

However, when a baby with any sort of special need is born, their senses may be incomplete. They may have a physical disability, sensory impairment, intellectual delay or a combination of all three. They may just have a temporary special need because of premature birth, through to a baby with permanent profound and multiple learning difficulties. Carpenter states (1994) that forty percent of all 1 to 2 lb. (450-900 g) babies are now surviving, with half requiring special education and one in five having profound multiple learning difficulties. Some of these babies with special needs may have, for example, a visual or hearing impairment shutting down on particularly areas of sensory learning.

A baby with a severe intellectual delay may not be able to use their senses to explore the world around them because they have not 'learned' to use their primary senses. It is difficult to be motivated to reach, grasp, and explore a bright, noisy rattle if you have no sense of the satisfaction of using the skills of looking, listening and consciously moving. Fraiberg (1975) conducted many studies on mothers with blind babies and made it clear that inhibition in cuddling (i.e. bodily sense), touching (i.e. tactile sense) and talking (i.e. sound sense) to babies has a significant negative effect on the normal bonding process between parents and their baby.

First steps...

Members and friends of any family, with a new baby in the midst, instinctively approach them in sensory ways. They, with varying shades of enthusiasm, or expertise, approach babies and:

- cuddle, rock, hold them close
- pat and stroke, bounce, bring their face close to the baby's face
- move faces in exaggerated motions
- emphasise lips in sounds and repeat sounds back
- wave a bottle under a nose to smell
- make funny noises, blow raspberries
- stroke lips to encourage feeding
- provide peek-a-boos and stimulating toys, play silly games and, in short,
- provide a rich sensory background in which to grow and progress.

Indeed, Lewis & Coates (1980) give evidence that babies who experience such a responsive

environment make faster social and cognitive progress.

However, families and friends with a baby with special needs may also use these intuitive sensory strategies but are met with an apparent blank wall of response. They may think twice about interacting after these rebuffs. Jones (1994) states that « sensory deprivation is common amongst sensory impaired children firstly because of reduced handling and because of the difficulty some parents have in intervening physically and relating emotionally with their child ».

This reduction in interaction may also happen with the many - or few, as the case may be - professionals surrounding the family - eager to help and perhaps be the 'expert' in a particular area. They may feel that their 'expert' help is being rejected at source - the unresponsive baby. As Featherstone (1980) says: « It often looks to parents as though outsiders hold the child's future in their hands. For their part, professionals often feel less powerful than they appear to clients ».

Even the educationalist, with specialist training in teaching strategies and an understanding of early sensory and learning processes, may respond to a child with profound multiple learning difficulties in a different way than normal. Ware (1994) describes a number of studies on staff-pupil interactions, including one which found most classroom interactions were extremely brief (less than a minute each), time between interactions averaged 12 to 13 minutes and pupils with more severe disability were less likely to receive initiations that expected a response.

An instance confirming reduced intervention was seen in my own family, five years ago. Alexander, a surviving triplet, was born weighing 1 lb. 10 oz. (700 g) and spent the first months of her life in an incubator. Her physical and medical needs were very well met but there was little interaction with the nursing staff as she was 'a good baby'. Her dad felt that even if she was a good baby, she needed something more in life than a humming, white incubator. Every day that he visited, he gathered her from the incubator (tubes and wires and all) and balanced her on his hand. He massaged her with his little finger as he sang nursery rhymes to her, blew raspberries on her feet and finished with 'peek-a-boo' using a little handkerchief. It was a much