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Family Matters: The Fourth Trimester

By Chloe Learey

Sally Pennington, RN, mentioned the concept of the fourth trimester on the second episode of "Family Matters," the talk show on Brattleboro Community Television where we discuss topics of interest to families with young children.

Considering the first three months of a baby's life outside of the womb as a critical period of development is helpful in understanding how best to support your child during this time. Going from a dark, relatively quiet place where everything is soft and warm and you are in constant physical contact with your mother to a bright, loud environment where surfaces can be cold and hard, and where you are sometimes not touching another living being is a drastic transition.

Supporting this transition is key to helping a baby feel safe and secure and promoting attachment between child and parent. Secure attachment to a primary caregiver promotes social emotional development and the ability for a child to regulate their feelings, leading to a child who is better equipped to handle the ups and downs of the world.

Helping families understand the importance of this period and the tools they have for supporting this development in their child are an important part of early childhood services. Responding to a baby's cues is one of the key elements of supporting secure attachment during this fourth trimester. A newborn is a very competent human being who can make his or her needs known even when we cannot always understand what is needed. When you don't know what to do, simply acknowledging that your baby is seeking attention provides reassurance, and remembering that this little person has gone from that dark, warm constant environment to a bright, loud unpredictable one can give you clues about what things to try in order to be responsive. Is the baby cold or hungry, needing movement, needing touch, needing more quiet? Thinking of ways to mimic or re-create the more predictable womb environment is a good start. Talking to your baby about what is happening in as soothing a voice as possible during this period is also key. There is plenty of time for baby to learn to self-regulate as they continue to get used to the world, but in the first three months post-partum they are relying on primary caregivers to help them feel safe, secure and reassured.

Of course there can be challenges to parents being able to be as responsive as they would like. This can be a time of sleep deprivation, schedule changes, and shifting family dynamics. In addition, mothers might experience postpartum depression or, more broadly, perinatal mood disorders. It is estimated that up to 80 percent of women experience the baby blues for one to three weeks after giving birth, and that this resolves itself without major intervention. However, for some women anxiety and depression persists which can significantly interfere with attachment if not recognized and treated. It is important for physicians, nurses, home visitors and others who work with mothers of newborns to be aware of this as a possibility and support a mother getting help.

Each family's experience of the fourth trimester will be unique as parents and babies learn to read each other's cues in the attachment dance. As always there is lots of advice lurking out there. Understanding that your primary job as a parent in this time is to help your baby feel safe and secure can help you decide what feels like the right thing for you to do.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Childhood Development in Brattleboro. You can watch episodes of Family Matters by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>.

http://www.reformer.com/health/ci_28870535/family-matters-fourth-trimester