

Excerpts from:

# The Vital Touch: How Intimate Contact With Your Baby Leads To Happier, Healthier Development

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## Spoiling

The concept of spoiling an infant by holding them or responding quickly to their cries was “invented” by the behaviorist John Watson. His views were published in 1928 in his book *The Psychological Care of Infant and Child*. His advice was very severe, “Never hug and kiss them [children], never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night.”

For more than 20 years, *Infant Care*, published by the U.S. Children’s Bureau, warned mothers to avoid at all cost picking up baby between feedings, lest they create a “spoiled, fussy baby.”

In this country, as late as the beginning of the twentieth century, orphans received little caressing. Almost 100 percent of them died. Now called nonorganic failure-to-thrive, infants deprived of nurturant touch often fail to grow *even* if hospitalized and fed enough calories intravenously.

Dr. J. Brenneman, a hospital pediatrician, introduced a rule in his hospital that every baby should be “picked up, carried around, and ‘mothered’ several times a day.” Thanks to “mothering” by 1938 mortality rates for infants at Bellevue Hospital in New York City fell within one year from around 35 percent to less than 10 percent.

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## Violence

James Prescott, a neuropsychologist formerly with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, found a relationship between amount of touch in a given culture and violence. After reviewing forty-nine societies, Prescott discovered that cultures high in infant physical affection – much touching, holding and carrying – rate low in adult physical violence, with the opposite true as well. The principal cause of human violence, concluded Prescott, is “a lack of ... touching and stroking during the formative periods of life.”

The United States has the world’s highest incidence of child beatings and murder by parents.

## Motor Skills

Ironically, the more we hold our babies, the sooner they leave our arms. Carried infants, as more than fifty studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America demonstrate, sit, stand, and walk earlier than Western infants.

African tribal infants spend time sitting or being bounced upright in their mother's lap and are almost continuously carried. African infants often skip crawling altogether and go straight to walking – as do most of the world's babies. African tribal infants are not only more physically advanced, but in the first six months of life, are smarter than our babies.

A carried baby uses his head to maintain his balance, balance and vision are in the same plane as when he begins walking, his neck and back are extended and hips are flexed, he roots and grasps at his mother. Contrast this active workout with the baby lying flat in a plastic container. Not needing to use his muscles to fight gravity or upright his head and without interaction with the mother, he is relatively passive.

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## Crying

We assume all babies cry for hours on end because prolonged crying is common in our culture. In most other cultures, this is not normal. Much of the crying we consider normal baby behavior may be a separation distress call in response to stress.

Urs Hunziker and Ronald Barr of McGill University Faculty of Medicine in Canada asked mothers to carry their three-week-olds in their arms or in a soft body carrier for at least three hours a day, until the babies were three months old. The babies who received more carrying cried an amazing 43 percent less than the control group. And they cried 51 percent less in the early evening when babies are presumed most fussy.

In a study done by Sylvia Bell and Mary Ainsworth they spent a year closely observing twenty-six infant-mother pairs in both a laboratory setting and at home. They found that when mothers responded promptly to their baby's cry in the first six months of life, babies cried less in the second six months. The more demanding babies were those who experienced the delayed response. Infants whose cries were quickly answered requested less holding, enjoyed being held more and protested less when put down and cooperated more with parental demands than did infants of less sensitive mothers.

For additional information, the *Time Life* documentary "Rock A Bye Baby" describes the influence of different practices in infant treatment and child rearing on emotional development, both in humans and in monkeys. Text and 30 minute video can be viewed on-line at [www.violence.de/tv/rockabye.html](http://www.violence.de/tv/rockabye.html).