

Treating Early Signs of Autism: addressing parental sensitivity to sensory processing differences

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**"The human capacities for love and for learning
are rooted in the sensory motor period of
development, the first 18 months of life."**

Selma Fraiberg, 1980

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Obstacles in the path to love and learning

- Infants who do not move in synchrony to the sound of the parent's voice
- Infants whose facial expressions do not brighten when they see their parents
- Infants who do not mold comfortably into the parent's body or take comfort in physical contact
- Infants who do not use gaze to regulate interaction

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Infants who are confusing social partners are disorienting for parents

- "My baby does not like to be held"
- "My baby prefers the car seat to my arms"
- "My baby prefers to be alone"
- "My baby is content to spend a long time looking at things, but not at me"

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Relationship is the context for treatment

- Parents and infants find meaning in preverbal systems of sensory-motor responses
 - Create shared experience
 - Support mutual regulation
 - Form internal working models of relationship
 - Provide secure physical and emotional base for exploration

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Prodromal signs of autism change the dynamic system

- Interactional Synchrony:
 - Communication of subjective inner states
 - Behavior in dyadic context
- Failures of mutuality or attunement lead to:
 - Physical withdrawal or parental overstimulation
 - Shutting down of sensory seeking through gaze
 - Flight and freeze responses
 - Dis-coordination of rhythmic motor and vocal activity

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The baby's behavior affects parental sensitivity

- Hard to imagine what the baby wants or needs
- Parent can't figure out how to follow the lead of a child who appears rejecting or aimless
- Parent has to work against their own feelings of failure or inadequacy to parent this baby

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The trajectory leading to ASD diagnosis

- The infant self-protectively shut out unmanageable stimuli
- Sensory and motor constrictions are rarely the obvious explanation to parent
 - Who feels emotionally rejected and confused
 - Who withdraws from contact just in the moment the infant needs parental co-regulation most

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The treatment approach

- Attention to matching the rhythms and intensity of affect, movement and sound
- Repair of the disrupted moment of engagement lies in the choreography between the parent and infant
- Interpret the infant's functioning to the parent

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Synchrony and the Interactive Flow

- Rhythmic repetitions
- Ongoing attunement to affective states
- Contingent responses to infant communicative signals
- Temporal aspects of intensity, shape and rhythm
- Respect for differences in sensory reactivity

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Affective Attunement

- Choreography between infant and parent is based in a rhythmic dance of sound and motion
- A sensory-motor affective cross modal parental gesture that matches the vitality affect of infant
- The parent does not show the baby what he did, **she lets him know she can feel what it is to be him**
- Parental attunement produces more gazing and positive vocalizing than maternal imitation (Markova & Legerstee, 2006)

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Match the Infant's rhythm

- Change how parent uses space and intensity of affect
- Slowing down in body and voice
- Lowering the body, lowering voice tone
- Tolerating waiting for the baby to recover his movement toward the parent

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Pitfalls in intervention strategy

- Increase the stimulation or become bigger, louder and more intense
 - leads to shut down
- Bring in extraneous objects to distract the infant from distress
 - leads to distraction by the object, but disengagement from the parent
- Overlook the parent's histories or life circumstances

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The work of the therapist:

Expanding the model of developmental guidance:

- Understanding the contractions interfering with the infant's sensory and motor systems
- Interpreting to the parents what is being observed and speculating why the infant is struggling with his or her responses
- Lending vitality affect to the parent through parallel process

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The work of the therapist:

- Offer insight and support the parent's needs:
 - Regain emotional vitality and self-esteem
 - Enable repair of missteps in interaction
- Recover an empathic connection to the baby
- Baby is supported by the parent's attunement and capacity for co-regulation

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More information:

- www.kidsattuned.org
- <http://kidsattuned.com/recognizing-and-treating-early-signs-of-autism-the-infant-parent-therapeutic-process-part-3-2/>
- <http://kidsattuned.com/recognizing-and-treating-early-signs-of-autism-the-infant-parent-therapeutic-process-part-4/>
- www.dirime.com

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