Introduction to *The Aware Baby*

For more information about *The Aware Baby*: www.awareparenting.com/awarebaby.html

About the author

Aletha Solter, PhD, is a Swiss/American developmental psychologist, international speaker, consultant, and founder of the Aware Parenting Institute (www.awareparenting.com). Her books have been translated into many languages, and she is recognized internationally as an expert on attachment, trauma, and non-punitive discipline.

The need for a revolutionary approach to parenting

The birth of a baby is a joyful event. Many new parents feel tremendous love and caring, sometimes at a depth never before experienced. Friends and relatives are eager to see what the infant looks like, and perhaps also to experience for a few seconds the feelings of love and hope that a fresh new human being elicits in all of us. Parents naturally want to do everything they can to insure that their baby will grow up to be loving, intelligent and happy, and contribute something to society.

The world is gradually becoming a better place for babies. Knowledge of nutrition has led to better diets for pregnant and breastfeeding women as well as for babies. This knowledge, combined with improvements in health care, allows babies to have a better chance than ever before of surviving and being healthy. The growth of developmental psychology has alerted parents to the importance of the first few years of life, and has resulted in a proliferation of parenting books and educational toys that can help babies develop their intellectual abilities. Infants with handicaps now stand an excellent chance in many countries of being encouraged to reach their full potential. Research on the importance of early attachments has further contributed to our understanding of the optimal conditions for emotionally healthy development. As a culture, we are gradually accepting the fact that babies are full-fledged human beings with the ability to think and feel.

All over the world, parents raise their children to become productive members of their specific cultures. Parents foster the development of different values depending on their religious or cultural beliefs, as well as the requirements for survival, whether these are cooperation or obedience, dependence or independence, creativity or conformity, sharing or ownership, humility or pride. Parents also emphasize the development of social, motor, memory, language, or reasoning skills depending on what will best serve the child later in life. Parents transmit these cultural values, expectations, and skills to their babies in a myriad of ways: by how the parents respond to crying, how much they hold their babies, what kinds of stimulation they offer, how often they feed them, where the babies sleep, and how they set limits. In most cultures, these traditions are assumed to be the “natural” and correct way to treat babies.

In the traditional hunter-gatherer !Kung San culture of the Kalahari desert in Africa, parents emphasize the development of motor skills so that the children will eventually be able to walk long distances, hunt, and carry heavy loads on their backs. Consequently, anthropologists found that the !Kung babies excelled in motor coordination tests. The Yequana Indian mothers of the Amazon forest of Venezuela expose their babies to different water currents at an early age. Fish is a staple of their diet, and these people are some of the best whitewater canoeists in the world. The Gusii of East Africa stress the development of obedience and responsibility so that the children can become productive members of society and help in the fields or tend livestock at an early age.

However, no culture is perfect. In most cases, the cultural values and economic constraints force parents to impose certain restrictions on their children and ignore certain legitimate needs, such as the need to express emotions, to be fully accepted, or to explore freely in a safe environment. The fact that infants survive and grow up able to carry on the culture and reproduce does not imply that their basic human needs have been met or that they have attained their human potential for intellectual, emotional, or spiritual development.

In Western, industrialized nations, parents have traditionally emphasized the development of independence and the acquisition of linguistic and cognitive skills. The idea is that children must become intellectually competent and self-reliant in order to succeed in an increasingly competitive world. In fact, scholastic achievement tests at all levels of education reflect this cultural bias. They measure primarily vocabulary, reading comprehension, and mathematics. Speed and superficial knowledge are also emphasized, especially in the United States. This cultural emphasis is often at the expense of the development of deep thinking, creativity, cooperation, and empathy.

Furthermore, until recently, there has been little effort in Western cultures to raise children to become non-violent. Our children are exposed to violence on a daily basis, both in real life and in the media. However, because of the powerful weapons of destruction and the easy availability of guns, raising children to be non-violent is now of primary importance for everyone's survival. We must teach children alternatives to violence for solving conflicts. We must also raise children so they will be free of pent-up rage or fear, because these emotions are so often at the root of violence. This means paying close attention to the ways they get hurt, and helping them heal from stress and trauma. *We can no longer afford to ignore how children feel*.

Our child-rearing methods must therefore change drastically if we are to raise children to be not only productive, but also non-violent, citizens of our changing world. We still need to emphasize the development of linguistic and cognitive skills for economic survival in industrialized nations, but we must also focus on emotional health and self-esteem. We need to question our assumption that independence is a virtue, and raise children to be more interdependent. They need models of democracy in action and conflict-resolution skills so they will learn how to work cooperatively with others. Perhaps most important of all, we must allow them to express their emotions and heal from trauma.

This new approach is not based only on the requirements of our particular culture. It also recognizes deep and universal human needs that must be met if babies are to grow up

emotionally healthy in *any* culture. According to psychohistorian Lloyd de Mause, there has been an evolution in child rearing throughout the ages, with a gradual shift from abusive methods to an approach that trusts children's inherent goodness, involves more dialog with them, more empathy to their emotions, a tolerance of their developing will and individuality, and encouragement for creativity and independent thought.

This new approach has been gradually gathering momentum since World War II. It began with the popularization of natural childbirth and gentle handling of the infant after birth. It has further manifested itself by a revival of breastfeeding, the recognition of attachment needs, and a tendency towards less authoritarian child-rearing methods. However, we need to continue questioning some of our basic assumptions and beliefs about what is best for babies.

This book describes a comprehensive, revolutionary approach to parenting from conception to two-and-a-half years of age. The seven chapters each discuss a separate topic (such as crying, sleep, food, and play), and address babies' needs in regard to that particular area. This approach, that I call "Aware Parenting" (www.awareparenting.com), does not involve quick solutions or simplistic methods. Instead, it represents an entirely new way of being with babies based on trust, empathy, and respect. It describes how to form a deep emotional connection with your baby, and how to help your baby stay connected to her true self and grow up as a whole human being. Aware Parenting is comprised of three basic aspects: attachment-style parenting, non-punitive discipline, and acceptance of emotional release.

The recommendations in this book may be quite different from other books you have read or from your cultural assumptions about what is a "normal" or "correct" way to raise a child. I encourage you to have an open mind, even though at first you may strongly disagree with some of the material. It is normal and healthy to question what you read. On the other hand, please don't accept this approach blindly as a new dogma or "system" for raising children. It will work well only if you keep thinking creatively about what is best for you and your family.

Four Basic Assumptions

There are four basic assumptions concerning human nature underlying the ideas presented in this book. The first assumption is that human beings are born knowing basically what they need, not only for survival, but also for optimal physical, emotional, and intellectual development. As an illustration, given choices between toys, babies will play with the ones that best foster their intellectual development on any given day. The idea is that babies know and indicate what they need, and we can therefore trust them to be in charge of their own lives as much as they are physically able. Babies will communicate their needs, if given a chance, and it is the caretaker's role to interpret their signals correctly.

The second assumption is that babies are conceived with the potential for both good and bad behavior, but how they are treated determines how they will act. If babies are not hurt or oppressed, and if all their needs are met, they will be good, cooperative, intelligent, joyful people with the ability to give and receive love. People act in hurtful and stupid ways only if they are suffering from unhealed trauma.

The third assumption is that experiences early in life can have a profound and lasting effect on feelings and behavior patterns later in life. Babies are vulnerable and can be easily hurt because of their extreme dependence and lack of information. Even in the best of families, babies will experience stress and emotional pain at times. In addition to contributing to negative feelings, painful experiences early in life may also be responsible for eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, addictions, insomnia, certain learning disabilities, relationship problems, self-destructive behavior, hyperactivity, depression, and violence. Throughout this book I explain how early experiences may lead to these and other negative consequences. Although later childhood experiences are also important, the first few years are by far the most important years of a person's life.

Some people disagree with this assumption and feel that it places too much of a burden and responsibility on parents, so they prefer to believe that much of human behavior is determined by hereditary factors. There has been an ongoing debate between proponents of the "nature" theory, who believe that behavior is determined to a great extent by genetic factors, and proponents of the "nurture" theory, who place greater importance on environmental factors such as child-rearing. Nobody knows how much of our behavior is hereditary. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that the way babies are treated has a strong influence on their feelings and behavior later in life. In fact, early environmental influences can alter the very function of the brain. It is therefore important to realize that even biological correlates of behavior may not be genetic at all, but rather the result of early environmental influences (including prenatal ones) on the developing brain.

The fourth assumption of this book is that, when optimal conditions are present, babies can heal from many of the effects of stress or trauma. Babies' natural biological tendency is to strive for health and physiological balance (homeostasis). In addition to describing an approach that avoids hurting babies as much as possible, this book also describes how to help babies heal from emotional trauma if it should occur. The fact that most of us adults still suffer from the effects of early trauma does not contradict this fourth assumption. It simply implies that we were not raised in an environment that allowed us to restore emotional health.

In summary, the four assumptions underlying this book are:

1) Babies know what they need.

2) If babies' needs are met and if they are not hurt, they will be intelligent, compassionate, and non-violent.

3) Babies are extremely vulnerable, and early trauma and unfilled needs can have long-lasting, negative effects.

4) Babies have the ability to recover from many of the effects of stress and trauma.