

Simple Tools® for Mothers by Karen Strange

Ever wonder how we become who we are and what helps us integrate our experiences from our early beginnings? This is a short synopsis of things to consider and tools for mothers to use during pregnancy and beyond. My hope is to offer a new way of being in connection with your baby during the perinatal period.

The baby shall be referred to as she in this text

We are the story of what has happened to us up until now, from conception through birth and to the present. The story is laid down emotionally, psychologically and physically, in our connective tissue, in the fluids of our body and in our bones. The story of what happened to us wants to get told to someone who is listening. Hearing the story and acknowledging what happened with empathy is the repair and where healing occurs. How your baby moves and acts is actually her way of telling you her story, which is her history. The question to ask is, “What is the story here?” Your baby is ALWAYS showing you her story, her history. Then, the question becomes: can you slow down and be present to hear what your baby is saying?

You are the regulator, the architect of your baby’s brain and nervous system and the baby forms according to whatever you are feeling/experiencing. For example: If your baby is crying for what seems to be no reason, notice, how are you feeling in that moment? You may notice that you are upset. To settle/calm/ground yourself, take a breath. Your baby may be responding/reacting to your inner emotional state because **your baby responds to what is happening in your nervous system.**

Periodically, throughout the day (especially after a heightened emotional state), **take an oxytocin moment/break.** Oxytocin is released when you do anything pleasurable. This is especially important during gestation and early infancy as the release of oxytocin helps baby’s brain become wired with a calm temperament and the capacity to self-regulate emotional states, meaning their system gets hardwired to go from stress to relaxation, easily. If their environment (their mother) does this, then their body learns how to do this, too. **Oxytocin is what heals the body.** Do this prenatally to establish a common, well-worn “mental groove” so that you will have the capacity to return to it after the birth. It is a great habit to get into for your health and to be in tune with your baby.

Birth is a big experience for both mother and baby. Adults have an understanding that the baby is coming from inside to outside but the baby may not know this. After birth, your baby may not know she is out, that she made it. She may be stunned by what has just happened. Something you (your partner, your doula, your midwife, your support person) could say, slowly, to your baby is: “You are out now, you made it, you can take a breath now.” You can do this anytime something intense happens (during an interruption in the birth sequence). Once it is over, you could say, “You made it, it is over, and you are safe now. Yes, that was a lot, and it is over”. This allows the nervous system to come down from emergency mode. After birth, ground yourself (by feeling your feet on the floor) and take a breath. You could say to the baby, “I am so happy you are here, I love you.” **Take a moment to look around. Acknowledge to yourself, as well, that you made it, it is over and you are safe!**

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In utero, your baby is conscious, aware, super-sensitive, intelligent, building neural connections, and laying down memory.

She is very much experiencing whatever you are experiencing, only more so, more sensitive and more aware of her environment. Once she is born, she does not have the muscle control you have and she does not have the capacity to speak language with the words you use. But she DOES understand the intent of what you are saying. She is always communicating with you, telling you her story. Once you understand this big piece, the rest is simple.

There are no secrets you can keep from your baby, so talk to your baby, and more importantly listen to what your baby is showing you and telling you. Acknowledge that she is telling you something important. Then remember to tell her what is going on.

The most important place to start is by slowing down. Slowing down is achieved by the practice of grounding. This is so important to “know/feel” in your body. As you begin to understand the baby’s experience and perception of birth and of being in our world, you will understand the importance of slowing down through grounding and pacing. This allows the baby to stay current with what is going on in her environment.

“It’s not just what you do or say that matters, but rather, how you are on the inside.

How are you on the inside?

The only way to assess that is to take a pause, and slow down.”

- Karen Strange

Grounding: Feel your feet on the floor or the weight of your body on the chair, the place where your body has the most contact with the floor or chair. Bring your attention here. Take a moment and feel this place. Doing this slows your internal rhythm or pace and helps you to become more present. Every time you take a breath you down-regulate (or slow down) your autonomic (automatic) nervous system, meaning you move away from an activated, fast-moving internal rhythm to a slower, more-balanced state of being. This enables you to establish a better connection with your baby.

Pacing: Watch your baby’s cues and body language; they mean something. Notice - is she fussy? Is she looking at you or looking away? Is she squirming or settled quietly and just watching you? If she is on the active side, it means you need to slow your pace with frequent pauses to ground yourself. Pauses are part of nature and part of your baby’s rhythm. Your baby’s brain waves are 6-10 times slower than yours. The baby needs you to slow down so the baby does not get overwhelmed. The baby responds and reacts to your inner emotional state, so becoming more aware of your energetic presence, slowing down, and grounding are the MOST important parts of being in tune (or attuned) with your baby!

Differentiation: Whether the baby is inside or outside, it is important to differentiate your experience from your baby’s. Babies are undifferentiated physically, emotionally and psychologically from their mothers until birth. At birth they become physically separate (differentiated) and yet are still undifferentiated emotionally and psychologically.

The mother may not be aware of the extent of this connection because the baby is now outside of her body, but the baby will not know she is separate from her mother for many months. You and your baby have been together as one from the beginning. It takes time (usually years) to complete the separation that begins at birth.

The mother and the baby are deeply linked emotionally and delicately tuned into each other. To your baby, the whole entire world is you, her mother. Your baby feels everything you feel; she is synchronized with you. If you are upset, tell her what you are feeling and that it is your experience. It is not about her,

though you know she can feel it.

Differentiation helps create healthy boundaries. In the same way that children of divorce think they caused the divorce because the world revolves around them, your baby needs to be told that she did not cause what is bothering you. It did not happen because of her.

Remember, in utero, your baby is conscious, aware, super-sensitive, intelligent, building neural connections, and laying down memory. This continues once the baby is outside of her mother.

Talk to your baby! More importantly, LISTEN to your baby! She is communicating with you. Then the question is, what is she communicating to you? Acknowledge that you hear her, that you see her, and that what she is expressing matters to you. This is what each of us (baby, child, teen, adult, everyone) is looking for (and needs) when communicating with each other.

-Karen Strange

4 Way to Communicate with Your Baby:

1. Tell your baby what you are going to do BEFORE you do it – Example: Before changing her diapers, before putting on a new shirt, before picking her up, say, “I’m getting ready to do this.” Then again right before you do it, say, “Here comes the new diaper” (or shirt or whatever).

Babies process slower and need time to take in what you say. It is good to take a pause after telling them what you are going to do. With the slower pacing and pausing, the baby learns that she can trust you.

2. Tell your baby what is going on – Example: You are transferring to the hospital, you are worried about a bill, you are going to a big meeting, you just had a fight with your partner and you are upset. Whatever is going on, tell her.

You can reassure her and tell her that she is not the reason you’re upset, but it’s important to acknowledge that she feels your strong emotions. Even if you do not completely acknowledge the strong feelings inside you, your baby feels what is going on inside of you. She does not know the cause of your stress, unless you tell her. So, take a slow, deep breath (down-regulate) and become the place of safety, for the baby. The baby feels this. This helps wire the baby’s brain for self regulation. The baby will eventually be able to regulate (or come out of) their own emotional state, because they learned this ability through your example, by mirroring and experiencing their environment.

3. Tell the baby what you want her to do – Example: In labor, ask the baby to turn a certain way so she will come out more easily. If the baby needs resuscitation, tell her “I need you to take a big breath and come into your body...That’s it! Now you can take another breath, and another one...” You can say this even if the care providers are working on the baby.

4. Tell the story of what happened - Example: “I am sorry (empathy) for what may have happened, I know you felt that, it was not your fault and you did nothing wrong. I know that was a lot! You are safe now, here let me help you feel safe...” Then, you should take a breath, feel yourself on the floor, be present. And remember to tell your baby “I love you!”

Telling the story acknowledges what happened. Naming how you feel encourages differentiation. Naming helps the nervous system to feel heard. When the baby feels heard, the nervous system settles. Naming is a basic tool for mindfulness of what you are experiencing in the moment. It is an acknowledgement of what is. The story must be told slowly (pacing) with pauses, eye contact and grounding. Then, reflect

back what you see from the baby (following the baby's cues). In telling the story and naming what is happening or happened, you are helping the baby integrate the story (experience) of what is going on. The more you pause in story telling, especially when you feel your own emotions arise, the better for you and your baby.

A word on Rupture and Repair... Ruptures are mis-attunements, misunderstandings, mis-connections, miscommunication, and interruptions in a sequence. Ruptures happen all the time: in utero, during labor, after the birth, as we grow up and in all of our relationships. Repairs can happen whenever there is a rupture. First, you need to "make sense" of the experience (integrate) so that you become a safe place for the baby/child.

*"It's not just what you do or say that matters, but rather how you are on the inside.
How are you on the inside?" -Karen Strange*

When rupture occurs, you can take a breath, ground yourself, and say, "I'm sorry that happened to you, I did not know" or "I was sad (tired, angry, confused) and I know you felt that. It is not about you (helping to create differentiation) but rather about me and my..." Then, you could also say something like "I love you, you are safe now." These are all examples of repairs. Repairs can be done at any age. **Repairs lead to stronger attachment and trust than if the rupture had never occurred.**

Things to consider:

- It can be helpful to have someone track the baby's journey through the birth process and after. Consider having a "baby doula", someone that tracks the baby's journey and is there for the baby. The baby doula can tell the baby that she is there to follow her passage/journey through the birth process. Just like a mother has a birth attendant and/or a doula, she (the baby) has someone there for her for the whole process. The "baby doula" would listen to what the baby might be communicating and supporting what it might be like in there for the baby.
- Check out Dan Siegel's book, "Parenting from the Inside Out."
- And remember, It's not just what you do or say that matters, but rather how you are on the inside. How are you on the inside?

Appreciation and thanks go to: Dr. Marcy Axness, David Chamberlain, Dr. Thomas Verney, Myrna Martin, Mary Jackson, Dr. Ray Castellino, Debby Takikawa, Anna and John Chitty, David Sawyer, Jo Bershenyi and Dr. Fred Wirth, Dr. Wendy Anne McCarty Editing and formatting by Karen Robinson, Dr. Patrick Strange, Jan Wolfenberg, and Amanda Richmond