

By Barbara Holden

Here is a powerful and unique description of a baby's very first moment on earth:

“While she is still wet from the womb, as she breathes her first breath, cries her first cry, feels her first gusts of cool air, her brain is building itself at a rate never to be repeated... Synapses in her tiny brain are sprouting in response to each sensation. The most powerful computer in the world has been waiting for these moments of light, and smell, and touch, and sound, and taste – the carpenters of the human brain.”

This powerful portrait of childbirth appears in Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley's book *Ghosts from the Nursery*, a work that traces the roots of youth and adult violence to early childhood experiences and brain development.

To me, Karr-Morse and Wiley's words hammer home the vital message that the early development of a child's brain, which determines his impulse control and future violent tendencies, must be tended to from the minute he is born.

And I believe if parents know WHAT to do, most will make every effort to give their baby the benefit of good parenting.

Studies have repeatedly shown that 80% of a child's brain will develop before his third birthday. A young child must be shielded from traumatic experiences; he must be raised by parents he can trust in a home that is free from violence. His environment must foster learning and stimulate his brain. He must be held, cuddled and talked to each day. He must feel safe.

But for far too many children, for a multitude of reasons, the first months are simply written off as a period of life she won't remember. An unimportant moment in time filled with crying, late night feedings and diaper changes.

This couldn't be further from the truth. If parents take advantage of the little things they can do to encourage brain development, such as talking to their baby when changing a diaper, making direct eye contact, cuddling and smiling, the first years can literally determine that baby's future.

That means every story time, every song, every interaction with a caregiver is developing the brain and sculpting the baby's ability to trust adults, react to stimuli and comfort himself. You can imagine that if positive experiences build his brain, then negative experiences such as neglect, violence and hunger have an acid-like way of eating the brain away.

Too many babies in Memphis live in that acid-like environment, I believe because their caregivers do not realize the life-long impact that negative experiences bring. Our community must change this by educating ourselves on the importance of early brain development.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) says that much violent behavior can be traced back to early childhood experiences. The group's researchers found that violent tendencies can be decreased or even prevented if certain early risk factors are significantly reduced or eliminated.

These early childhood risk factors include being the victim of physical abuse and/or sexual abuse, exposure to violence in the home and/or community, use of drugs and/or alcohol, presence of firearms in home, or a combination of stressful family socioeconomic factors like poverty, severe deprivation, marital breakup, single parenting, and unemployment.

That said -- don't panic if one of these risk factors applies to you and your child. It is the combination of such factors, consistently ignored, that are the real cause for alarm.

Positive parenting and a nurturing community will go a long way to counteracting negative childhood experiences. Bad and unfortunate things happen in all families; it's how you respond that will lay the path your child's future.

"The ghosts of children lost to rage and despair, overlooked or abused by a community unaware of their existence, do retaliate," warns Karr-Morse and Wiley. "Rage filled adolescents only seem to come out of nowhere; they come, too often, from the nursery."

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.