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Book Review: *Diary of a Baby*

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Book Reviews

Daniel N. Stern, *Diary of a Baby*. Basic Books, 1990.

Have you ever wondered how an infant experiences its world? If you are a parent, you certainly have. Most likely, at times you have also both underestimated and overestimated the infant's capabilities. In *Diary of a Baby*, Daniel N. Stern, a noted psychiatrist and expert in infant development, successfully presents a view of infant experience that is admittedly "part speculation, part imagination, part fact."

Stern actually discusses the infant's world at five different ages: six weeks, four and one-half months, twelve months, twenty months, and four years, each age reflecting major developmental changes from the previous one. In presenting each age, Stern first characterizes the infant's current skills and abilities in an attempt to understand how the infant views its surroundings. He then details several everyday episodes in the infant's life, each beginning with an "autobiographical" segment, a description of the experience from the infant's perspective (represented by a fictional infant named "Joey"), and reflecting the infant's own thoughts and feelings. Stern concludes each section with an interpretation of these experiences based on current knowledge and beliefs concerning infant development.

Explanations and interpretations of the infant's behavior and abilities are presented in an easily readable, understandable, non-technical manner, making it appropriate for

any reader. Stern incorporates current knowledge based on research and beliefs concerning physical-motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional development. Most importantly, a coherent picture is presented showing the interrelationships between these various aspects of development. Inevitable comparisons between infant and adult thought and behavior not only serve to illustrate the much different world of the infant, but also provide insight into our own thoughts and behavior.

The autobiographical segments present Stern with a challenging task, to present experiences from an infant's perspective rather than from an outside, objective point of view. Compounding the difficulty is that he seeks (is required) to describe in a linguistic way the non-linguistic thoughts and experiences of the younger infant. This is successfully accomplished in an oftentimes poetic way through references to raw sensory experiences of "sounds, images, weather, space, and movement".

Stern characterizes the world of the six-week-old infant as one "concerned not with how or why something has happened, but with actual, raw experience itself, not with facts or things, but with feelings, his feelings." This theme of emotions influencing experience of events is presented throughout the book, even as other developmental capacities emerge at older ages and change the child's experiences. Stern also captures the young infant's fleeting attention, which shifts quickly from one sensory experience to another. The six-week-old infant's experience of seemingly mundane

events—viewing a patch of sunshine, seeing his crib rails, feeling hunger (a “storm”), and eating food—reflect current as well as developing skills.

At four months the infant enters a social world, where the child experiences a “flow of feelings” between itself and mother in face-to-face interaction. The infant is uniquely equipped with natural preferences which makes the human face attractive to infants, thereby promoting social interaction.

By twelve months the infant is aware of his own internal mental events (“mindscapes”) which are unique to him and hidden to others unless he chooses to reveal and share them, as in the case of experiencing the joy of finding a hidden toy. The infant also contends with an attachment system, in which he seeks the safety and security of his mother, wanting to be near her. However, there is also an opposing exploratory system, a natural curiosity which draws the child out into the environment and all it holds. Stern uses mother and infant waiting in a train station to illustrate the interplay between these two systems.

The twenty-month-old has entered the “world of words.” Language and symbolization changes and opens up the child’s world. He is no longer bound by reality. Language allows him to think about the past, present, and future. He can use symbols to represent other things, and can make reference to himself. But language is also limited, and thus different from “his old nonverbal world,” as it often narrows an event experienced in a variety of sensory modalities. Therefore, something is gained, but there is a cost.

Finally, the four-year-old child, no longer an infant, can construct his own experiences

into a coherent, autobiographical narrative. He can construct a story with a beginning, middle, and end out of his own experiences, based on past and present events as well as imagination. This created story is related, but not identical, to his actual subjective experience.

Diary of a Baby is not intended to be a comprehensive, objective look at infant development and research (infant development textbooks serve that purpose), but is a book to be read slow and enjoyed. As a reader, one should attempt to truly “experience” the infant’s world, as Stern has tried to present it. As a result we, as adults, will not only understand a little more about the infant’s world, but may also understand, appreciate, and perhaps change the view we have of our own world.

Donald S. Paszek