

Primal Health



*The future of our world
Depends on babies growing up healthy
In mind, body, and spirit.
Cathy Daub*

Visit www.primalhealthresearch.com

Or

www.birthworks.org/what-is-primal-health

Or

www.birthworks.org/primal-health-research

Primal health is the period of time from conception to the end of the first year of life. Research by Michel Odent MD, suggests this time period impacts one's physical and emotional health for their lifetime. This means that as postpartum doula, we have the opportunity to support families in creating optimal primal health. The links below explain optimal health, please visit them for more understanding. In addition the most important points regarding primal health are described below.

As postpartum doula our role is to provide non-medical holistic support to families. By providing them with evidenced based information, lactation support, emotional support and facilitating bonding we can encourage optimal primal health.

What is important about the Primal Health Databank?

The primal health databank developed by Michel Odent on the BirthWorks website describes a growing body of knowledge showing that experiences a baby has during this primal period directly impacts his health as an adult. All birth professionals and parents need to be aware of the importance of the primal period in birth.

Sensory Integration

The experience of a mother and her baby at birth is one of sensory integration. This means that the mother and baby use all of their senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling to stimulate hormone production and bond and attach with each other. A baby sees his mother, hears her soothing voice, feels her skin, tastes the salt on her skin, and smells the colostrum that has the same taste and smell as amniotic fluid. A flood of hormones are released in the mother and baby as they connect and bond with each other through sensory integration.

These hormones have physical and behavioral properties that also help to develop the baby's limbic (emotional) brain. It is the cumulative effect of these senses that forms pathways in the baby's deep limbic brain. The brain is a sensory organ that develops with sensory input. The quality of sensory input passing through several pathways at once, helps to integrate all pathways of the brain during critical periods of fetal development and when an infant is outside the womb.

Breastfeeding immediately after birth is actually not as much about nutrition, because the milk does not come in until about three-five days later, but is more an experience of fetal brain development. In addition, all the senses are stimulated, becoming integrated into the mother and baby's physiology. With mother-baby skin-to-skin contact in the weeks and months after birth, the baby experiences the world as a safe place. This forms the foundation for him to grow and learn in the years to come.

Innate Fetal Agenda

The baby has an innate fetal agenda. At some level, the baby expects to continue to feel skin-to-skin contact with his mother. His mother in turn has primal behaviors that are instinctive. In the animal world, mothers will lick their newborns stimulating hormonal production. In humans, when a woman is alone with her newborn in the moments after birth, she will touch and massage her baby's skin and talk to him with high pitched sing-song vowel sounds, all perhaps before even picking him up. These primal behaviors are part of an innate fetal agenda. At the moment of birth, breastfeeding is the baby's primary agenda because to survive he must get food. Says Bergman, "Separation tolerance in mammals is measured in minutes – in humans, it is not measurable."

Protest and Despair

Separation of mother and baby is a violation of the innate fetal agenda. All of his experiences have been a result of sensory input from his mother and he expects this to continue after birth. If it doesn't, and he is separated from her, he experiences protest and despair instead of safety and security and these are the pathways laid down in the limbic (emotional) brain which influence adult health. Protest in and of itself doesn't harm the brain and in fact some stress resistance develops resilience which is necessary for health because we want to maintain the capacity to function after stressful experiences. However, when it is repeated and prolonged, harm follows in the brain, with the actual wiring of parts of the brain changing to something different.

Socially, with protest and despair, the brain wires itself in a "fight-flight" response (the amygdala, hippocampus, hemispheres, and cerebellum). Aggression, defense, anger, irritability, and heightened arousal, become wired into the brain." Ensuring mother baby skin-to-skin contact after birth is a way to prevent this from happening.

Behavior is Place Dependent: Cells That Fire Together, Wire Together

Behavior is place dependent. This means that if the place is not there, the behavior will be absent. For

example, if a baby is separated from his mother, she will not be able to exhibit primal behaviors such as caressing and massaging him that release a multitude of hormones in him, all with their associated behaviors. Another way to say this is that cells that fire together, wire together. If they don't fire, because there is no place, then pathways that were supposed to wire don't and the learning is lost because the pathways never formed.

As a postpartum doula, even if there was mother-baby separation, all is not lost because pathways in the limbic brain are still forming. It is crucial that the mother understands the significance of mother-baby skin-to-skin contact and gives her baby all the touching she can, even wearing her baby in a kangaroo carrier that holds him close to her heart.

Achieving Stability Through Change

Attachment of the mother and baby helps to establish what is called regulation in the right brain. Regulation helps the baby to know what is normal so that when he encounters stress and change in the world, he will be able to “regulate” back to his normal set point. This ability to achieve stability through change forms the foundation of good mental health.

Emotional Language Leads to Speech

Another skin-to-skin mother-baby contact is so important is that all the senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling, are translated into emotional language – not through the mouth but through the ANS (Autonomic Nervous System) which is the vehicle that expresses a language between the mother and baby by secreting hormones in the body that wire the brain. This emotional language has an effect on the baby's heart rate, hormones, appetite, and activity, all regulating the baby's metabolism and helping even a young premature baby to improve in color, temperature, and the ability to open her eyes. This sensory experience forms the basis for the newborn's future development of speech and language.

The cascade of events in mother-infant separation at the time of birth has deep and significant societal implications. Mothers and babies need to be protected at this crucial time in their lives, and caregivers need to insist on maintaining their skin-to-skin contact well into the postpartum period. Nothing can be more important to the health of our society as a whole. If pregnant women knew the importance of suckling and breastfeeding for brain wiring and maturity, more would likely breastfeed their babies. They would also seek ways to increase mother-baby skin-to-skin contact throughout the day and night in the weeks and months after birth.

Application and Understanding

5. Define the Primal Period and explain its significance.
6. What is an innate fetal agenda?
7. What is the meaning of “Behavior is Place Dependent?” Give an example.
8. Describe how sensory integration is a crucial part of the birth experience on into the postpartum period.
9. What is the reason that humans need to be able to achieve “Stability through change?”
10. How would you respond to the following scenario?
Two weeks after the birth of her daughter, Mary decides she needs to hire you for postpartum doula care. She has just returned from the store and you see that her baby is in a car seat set on the floor. She says she tried breastfeeding but it hurt too much and besides she'll be going back to work eventually so she has decided to bottle feed. Her baby starts crying and she walks over and starts rocking her in the car seat.

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