As technology evolves, from time to time recognition becomes possible of a naturally occurring phenomenon that clearly must have been happening for eons, and whose existence is of far more significance than one initially may recognize. One such phenomenon recently observed is the fetal erection of the penis. Depending upon one's point of view, such a discovery must be of varied significance.

We have been hearing about the concept of fetal erection for some time now, but it has remained in the "so what, everybody knows that" category simply because so few of us had access to its living proof—as recorded in an ultra-sound picture such as the one presented on this page which shows this erection in a 29-week-old fetus. This remarkable sonograph has been generously supplied to me by Deborah Alley, RP, RPMS, senior ultra-sound technician in the Department of Radiology at the Norfolk General Hospital, Norfolk, Virginia, and I am very grateful for this contribution.

Staring at this actual proof and suddenly absorbing the fact that such intrauterine erection is a real and universal aspect of the human experience, so great has been my wonderment that I want to share with everyone my own logical interpretation of its meaning.

The primary message seems to me a simple one: Each of the human body systems begins its characteristic functioning during pre-natal life, except for the reproductive system which remains on "hold" until the approach of puberty. Thus, the fetus ingests the amniotic fluid surrounding it and this is then processed by the digestive and urinary systems. Deborah Alley writes: "We can watch the baby's bladder empty and fill again with a 30-minute interval. . . . We often see the fetus void which presents as a steady stream of echoes flowing out through the penis." The heart beating and the blood circulating are probably the earliest signs of fetal body functions easily observed, though there is also the general metabolic activity that results in growth, and the movements of the musculo-skeletal system. The fetus's reactions to loud sound or bright light directed at the sheltering abdominal wall are also well known.

As to the sexual response system, I'm informed that pre-natal penile erection is cyclical on a pretty regular basis, just as it will continue to be throughout the rest of that individual's life. What of the baby girl? No direct observation before birth has been possible up to this time, whether of clitoral erection or vaginal lubrication, but Langfeldt (1980) has shown that these are evident from birth onward, to continue cyclically throughout her life. All of this makes possible the central finding that the human sexual response system functions literally during the entire life span. Of course, as with other body systems, functioning in utero and during the first days of life is reflex in nature. But Brazelton (1981) has demonstrated how surprisingly early and how quickly a newborn learns control of a number of body reactions and functions. In fact, "everybody knows" (though not everybody has observed) that infants of both sexes are often highly successful in learning, in the first weeks or months of life, that a pleasurable experience can be set in motion simply by pressing the thighs together. For want of an age-related term, we call it orgasm, and infant girls appear to be quite enthusiastic about this accomplishment. Certainly by the time a baby gains enough control of its hands to begin exploration of what is nearest and dearest to it—its own body—the sexual pleasure center thereof has already been identified, from then on to be enjoyed as much as the surrounding culture will allow.

And this is often not a great deal—or not at all. Given our present apprehensive and fearful attitudes, interference with this naturally occurring phenomenon is the order of the day with most parents (and even with a goodly number of professional people) who take for granted that to permit is to condone, something that at all costs must not be allowed to happen. Providing reassurance that masturbation is harmless is generally in vain. Some people grudgingly concede that "It's okay, but only if you don't do it too much." But what is too much? Who are we to say, especially as we know that the body's natural refractory periods take over as safeguards? However, when we interfere, that is, when we try to come between the child and his/her body, the negative results may not be seen until much later. Therefore, parents need to be made aware of the importance to the child's future of the evolution of—rather than the suppression of—the child's sexuality. They should be instructed that they are not simply bringing up their child, but someone's future husband or wife, and a possible parent of their own grandchild. Do they really want to pass on to the next generation the damaging chain of negative sexual conditionings that they themselves have undoubtedly experienced?

What is needed is to teach them that sexuality is a marvelous natural phenomenon, to be developed in the same way as the child's inborn human capacity to talk or to walk; and that their role should relate only to teaching the child the appropriateness of privacy, place, and person—in a word, socialization. Parents can be helped to comprehension of this if they will only recognize that, from the very beginning of its life, a child's
sexuality is an integral part of its being—that it is meant to function along with, rather than apart from, its mind and body, with each inherently influencing and being influenced by the other two. And if this realization is reflected in the parents' attitudes and actions, the child will start off on a positive path: “I know my body is good. The feelings it has and the things it does and what it produces are all good. I am learning where, when, and how it is okay to let these things happen. I am in charge of my body.”

The serenity that comes from loving and being loved, trusting and being trusted, provides a secure basis for moving ahead through life’s changes. In my opinion, any crippling interference with children’s normal body functions is a form of emotional as well as physical abuse. If child development can come to include the development of appropriate use of all human endowments, including sexuality, we may just possibly begin to note fewer of the signs and symptoms of psychosocial dislocations that are presently all around us. Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” But, well before they reach that stage, the infant and young child are saying to us, without words, “I feel, therefore I am.”

Look well at the face of the three-year-old person at right in whom I see all of the foregoing epitomized.

References


Rape becomes “blood sport.” Auckland Star, April 7, 1982.

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