

Is Reich Still Relevant?  
Self Regulation from Wilhelm Reich to Peter Levine  
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#### Abstract

A controversial figure both in his own time and today, Wilhelm Reich intuited many of the concepts that contemporary neuroscience and attachment research have now made quite concrete. "Self regulation" was for Reich a principle of emotional health and also a theory of child rearing.

#### Description

It was Self regulation was for Reich, a description of the functioning of the healthy bodymind, whatever the age of the person. It was a biological concept taking into account what was then known about the autonomic nervous system. After the birth of his son, Reich became particularly interested in how infants could be treated to promote their self regulation from the beginning of life. He felt that in contrast to the strictly controlled infant treatment of his day, usually identified with James Watson babies should be fed on demand, would toilet train themselves when physiologically capable, and should be free to explore whatever gave them pleasure in their own and each other's bodies. Are these ideas are still "revolutionary" or whether they have been incorporated into contemporary child rearing ?

#### Introduction

This paper brings together certain threads of my professional experience over the last 35 years: Reichian therapy, psychoanalysis, Continuum, neuroscience, attachment theory and most recently, Somatic Experiencing. When I first became interested in practicing psychotherapy, I sought training in both body psychotherapy (Reichian) and psychoanalysis. Although I integrated them seamlessly into my private practice, their worlds remained rigidly separated. Reichian therapists held that mere "talk therapy" was totally ineffective, while Reich was virtually unmentionable in psychoanalytic circles. It is gratifying to see them finally approach each other and begin to interact and integrate. Somatic Experiencing, EMDR and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy have been and continue to be important bridges.

Perusing Peter Levine's doctoral dissertation, I noticed that he briefly noted (pp.65-6) the significance of Wilhelm Reich's thought to the development of contemporary paradigms used in many somatic psychotherapies, chief among them, Somatic Experiencing. He specifically highlighted Reich's theory of energetic charge/discharge involving the autonomic nervous system. Simultaneously, as part of a psychoanalytic study group, I had been consuming the recent neuroscientific and attachment literatures. In each of these domains, "self-regulation" came up again and again. That took me back to my dissertation, which explored Reich's concept of self-regulation as a childrearing practice.

I began to compare what Reich and his followers had written with what Peter Levine and Maggie Klein recently wrote about the treatment of infants in *Trauma through a Child's Eyes*. I found enormous similarities. But, what was speculative on the part of Reich was neuroscientifically-based and elaborated by Levine and Klein. This paper is an attempt to begin to explore the relevance of some of Reich's thought to the current treatment of trauma as well as its prevention. Three areas are of particular interest: the functioning of the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the central nervous system, several of Reich's differences with Freud, and self-regulation as a childrearing practice. For Reich, self-regulation was a philosophy of childrearing as well as a principle of healthy adult functioning throughout the lifespan. He was particularly interested in prevention of developmental trauma and of shock trauma to newborns.

After noting some of the origins of Reich's thought and his differences with Freud I shall summarize his own writings and those of his immediate followers, looking especially at self-regulation as a childrearing method compared with current usage of the term. I then present quotations from the chapter on the treatment of infants in Levine and Klein's recent work which illustrate their similarities to Reich's beliefs and teachings. Thus, Reich's role as a precursor of current thought and research will be evident.

Utilizing the model of the amoeba, Reich noted that the human organism is in a constant state of expansion and contraction at every level. Most easily observed in pulse and in respiration, this principle is characteristic of every cell and organ in the body. He observed this expansion and contraction, sympathetic/parasympathetic alternation, most poignantly in the human orgasm and a lot of his work eventually centered on the meaning and achievement of healthy sexual functioning. It also characterizes the emotions and is evident in the natural oscillation at low stress levels of the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the nervous system. Withdrawal of energy he termed *anorgonia*, and blockage by muscular contraction he termed *armoring*. Although Al Lowen's explications of these ideas are well known, a more sophisticated treatment is found in several books by Stephen Johnson, especially *Character Styles*. Lisbeth Marcher and her colleagues in *Bodydynamics* have elaborated it further (not published Levine and Ogden use it) by distinguishing withdrawal vs. contraction in each of the character types they delineate.

Reich observed clinically that the control of anxiety was the main function of either armoring or withdrawal of energy from a body part. In the 1930's, building on the work of Walter and Kathe Misch, and also Krause and Muller, Reich began to associate anxiety with a blocked response of the sympathetic nervous system and to associate the parasympathetic with pleasure. Alternatively, the vagal system he associated with libidinal expansion and movement outward while the sympathetic was essentially the system of libidinal retreat, drawing back into oneself. What is important is not so much the details but the overarching principle of expansion and contraction characteristic of a healthy organism.

According to his biographer Myron Sharaf (1983):

...Reich was the first psychoanalyst to emphasize the role of sympathetic response in neurotic illness. It is interesting to note that current bio-feedback techniques often involve the replacement of anxiety states [sympathetic] with calmer ones by conditioning the patient to relaxing (parasympathetic) thoughts and feelings....It should be stressed that Reich's therapy, unlike bio-feedback techniques, did not aim at the avoidance of anxiety states. On the contrary, the *binding of anxiety* in the armor was more of a problem than free-floating anxiety itself. Intense anxiety was often aroused in the course of therapy as the armor loosened. The patient was helped to work through his anxiety states, not avoid them. The cardinal therapeutic problem became the fear of intense emotions and, in particular, the fear of strong pleasurable sensations (what Reich termed "pleasure anxiety"). (208)

In the late 1930's, as an outgrowth of his theoretical and clinical experience with adults and his profound interest in children, Wilhelm Reich began to formulate a theory of childrearing that he and his followers would refer to as "self-regulation." A substantial literature (Carleton, 1987) on the subject was produced during his lifetime and continues to the present day in Reichian circles. That literature defines and refines the concept, and provides clinical examples and case histories as well as applications of the theoretical material to large-scale socio-political issues.

For Reich, self-regulation was a biological concept which allowed the organism of the infant to develop in the most natural and healthy way he could imagine at that time. Given his training and his interests, he focused on the psychosexual stages of development originally posited by Freud, and added one, the ocular stage, at the very beginning of life, thus underlining the importance of a then nascent field of pre- and peri-natal psychology. He advocated such things as allowing the newborn to remain close to or on its' mother's body, breastfeeding on demand, toilet training only when initiated by the child, and freedom for children to masturbate and explore each other's bodies (Carleton, 1987).

In recent years, the term "self-regulation" has again become current, this time in the literature of applied neuroscience or neuropsychology. Authors such as Allan Schore (1994, 2003), Amini, et al (1996), Daniel Siegel (1999), and Louis Cozolino (2002), have used the term to refer to the affect regulation developed by the infant in concert with the effective parent or caregiver. Peter Fonagy (2002) and his associates have explored the relationship between affect regulation and the development of the self.

Contemporary neuroscientific research has picked up where Freud and, subsequently Reich, left off. With tools such as fMRI's, scientists are able to trace happenings in the nervous system that Freud and Reich could only intuit or suggest. Freud left the neurological research in which he had been trained to found a whole new "science" of psychology. Reich at first followed his mentor but subsequently broke with him around, among other things, the biological/energetic basis of psychosexual development. What Freud ultimately saw as metaphorical, Reich saw as strictly physical/energetic.

In order to understand the genesis of Reich's thought, it is necessary first to consider the point of view of his predecessor and mentor. In *THREE ESSAYS ON THE THEORY OF SEXUALITY*, first published in 1905, Freud outlined what is considered by many – and certainly by Reich – to be his momentous and original contributions to psychological theory: the importance of sexual factors in the etiology of neurosis, the psychosexual stages of child development, and what is most relevant here, the theory of libidinal energy as the life force in human existence. It is interesting to note that what Freud and Reich called "energy" includes what contemporary neuroscientists and attachment theorists refer to as "resonance." In an interpersonal context, they are virtually the same. It was upon these early ideas that Reich built his own work and eventually developed his own original contributions.

By 1930, however, when he came to write *CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS*, Freud had, according to Reich, betrayed much of his own earlier work, including Reich's contributions to it. In a 1952 interview with Kurt Eissler (Higgins & Raphael, 1967) for *The Sigmund Freud Archives*, Reich states that Freud wrote *CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS* in direct response to a lecture Reich gave in Freud's home. In any case, Freud does suggest a poor prognosis for the relationship between sexuality (which we can simply see as life energy) and society. Freud derives an

antithesis between civilization and sexuality from the circumstance that sexual love is a relationship between two individuals in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, whereas civilization depends on relationships between a considerable number of individuals (p.55).... [More generally,] sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life...(p.44)

In this respect civilization behaves towards sexuality as a people or a stratum of its population does which has subjected another one to its exploitation. Fear of a revolt by the suppressed elements drives it to stricter precautionary measures...A high water mark in such a development has been reached in our western european civilization. A cultural community is perfectly justified, psychologically, in starting by proscribing manifestations of the sexual life of children, for there would be no prospect of curbing the sexual lusts of adults if the ground had not been prepared for it in childhood (p.51).

To paraphrase Freud, civilization is dependent upon the primacy of the neo-cortex, which can and must be the regulator and controller of the remainder of the body/mind. This attitude underlay much psychoanalytic thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was frequently applied to the treatment of infants and children. Reich and the body psychotherapies which his work spawned along with contemporary applications of neuroscience see it differently.

Reich refused to accept the inevitability of such an antithesis or the necessity for such instinctual sublimation in the interest of cultural development. He therefore rejected the necessity for regulating infant feeding, elimination or sexuality, seeing them as natural expressions of the organism. Reich, in fact, posited that true sublimation of antisocial impulses would be possible only in the absence of repression. Infantile and antisocial impulses can be given up only when normal physiological needs can be gratified (Reich, 1945, p.19). Reich, then, distinguishes between natural, biological needs and impulses and the secondary antisocial impulses which result from their repression. Nature and culture in his view, are not, as Freud concluded, inherently antithetical. If a person's (especially an infant's) primary instinctual needs are gratified, it increases his capacity for both love and work. In Reich's opinion, there

can be harmony between nature and culture (1945, p.25). If normal impulses are not suppressed, society need not fear its revolt.

Although the practices of self-regulation have been described and elaborated extensively in a number of publications, the most succinct description appeared in a 1973 JOURNAL OF ORGONOMY article by Barbara Koopman:

Infants were to be fed on demand; routine circumcisions were taboo; children were allowed to eat what they wished and toilet-train themselves when ready. The basic need for loving contact was to be met, but not the willy-nilly gratification of every whim. Children were to be taught to respect the rights of others, measures for their own safety, and freedom with responsibility (pp. 43-4).

Underlying these principles is the assumption that if the child is allowed to gratify his normal, healthy drives, he will not have to develop destructive, secondary drives (Wolfe, 1944, p.70). "Gratification of natural needs...will never make spoiled children; it will only make independent, contented personalities" (Martin, 1942, p.30).

Reich's most extended writings specifically addressed to self-regulation are to be found in a number of articles published in various orgonomic journals. There have been many groups and individuals who have used and reworked Reich's ideas. The only major group continuing to call itself orgonomic is the College of Orgonomy which publishes The Journal of Orgonomy (1967 to present). In 1950, Reich published the article "Children of the Future" (Reich, Wilhelm. Op. cit., pp. 194-206). This is in effect a manifesto. It announces the establishment of a major research undertaking to study "the healthy child." He acknowledges the debt he and his co-workers owe to the early psychoanalytic breakthrough in the understanding of the child, but he goes on to say:

...the psychoanalysts have failed to distinguish between primary and secondary perverse, cruel drives; they have left them together in one pot, so to speak, in accordance with the general "cultural" ideology, and they are continuously killing nature in the newborn while they try to extinguish the "brutish animal." They are perfectly ignorant of the fact that it is exactly this killing of the natural principle which creates the secondary and cruel nature, "human nature" so called, and that these artificial cultural creations, in turn, make compulsive moralism and brutal laws necessary. (Ibid., p.203) (72)

The study of the child, (specifically infantile sexuality, illustrating his conceptual debt to Freud), self-regulation, freedom vs. license, the family, and normal development are deeply embedded in all of Reich's work. In his Character Analysis, (1949) his focus is on the origin of pathologies, but the foundation for his entire discussion is based on the impact of the family on the newborn, and its ongoing impact on the child's development:

...The character formation in the child depends, however, on the character of the parents in more than one decisive way. With a sufficiently deep-reaching analysis, much of what official psychiatry considers "hereditary" can be shown to be the result of early identifications. We do not deny a hereditary factor in the modes of reacting; even the newborn infant has its "character." But we maintain that the environment is the decisive factor. (Wilhelm Reich, op. cit., pp. 155-156) (74)

These statements along with many others throughout his writings may be seen as anticipating many of the findings of attachment theory. Research utilizing the Adult Attachment Interview has shown how parents' attachment styles are mirrored by their children.

In articles like "Armoring in the Newborn Infant," ( Orgone Energy Bulletin, 3, July 1951, pp. 121-38) it is clear that by 1950 Reich had shifted his primary focus in the treatment of human pathology to the concept of mass prophylactic treatment of the family to secure a greater degree of health in newborns:

We assume that in a newborn infant an unwarped highly plastic bio-energy system emerges from the womb, and that from then onward it will be influenced by a multitude of various environmental impacts. The impinging impressions will begin to form the infant's specific type of reaction to pleasure and to sorrow (Ibid., p. 121). " (77-78)

The most comprehensive outline, explanation, and description of the technical application of Reich's ideas on childrearing from pregnancy to adolescence appear in *Man in the Trap* by Elsworth F. Baker (1967). Baker's position is clear: "No one can adequately understand the energetic concept of functioning unless he has worked with and carefully observed babies...When allowed to develop in the uterus of a relaxed and loving mother and born naturally, it becomes immediately an independent and efficient, functioning unit. Its breathing commences immediately, and immediately it is able to observe and contact the world" (Ibid., p. 310). (81-82)

For Reich, self-regulation was first and foremost a condition of the individual's character structure (Wilhelm Reich, op. cit., 1971. pp.155-163), and the individual's ability to, as a result of his or her emotional health, (Ibid., pp.156-158) function with a genuine openness, and spontaneity, and rationality. The healthy, self regulated individual does not adjust himself to the irrational part of the world and insists on his natural rights (Ibid., p. 156). The goals of character analysis and orgonomy were and are to help the individual resolve the blocks (both psychic and somatic) to the re-establishment of the natural processes of human life; the self-regulatory processes (Ibid., pp.146-163). (97-98)

For Reich, self-regulation was not a concept at all, but a biologically observable fact (Wilhelm Reich, op. cit., 1971, pp.255-265). When we look for a clear statement of how Reich applied this discovery of the natural functioning of living matter to humans, and particularly to children, we see most clearly how he developed and presented its principles. Here is Reich's explanation of how self-regulation operates, and how he sees the role of adults in working with these principles:

The newborn infant, if no severe damage has been inflicted upon it already in the womb, brings with it all the richness of natural plasticity and development productivity. The newborn infant is not, as so many erroneously believe, an empty sack or a chemical machine into which everybody and anybody can pour his or her special ideas of what a human being ought to be. It brings with it an enormously productive and adaptive energy system which, out of its own resources, will make contact with its environment and will begin to shape it according to its needs.

That is to say, the infant is hard-wired from birth to relate to its environment, especially its caretakers. It is prepared, as Schore points out, to participate in the formation and development of its nervous system.

Writing in response to the socio-political currents as well as the childrearing practices of his times, Reich goes on to say that

The basic and paramount task of all education, which is directed by the interest in the child, and not by interest in party programs, profits, church interests, etc., is to remove every obstacle in the way of this naturally given productivity and plasticity of the biological energy. These children will have to choose their own ways of being and will determine their own fates. We must learn from them, instead of forcing upon them our own cockeyed ideas and malicious practices which have been shown up as most damaging as well as ridiculous in every new generation. (Wilhelm Reich, op.cit., 1950, pp.204-205). (99-100).

Reich advocates practices that would become increasingly acceptable to a large segment of the American population by the early 1980's.

According to Reich, self-regulation describes the process of childrearing in the early years, especially self-determination in the regulation of the body and its functions. A child decides when and what it eats;

when it is ready to go to sleep; when it has sufficient control of its bowels to be toilet-trained, etc. In his writings, Reich was less specific about other aspects of childrearing, yet his position becomes evident from the following statement of his former wife and the mother of his son, Peter, Ilse Ollendorf. Here are some of her comments concerning the original "true" definition of self-regulation as practiced by her and Reich in the rearing of their son...people think self-regulation is the same as permissiveness. It isn't. Our ideas of self-regulation had to do with the body functions, physical functions, that they should be self regulated: feeding, toilet training, access to all parts of the body. That was self-regulation. As far as behavior was concerned, we used, I wouldn't say conventional methods, but there were limitations. (137-138) We did not let him cry. When he cried, we tried to find out why he cried, and tried to alleviate whatever was bothering him. We tried also, for instance, to include and not to isolate him, even when he was very small. (176)

Ilse Ollendorf and Gladys Meyer (wife of Reich's translator, Theodore Wolff) spoke to the point that their children were easily reasoned with. Gladys Meyer said her daughter was always a reasonable child. You could say, "Well, no, Sweetheart, don't do that." And, if you explained why, she would take it. Ilse Ollendorf said, "Peter was very outgoing, accepting of people, accepting things as they came along, easy to get along with, not terribly shy and in a way, I would say daring...because from a very young age, we had reasoned with him. We had explained things to him so that he could understand something, he could be reasoned with." Almost every parent interviewed in the early 70's who claimed adherence to Reich's ideas mentioned how emotionally open and honest the children were. For example, parents claimed that none of the children lied, a trait that the parents felt was directly attributable to the self-regulation. Many parents felt that their children were unusually empathetic persons. (237)

It is interesting to compare the above with Peter Levine and Maggie Klein's observations and directives in *Trauma through a Child's Eyes*. Writing almost half a century after Reich and his initial followers, it is interesting to me that except among certain groups, practical application of the principle of self-regulation to infants and children are still far from the norm. In their chapter "On Coming into the World: Birthing and Babies" (pp.275-322), Levine and Klein come to many conclusions similar to those espoused by Reich. Utilizing neuroscientific research, attachment theory, ethology, and their own considerable clinical and educational experience, Levine and Klein are able to elaborate and validate where Reich could only speculate.

The following are all direct quotations from Levine and Klein's chapter on the treatment of infants.

The mother's mental, physical, and spiritual health during gestation plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for a healthy baby. ( 278)

It is obvious that we must shift our values for the well-being of future generations. Providing the safe haven of a "good womb" experience must become a societal priority. (279)

The "new" parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, responsible for calming, is very immature at birth and only develops fully around eighteen months of age. The baby's maturing nervous system is dependent, therefore, on its environment to groove the neural pathways for deep relaxation, self-soothing, and building the capacity to tolerate stress and frustration. 7 After birth, infants need parents who can keep them warm, nurtured, rocked, cuddled, held, smiled at, and sung to. They need caregivers who are not stressed out, distracted, overwhelmed, depressed, or anxious. (279-280)

Ensure constant proximity to mother and as much skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby as possible. Electromagnetic resonance instruments show that mother and baby's subtle heart patterns are in synchrony at a distance of at least three feet and possibly up to twelve feet. Creating a distance greater than this during the early weeks of life is disruptive to the normal biological processes. This may cause a high level of stress hormones and poor attachment. (288)

Since nerve cells are proliferating rapidly during early infancy, we must protect newborns from as much pain as possible. Pain causes the developing nervous system to grow extra nerve cells to fire and transmit pain information to the brain. ( 296)

It is interesting to note a similar prescription from Reich written in 1951 (*Armoring in a Newborn Infant*):

The orgonotic sense of contact, a function of the orgone energy field of both the mother and the child, is unknown to most specialists; however, the old country doctor knows it well. *Orgonotic contact is the most essential experiential and emotional element in the interrelationship between mother and child*, particularly prenatally and during the first days and weeks of life. On it, basically, the future fate of the child depends. It seems to be the core of the emotional development of the newborn infant. We know very little about it....

To return to Levine and Klein...

#### What Newborns Need

It is most important for caregivers to recognize what their newborns need and lovingly provide it. For one thing, newborns need to be held. They need to mold into the inviting warmth of their parents' bodies—not into a plastic baby carrier. They are accustomed to being rocked and jiggled inside the womb; they need to be gently stimulated outside the womb as well. They need to find their way to the nipple and suckle the breast. They need to be swaddled with a receiving blanket so that they feel “held” securely when they are not skin-to-skin. They need to be soothed with gentle rhythmic rocking and swinging. They need to feel the stimulation of movement and play. They need to hear the sounds of their parents' voices singing and sounding to them and calling their names. They need to know that it's alright to cry for “no reason” as they are held comfortably by parents who are at ease with their baby's tears. Remember that infant tears may be a discharge and release from birth trauma. (297)

Feeding and relationships go hand-in-hand. Effective feeding supports the development of attachment, self-regulation, and healthy separation. When a parent reads and responds to the gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations of the infant regarding timing of feeding, amount, preferences, and pacing, positive attitudes about relationships are forged. The quality of the feeding relationship is characteristic of the overall relationship between infant and parent. Trust your baby. Feed her when she's hungry; do not force-feed. (300-301)

The best way to prevent long-term issues with nourishment and relationships is to make sure that babies get their initial needs met for contact. Also, breastfeeding should be on demand, not on someone else's schedule. (301)

While all mammals have evolved limbic circuitry to “read” internal states, primates have the unique capacity to create an internal state that resembles that of other by observing and copying intentional external behaviors. (29) According to Daniel Siegel (author of *Parenting from the Inside Out*) and the research of Marco Iacoboni, both at UCLA's center for Culture, Brain, and Development, it is the firing of mirror neurons that make it possible to have resonant relationships in the first place. (30, 301-302)

Siegel and Iacoboni are applying this new knowledge of mirror neurons to the implications for language and social development in children. This attunement with primary emotions is the way that children develop the sense of “feeling felt”. It is communicated non-verbally through facial expressions, tone of voice, and bodily postures, gestures, and actions, forming the basis for empathic connection from the very beginning of life. (302)

An infant not only experiences reflexive reactions but is also experiencing a sea of sensations. It has a nascent consciousness that registers what happens to it and around it, even in the womb. Yet there has been a long-held cultural belief in the West that babies lack both awareness and

sensation. Ironically, it has taken modern technology to “validate” the innate wisdom of tribal cultures that honor the baby’s feelings and gifts right from the time of conception. (303)

It is now a well-known fact that these earliest interactions between mother and infant determine the actual shape and structure of the brain in humans and all mammals. This is a radically different concept from even one decade ago. Your baby’s brain develops according to what you feed it, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. The quality of your interactions, connections, bonding, nurturance, and play create the neural pathways that affect relational patterns for life! (303)

Face-to-face attunement (where the baby’s basic needs and rhythms are perceived and responded to) of the infant-mother pair facilitates the development of the right orbito-frontal cortex, the part of the brain involved in a crucial way with increasing resilience to stress and trauma. (32) These early “mommy images”, once installed in implicit memory, become the basic building blocks for self-soothing as babies mature into toddlers, internalizing mother’s face as a symbol of comfort. As toddlers explore the world, moving away from mother, they carry these earliest experiences with them. If this imprint is lacking, the development of curiosity, social relationships, discovery, and learning are affected. The importance of mother in the development of self-regulation of emotional arousal cannot be overestimated. It remains life-long. (303-304)

With each successive match, mismatch, and repair your infant becomes more resilient. The window for sensation increases, as does the ability of his or her nervous system to charge and discharge smoothly. (305)

The more the mother tunes her activity level to the infant during periods of social engagement, and the more she allows him or her to recover quietly in periods of disengagement, the more synchronized their interactions. (35) Each time the repair is made, the infant brain organizes itself at a higher level of capability to recover from distress, which is fundamental to the infant’s affective development. (306)

The best trauma-prevention gifts you can give your baby are the gifts of emotional presence and somatic resonance, which is an inherent “knowing” of when the inevitable mismatch occurs and the receptivity to respond gracefully to repair it. In this way, your infant gets the message “I can be distressed, but it won’t last forever-there is a way out! I may feel awful now; soon I will feel good again.” This type of resonance equals love and everyone wins. (306)

Thus the adaptive brain shapes itself for bigger and better defensive responses or, when feeling safe, to experience more pleasure, curiosity, learning, frustration tolerance, and delight. The brain literally develops in correspondence to its environment. A thriving baby is a baby whose needs are met for pleasurable eye contact, the parent’s soothing voice, skin-to-skin touching, holding, movement, and play. One of the first things a healthy baby instinctively does after birth (if it hasn’t been drugged or separated from its mother) is to search for its mother’s face and listen for its mother’s (and father’s) voice. The blissful gaze between mother and infant creates a rush of feelings in the mother that turns on the infant brain. One is not possible without the other!

In Allan Schore’s landmark book, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (1994), he cites numerous studies regarding the process of regulation of the infant’s newly developing nervous system, beginning at birth. Face-to-face attunement of baby and caregiver was the mitigating factor that increased the capacity to self-regulate. With proper attunement in the mother-baby dyad, the orbito-frontal cortex develops properly, ensuring this “stress protection” against later traumas. (38, 307)

When attention (whether from familiar people or strangers) is given to a baby, it is important to notice how that attention affects the baby. (308)

Bonding: The Basis of Emotional Connection



Bonding is a special kind of togetherness. It is a comfortable feeling of well-being that occurs within the dynamic relating of the mother and her newborn. It is a “settling in together” that includes four essential components: 1) touching skin-to-skin; 2) communication that includes both eye contact and mother’s voice; 3) holding; and 4) playfulness. Babies look for their mother’s face and through touch and smell, search for their mother’s breast. Secretion of prolactin (the bonding hormone) create what some mothers have described as “a rush of love” that feels divine. This face-to-face gaze with pleasant vocalization brings growth not only to the baby, but also to the mother. What is even more astounding is how this emotional growth between a mother and her newborn is the catalyst that “turns on” the infant brain, releasing chemicals, proteins, enzymes, and other elements that actually shape both the structure and capacity of the brain. Whether a baby perceives the world as a friendly or hostile depends on the quality of these earliest interactions. Babies born to a depressed or anxious mother develop in response to those states. Babies born into a violent home develop brains that are shaping themselves for survival and defensiveness, with perception filtered to expect danger—whether or not danger is present. Babies born into safe and nurturing families develop brain with receptivity to pleasure and an eagerness to explore their surroundings, take healthy risks, and connect with others. (308-309)

Disruption to bonding—whether caused by a mother with a mental disorder, a violent or negligent home environment, or a highly anxious mother who overwhelms her baby (for example, by force-feeding to gratify her own need to do a “good job”)—cause a disorganization to occur in nervous system development. (310)

The very first “task” of babies is to form bonds of trust. Since they are dependent beings, they need to sense that they are wanted and truly welcomed. Lisbeth Marcher; the Danish founder of Bodynamics, refers (after the work of Erik Erikson in his landmark 1950 book *Childhood and Society*) to this earliest stage of development and “Existence.” To master this stage, a baby must feel that his existence is not a question. This need for a sense of “I am” and “I have a right to be here” is crucial. If there is resentment, neglect, pre-natal distress, or birth trauma during this period, to be alive, to exist, may literally be experiences as dangerous. (311)

The next stage of development begins in the months after birth and continues until approximately 18 months. This is often referred to as the “Needs” stage. The task is for the baby to learn to communicate needs and develop trust that his needs will be acknowledged. The good parent gives the message: “Your needs are OK; they do not overwhelm me.” Even if I can’t always meet them, I will not be upset with you for having them. I will try to meet your needs whenever possible and always when necessary.” When babies are put on feeding schedules rather than being fed when hungry, are not held, rocked, and cuddled enough, or not protected from the cold or sun, they suffer. Emotional and physical nourishment are fundamental at this point of development. Being force-fed, ignored, overstimulated by an excited or frenzied parent, and/or exposed to violence and even loud noises can cause problems later in life, ranging from eating disorders to difficulty with relationships, regulating emotions and moods, to disorders of conduct, attention, and hypervigilance. (313)

Again, parents need to resonate with their toddler, sensing the appropriate amount of help by noticing when she is stressed from too little help or disempowered by too much help. Your baby will appreciate your support to develop a sense of competence in exploring the world and becoming less dependent. The message to send your mobile baby is “I support you to be who you are, and if you need my help, I am here.” (314)

Babies do get traumatized and they do remember. Although preverbal children cannot put words to their experiences, there are well-documented accounts of encoded experiences in children between birth and two and a half years of age in books such as *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence* and *The Mind of Your Newborn Baby*. (See Bibliography.) Their traumas show up in behavioral changes and later get acted out in their play. (319)

Newborn babies feel pain. Circumcision is still sometimes performed without anesthesia. The delicate healthy skin tissue protecting the head of the penis is pulled back, crushed, and cut off. (321)

Circumcision is most definitely painful and can leave a traumatic imprint. We have worked with men, circumcised as babies, who have sensory memories of being “medically molested.” Fears associated with being touched intimately can then create issues around their sexuality. (321-322)

Thus, we can see that Reich’s ideas, if evaluated by what Levine and Klein have written, were fundamentally sound. With the benefit of neuroscience and attachment theory as well as their own clinical research and experience, Levine and Klein have essentially validated and elaborated the thought of their predecessor, thus placing Somatic Experiencing squarely at the center of the evolution of body psychotherapy.

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