, the comfort of the breast, the presence of important people: day after day, life is made up of a series of little losses, together with occasional major ones. This is not to say that life is miserable for babies; fortunately, they live very much 'in the present', and of course they gain things as well as losing them. But from the ego-centric viewpoint of the baby or young child, each loss represents a rejection. These rejections must be balanced by acceptance if the baby is to grow up feeling acceptable.

At the stage when children start to belong to groups outside the family, such as day-care or pre-school, possible rejection takes on new meaning. It has been shown that children remember experiences of rejection by their peers and teachers with painful clarity (Paley, 1992, pp. 33–6). It can be argued that our job as important adults in these settings should include efforts to guard against 'the habit of rejection', whatever its cause. For physical, temperamental or biographical reasons, some children seem to be particularly precarious in this respect; they need to know that they are acceptable in order to learn.

## Power of important adults

It is the possibility of knowledge without acceptance, or acceptance without knowledge, that gives us such power over the children for whom we are responsible. Because we are 'important', it is possible for us to devastate children by withholding or withdrawing our acceptance. The closer we are to children, and the better we know them, the more powerful we become.

There is, however, the other side of this coin. As our knowledge of a child gradually grows, our acceptance of that child carries more and more conviction. Important people may have the power to devastate by rejection, but they have the corresponding power to support and build through their acceptance.

A doctor's success in helping a child to be well or a teacher's success in helping a child to learn – or, of course, a parent's success in doing both – is directly related to his or her knowledge about the child. Success is thought to depend on a good 'match', of medical treatment to the growing body or of learning experiences to the developing mind. It can be argued that there is another, completely different but equally significant reason for gaining as detailed a knowledge of a child as possible. This reason is related to the child's self-concept. We tend to use the knowledge of children which we have gained by being 'important people' to look after them and help them to learn. We may, in addition, offer it back to the child in the form of realistic acceptance. The greater the depth of knowledge, the greater will be the power of our acceptance. The injunction to 'know the child' can take on a deeper meaning.

**– MUM AND JOE –**

☛ *Sometimes I wonder why Mum loves Joe like she does. If he woke me up like that all night, I reckon I'd feel more like giving him away.*

*Mum was playing a game with him the other day giving him little bits of bread-stick because he's dribbly and grumpy with his teeth. Then she remembered the chips were cooking, and when she started to go away and look at them, Joe really wailed. She's so tired I thought she'd be cross or take no notice, but she didn't. She came straight back, picked him up and gave him a huge hug. She said, 'You're an old softy aren't you?' and hugged him some more and then took him off to look at the chips with her.*

*I think she doesn't mind him needing her really; maybe she quite likes it. Perhaps that's why he cries every night, when he wakes up in his cot and wants to be in bed with Mum. He thinks he's in the wrong place, and the right place is with Mum. How can he learn to sleep all night without needing her?☛*

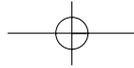
**How babies and young children learn to see themselves is significantly affected by their growing knowledge of how to be acceptable to us**

**Adult motivation**

Babies begin to discover what sort of a person they are right from the first day. As this process of discovery is well under way before our words can be understood, babies develop other ways of understanding about what matters to their important people; they use their senses to gauge adult and sibling reactions. In our role as important adults, we cannot hide behind words. How we really feel and what we really think are the things with which babies are actually dealing.

If we accept that babies and young children are responding to what we really feel and think, we may feel the need to take an honest look at what we actually *do* mind about. This is probably easier said than done. Often feelings get lost, particularly if they are painful. However, feelings that have become subconscious still affect our reactions to things. Some parents, for instance, find it very difficult to have to listen to their baby crying; others may tolerate crying without feeling deeply upset, but, in spite of 'normal' development, are very anxious about whether the baby is feeding properly. Maybe these reactions are the results of parents' own early childhood experiences; our reactions may alter as we gain experience. In such situations, the responses the baby receives are likely to be governed by our own feelings, needs and priorities.

Parents who need their children to behave in certain ways may be responding to their own childhood. Those who did not experience an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance as children were deprived; and they may continue, throughout their



lives, to need and to seek the unconditional acceptance that their own parents did not give them at the time. In the balance of the generations, important people are in some ways mutual; the parents are important people for the child, but the child is also important for the adult.

So it can happen that, instead of receiving much needed unconditional acceptance, the baby's role is to recognise and accept the needs of one or both parents. As the parents' care is essential for the baby's existence, the baby begins to learn from the first day how to fit in with what the parents need. For example, a young child may learn to accept the food his parent gives him, not because he likes or needs it but because – probably unconsciously – he knows that the person on whom he depends for survival actually *needs* his acceptance in this way. It is 'safer' to eat up than to reject.

## Unconscious messages

Some people may recognise their own childhood pattern in this description and may wonder if this means that the pattern inevitably repeats itself. The first step to take in answering this question is to try to do some 'self-watching', and notice the things that do seem, unaccountably or disproportionately, to matter very much. Then it becomes possible to think and talk about those things and to balance them with what we know about the unconditional acceptance that babies and young children need.

Even as we extend unconditional acceptance to babies and young children, they are still learning all the time about how we want them to behave, at different times and in a variety of places. In the author's study of the development of positive self-concept and learning skills (Roberts, 1993), one of the issues to emerge was connected with how parents *feel* about their children's behaviour. The parents' reactions were found to vary, depending on whether the setting was the home or somewhere outside it. At home, positive reactions related to personal characteristics, such as affection, helpfulness and happiness. When out in public, parents were unanimous in their feeling that what matters most of all is that children's behaviour should be 'socially acceptable'. There was a difference, in the parents' view, between ideally acceptable 'home' behaviour – affectionate, helpful and happy – and ideally acceptable 'out' behaviour – conforming, obedient, polite, sociable and sharing.

This raises questions about children's perceptions of appropriate behaviour when they go to school. It must be assumed that, initially at least, school is perceived, by both parents and children, as 'out'. This question will be considered in more detail in Chapter 9. Meanwhile, why should the parents have felt so very strongly about their children's public behaviour?

If we are unsure of our own worth, we have no secure basis for seeing ourselves as acceptable. Those who are unsure about themselves need constant confirmation of their worth. The more important our role as parent or carer is to us, the more we

are liable to mind about other people's judgement of our ability in that role.

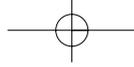
We tend to be judged, in relation to our ability as parents or carers, by the behaviour of the children in our care. And unless we are very secure in the knowledge of our worth as parents and carers, we need those children to behave in ways that 'do us credit', hence the parents' anxiety about their children's behaviour. However, happiness and the ability to learn – which were the main goals of the parents in the study mentioned above – do not happen as a result of the ability to conform and share, to be obedient, polite and sociable. In fact, early struggles to be socially acceptable are not generally happy experiences, nor are they always consistent with the ways in which successful early learning naturally takes place. Of course it matters that children learn to adapt to the society in which they live, and the child who persistently asks questions and is 'into everything' may in certain circumstances be thought to be behaving badly. But such behaviour is exactly what makes for successful learning. To accept and value and manage it will help the child to see him or herself as a learner, rather than as naughty.

### – LILY'S SUPERMAN –

☛ *Dan came to play with Lily yesterday; all dressed up like Superman he was. His mum had lent him her lovely scarf, and it was wound around his shoulders. He marched straight into the hall and announced, 'I'm Superman,' to no one in particular. Then he went up to Lily gave her a great big shove and said, 'Lily' very fiercely right in her face. Lily looked indignant and went straight off to Mum to complain, but she had just opened her mouth and taken a breath when she stopped. She stood there in front of Mum, thinking for a moment, and Mum looked at her and waited. Then she surprised us all by saying very firmly 'Dan's here to play'. And off they went to the kitchen!*

*It's a good thing Mum doesn't mind a bit of chaos. Lily and Dan spent the rest of the morning playing 'Superman and Superwoman'. They made a house under the table with cushions and bowls and an old blanket, and Lily's dolls had to be the babies. Joe wanted to be in the game too, but he didn't stay long because Lily and Dan were so bossy. They said he was one of the babies, and that he had to be in a baby's place and stay there, so after a while he got fed up and went off to look for Mum. When Lily and Dan wanted it to be dinner-time, Mum said they'd better have Super-Dinner and she gave them a packet of Lily's favourite Crunchies to share. In the end though Lily got fed up too. She said Dan wouldn't let her share out the Crunchies, and he kept pushing her around. Dan said Superman was supposed to be the boss, and then Mum stopped them arguing by saying that if they didn't come quickly, it would be too late to go to the park for a picnic. ☛*

**Babies and young children generally behave according to how they see themselves**

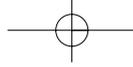


## Imaginative play

By their first birthday, babies are already showing signs of self-awareness in the form of imitative play in which they might pretend to drink from an empty cup or comfort a teddy bear (Curry and Johnson, 1990, p. 27). As they grow older, pretend play becomes increasingly important to them (Light, 1979, p. 41). Supporting children's imaginative play is crucial (Bruce, 1996). It is only by pretending to be another person that a child can explore what it would be like to be that sort of person, and this is what children need to do in order to make real choices about themselves in relation to other people. A child who is only ever allowed to be him or herself cannot begin to understand what it would be like to be another person. This is the gift that drama gives us, and children's pretend play is drama in a very real sense.

Babies and young children have an amazing capacity for observing and remembering. What Dad said to the dog, where Mum left the keys, how the builder smooths cement with a trowel and where you hid the special biscuits – these are all commonplace observations to children, along with details of gesture and intonation. Crucially important role models for pretend play come first and foremost from within the family: mummies and daddies, the baby, even the dog. Children will play these pretend games with 'modern dress' and a bare stage, if costumes and scenery are not available; but when we provide cardboard boxes for beds or a cooker, remnants of fabric for blankets, old cast-offs for dressing-up clothes, and a few other 'props', this not only adds another dimension to the play, but signals our acceptance and recognition of its importance.

As children's lives unfold and widen to include people and places outside the home, television programmes and stories in books, so their choice of role models for their pretend play widens too. The richer the variety and complexity of characters they have to choose from, the more they will benefit from this sort of play. Allowing and encouraging children's play gives them a safe way to explore and begin to understand themselves, the people in their world and the situations in which they find themselves.



## POSTSCRIPT TO PART 1: BABIES FIRST

### Living or working with young children? Questions to think about . . .

**Babies and young children need to be accepted by their important people**

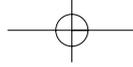
1. What are some of the things that parents and carers can do to make sure that a baby or young child feels accepted?

**How babies and young children learn to see themselves is significantly affected by their growing knowledge of how to be acceptable to us**

2. What characteristics and behaviours do you find particularly acceptable in young children? What is unacceptable to you? Why?

**Babies and young children generally behave according to how they see themselves**

3. Try watching a child very carefully, for about half an hour. What have you learned about that child's self-concept?



## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

### *For sharing with children . . .*

**Waddell, M. and Benson, P. (1992), *Owl Babies*, London, Walker Books**

'Once there were three baby owls: Sarah and Percy and Bill. They lived in a hole in the trunk of a tree with their Owl Mother'. This beautiful picture book is always a hit with small children, because they completely understand the plot. It's night-time, and Mum is out. Will she come back?

**Ormerod, J. (1997), *Peek-a boo*, London, The Bodley Head**

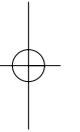
Babies love playing peek-a-boo, and this ingenious flap book is a winner. The pictures are enchanting, and the flaps are good and big so babies can easily get hold of them. With its 'snuggle down baby . . .' ending it makes a lovely going-to-sleep book, too.

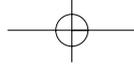
### *. . . and for a good read*

**Gerhardt, S. (2004), *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain*, London, Routledge**

With this book Sue Gerhardt has made a wonderful contribution to our understanding of the needs of babies. She writes about the fundamental importance of babies' first relationships, and how these early relationships affect the way the brain develops. This book is full of information about the latest findings in neuroscience, psychology and biochemistry, and – as the title indicates – is an extremely compelling and accessible read. In describing the links between early experiences and adult states, it shows very clearly why warm, responsive relationships are so important for babies.

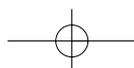
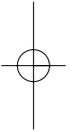


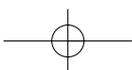
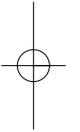
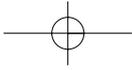




# **PART 2**

## **FUNDAMENTAL FEELINGS**





### 3

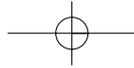
## Children's normal bad feelings

### – CATS AND DUSTPANS –

☞ *I'm the lucky one just now. Lily likes me. I sat down on the floor to play with her the other day and straight away Toby (he's the cat) got on my lap and curled up so I couldn't move. Mum was there too, so she knelt on the floor and sat Lily on her lap, just opposite. Lily gazed and gazed at me so solemnly but when she looked at Toby on my lap, I was glad I wasn't him. After a bit, Toby got down and padded off past where Mum and Lily were, and as he went by, Lily grabbed his tail and pulled it really hard, laughing and looking at me! Mum was cross and told her to stop, so she let go with a flourish and went off to get the biscuit tin. When she'd got the lid off and had a good look inside, she came over to me, holding the tin out with a huge smile.*

*I was quite surprised that she was angry with Toby because he'd been on my knee. Usually it's Joe that makes Lily feel hurt and angry because he's got Mum. I remember when Mum was trying to feed Joe and help Lily with her play-dough all at the same time. Lily kept asking Mum to do things that needed two hands, so that she would have to put Joe down, and Mum kept managing it without stopping Joe's feeding. I felt sorry for Mum, trying to please everybody, and I felt really sorry for Lily too, because she was so desperate. In the end Lily gave up trying to empty Joe's mouth of Mum, and stuffed all the play-dough right into her own mouth instead – if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! And when Mum made her spit it out because it's not for eating, she threw it right across the kitchen. And Joe watched it all from the crook of Mum's arm, with that 'I've got the cream' smile.*

*Still, Joe doesn't have things all his own way. I remember when he crawled all the way from the far end of the sitting-room to play with the dustpan and brush. He had almost made it, when Mum swooped down and removed it to a safe place. Joe was so furious, he put his head down on the floor and really shouted. Two minutes later he wasn't allowed to play with the big pot of nappy cream either; so he shouted all over again. He must have thought we were following him around spoiling his fun on purpose. ☹*



## **As well as feeling love, it is normal for babies and young children to feel pain, anxiety and anger**

### **Normal mixed feelings**

'Don't worry . . . be happy . . .' goes the song. When a new baby is born, in whatever culture or situation, there are always worries mixed with the happiness, and adjustments to be made. As a baby grows into childhood, our job as important adults may become more and more challenging, sometimes even overwhelming. One of the most difficult things for us to manage is children's expressions of pain, anxiety or anger. If a baby or young child is still unhappy or angry even after we have done our best, we may feel exhausted, rejected – a failure.

When we think of normal 'bad' feelings, it helps to remember the normal 'good' feelings of love and pleasure which also make up our lives with babies and young children. Quite rightly, love and pleasure for children are often our first consideration; but if they are the *only* consideration, we run a risk by ignoring other, more negative, feelings.

Unavoidably, and in the normal course of events, babies and young children have a very great deal in their lives that hurts, that is worrying and that is infuriating. It would not be desirable, even if it were possible, to protect them entirely from these normal real-life experiences, as they represent a crucial source of learning. Consequently, we have to live with babies' and young children's expressions of pain, anxiety and anger. This can be made a great deal easier by understanding as much as possible about what these emotions may feel like for them.

### **Reasons for 'bad' feelings**

What does it feel like for the child whose life is just beginning? To find some answers to this question, we can study our own 'important children' at home or work, as much and as carefully as possible. We can also learn from the writings of people who have studied other babies and young children.

Some experiences are common to all children. The abrupt emergence into a world after nine months in the womb is both a liberation and a stark shock. At birth, the freedom from the confines of the womb and birth canal is combined with the new effect of the full force of gravity, so that every movement requires both less and more effort than before. Gone are the familiar sights, sounds and sensations of the months before birth; suddenly the world is vast, bright, noisy, smelly and unknown. After the loss of the womb comes a different set of life-lines involving breathing, feeding, people and places. Every experience for the baby contains the possibility of pleasure, the probability of loss: the feed must end, the cuddle will not

last forever, the nappy must be changed (Miller, 1992a). In small ways, the baby is learning to live with loss day by day. Some babies, on occasion, seem to find this quite overwhelming. A loved person goes out or the room looks different, and their world collapses.

## Crying

Babies cry for a variety of reasons. D.W. Winnicott (1964, pp. 58–68) suggests that there are four normal kinds of crying. His first reason was that babies cry in order to feel that they are exercising their lungs. Winnicott suggests that pleasure can enter into crying as it can into any bodily function, and that this sort of crying is for satisfaction. Then there is the cry of pain: as well as indicating present pain, including hunger, this can signal painful memories or fear of pain.

Babies also cry with rage, and this ability to be angry with another person when things are not right is very important. Being in a rage is frightening for babies and young children because they feel destructive and dangerous; they need the experience of an adult who can tolerate that rage and not be badly hurt or destroyed by it. A calm response in the face of a tantrum gives the child confidence and reassurance about the possibility of accepting and managing those feelings. An adult who feels unable to tolerate a tantrum and tries to avoid one at all costs is confirming a child's fear that, in such a state, he or she is indeed destructive and dangerous, and that the damage cannot be mended.

The fourth type of crying that Winnicott outlines is that of grief: what he calls 'a song of sadness'. An infant's ability to cry from grief is as important as crying from rage, but more complex. Winnicott suggests that this sad crying is an early version of the ability to say 'sorry' and 'thank you', and that receiving the acceptance, sympathy and comfort that babies and children need in this state is much more valuable than teaching the words 'sorry' and 'thank you'.

In her book *Your Baby and Child* (2003, pp. 113–23), in the section 'Crying and comforting', Penelope Leach strongly disagrees with Winnicott's view that babies may cry for bodily satisfaction. She describes a range of situations that may cause babies to cry, with ways to help them. These include hunger, pain, over-stimulation, shock and fear, mis-timing, being undressed, feeling cold, jerks and twitches, lack of physical contact. The whole section is very helpful, for parents and carers who are struggling both with a crying baby, and with their own feelings as they try to manage and alleviate the baby's distress.

Underlying the routines of day-to-day living for most babies and young children is a strong determination to explore, to find out and to gain control. From birth, this 'need to know' is evident in their behaviour (Gopnik *et al.*, 1999). They listen and watch, they struggle to touch, to move, to taste – this is how they find out. Often these explorations are immensely satisfying, but the struggle to do all these things is also beset by frustrations, initially because of the limitations of their

own physical ability, and later because often what they want is either incomprehensible or unacceptable to the adult who is in control. Frustrations, especially as a result of not being able to explore, are another major source of normal 'bad' feelings.

## Brothers and sisters

Another cause for these normal 'bad' feelings can be brothers and sisters. Judy Dunn (1993, pp. 1–14) tells us that there are many variations in different settings and cultures about the ways in which children relate to each other and to adults. It is important not to make generalisations about such a very complex issue. It must also be clear to anyone who watches children in a variety of situations that very many children gain a great deal of love and pleasure from relationships with their brothers and sisters.

At the same time, however, there can be no doubt of the potential for normal 'bad' feelings between siblings. For a young child, the arrival of a new baby means that – however much is to be gained – the child who was the previous 'baby' will no longer enjoy the exclusive relationship that existed with the mother, but must give it up to someone else. This often coincides with weaning, which means losing the mother's breast and/or bottle as the main source of nourishment and cuddles. Of course, there is much to be said for being 'the grown-up one', but even so, the displacement from that special place with the mother can be hard to bear. There is much good advice from Penelope Leach (2003, pp. 422–9) on how an older sibling may be feeling at the birth of a new baby, and how to manage during the weeks around the birth, and for the first few months, in order to help that older child.

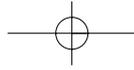
The 'built-in' difficulties in sibling relationships are not confined to the older child. In an earlier book (1984, p. 55), Judy Dunn writes of the predicament for the younger child:

*If you grow up from four to ten years old with someone who knows you intimately, spends a great deal of time with you and relentlessly disparages and criticises you, while himself appearing effortlessly more capable and successful, surely this experience will have a profound effect on your sense of your own value and efficacy, and will affect your behaviour with others outside the home.*

Of course, this is not true for all sisters and brothers, but it indicates the ordinary psychological reactions that can result from normal bad feelings at such close quarters.

### – MIXED-UP LILY –

❁ *I think Lily is often fierce with the cat because it's safer than being fierce with people, especially Joe. It isn't only when she's angry with Joe, though. There was that time*



*when their dad went away for a fortnight, and after about ten days, I think she was afraid he wasn't coming back. I suppose it's a long time when you're that young. That was when she got really quiet and she wouldn't let Mum out of her sight, but she was wild with the cat, pulling his tail and shouting 'Eat!' at him when he was eating already. It's safer to kick the cat, isn't it? The grown-ups might not love her if she kicks them, especially not if she does it to Joe; and that's what she's afraid of.*

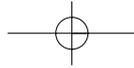
*Lily's such a mixed-up kid when it comes to Joe. The other day she was playing with the Duplo and she kept sweeping the pieces off the table so that they landed on Joe's head, but the next moment she handed him Old MacDonald, which is one of her favourites. Sometimes she plays like she's two people, one laughing and distracting and finding toys, and the other pushing and squeezing and bumping. I think it's great that she plays with him at all, after everything he's taken over from her. I think she really loves him, and it makes her feel better when she can manage the bad feelings enough to make room for the good ones – then she knows she's a good sister. She doesn't only play with him because she knows Mum will be pleased – sometimes she really wants to play with him as well, and then she feels good. ♡*

**Denied pain, anxiety and anger all undermine positive self-concept – these feelings are hard to acknowledge and manage unless they are recognised by others as normal and acceptable**

## Acknowledging 'bad' feelings

We seem to spend a lot of time and energy denying pain, fear and anger and trying to eliminate these emotions from our lives. We may avoid the causes, by not speaking to someone or withdrawing from a situation. Alternatively, we may try to 'pass on' our feelings to someone else, for instance by being irritable with someone who had nothing to do with the reason for our feelings. Often, this person will be someone in whose love we have confidence and with whom it is therefore 'safe' to be irritable. So when things get bad, our inclination is often to keep out of the way or, if we can't do that, to 'dump' our feelings on the nearest 'safe' person.

Babies and young children quickly begin to develop the ability either to avoid pain, fear and anger (requiring some form of anticipation) or to pass on feelings (requiring the ability to communicate, although not necessarily in spoken language). As adults, we tend to encourage this ability: we say things like 'Don't cry', 'Come on, there's no need to be scared', and 'Will you stop making that noise!' Or maybe we use distractions, 'Look, what's your teddy doing on the floor?' and 'Would you like a biscuit?'



However, there are grounds for recognising the great importance, for babies and children, of experiencing their true feelings and coming to know themselves (Miller, 1979, pp. 19–29). Children who have not been allowed to express their negative feelings may be in danger of a kind of emotional helplessness. Feelings do not cease to exist simply because they are denied; instead, what tends to happen is that they become all the more powerful for having been ignored. Emotional development is about learning how to accept and manage feelings, both positive and negative, and how to respond appropriately.

Cognitively, evasions and distractions are unhelpful too. Children who have been encouraged to think about something else every time something goes wrong are likely to be low on concentration and persistence in problem-solving situations.

For babies and young children, acceptance of *all* sorts of feelings is possible if they are given enough opportunities to be themselves. However, the need to accept something before it is possible to deal with it – whether the ‘something’ is an emotion, a person or a situation – must be one of the most unrecognised and unpractised essentials of human relationships. We need to realise that, in order to resolve a situation, we must accept its existence.

Sometimes, however, the unconscious needs of parents prevent children from achieving this acceptance. In the author’s study (Roberts, 1993, pp. 67–74), parents were asked about their feelings in relation to their children’s behaviour. In answer to the question, ‘What does your four-year-old do that makes you feel particularly rejecting and disapproving?’, the almost unanimous answer was that forms of verbal protest are the hardest aspect of children’s behaviour for their parents to accept. It may be that, in our responses to children, we do accept their feelings, sympathising and trying to resolve the situation; or perhaps we try to refuse to allow the crying, complaints, arguments and quarrels; or maybe we grit our teeth and take no notice. Probably most parents have tried all these, but common sense and observation would suggest that, when children cry, complain, argue or quarrel, we ‘important adults’ usually do our best to get them to stop.

We would all like children to learn to deal with their feelings so that there is less crying, complaining, arguing and quarrelling. But that is only possible if children are allowed to *have* the feelings in order to work on them. If we, as ‘important adults’, feel rejecting and disapproving when children express their negative feelings, the children soon learn to hide them, which makes it impossible to try to accept and resolve them. Hidden feelings are always liable to re-emerge, out of control, as in Black’s (1991) splendid poem ‘The Red Judge’. Feelings that have been accepted and thought about are generally more manageable.

## The cycle of loss

As discussed in Chapter 1, children need their important people’s acceptance; so, if ‘bad’ feelings are not acceptable, they must be hidden if the child is not to risk losing the most important thing in the world – the acceptance of the important adult. Miller

