

Babies in Mind



Still Face Experiment: Dr. Edward Tronick

Edward Tronick: Babies this young are extremely responsive to the emotions, the reactivity and the social interaction that they get from the world around them. This is something that we began studying about thirty-four years ago, when people didn't think that infants could engage in social interaction. In the 'still face' experiment, the mother starts by sitting down and playing with her baby, who is about a year of age...

Mother: Are you my good girl? Oh, yes...

Edward Tronick: She gives a greeting to the baby and the baby gives a greeting back to her.

Baby: Dah!

Edward Tronick: This baby starts pointing at different places in the world and the mother is trying to engage her and play with her. They're working to coordinate their emotions and their intentions, what they want to do in the world. That's really what the baby is used to.

So then, we asked the mother not to respond to the baby. The baby very quickly picks up on this, and uses all of her abilities to try and get the mother back. She smiles at the mother; she points (because she's used to the mother looking where she points)...

Baby: Dah!

Edward Tronick: The baby then puts both hands up in front of her and says, 'What's happening here?'

[Baby whining]

Edward Tronick: She makes that screechy sound at the mother, as if to say, 'Come on! Why aren't we doing this?'

[Baby screaming]

Edward Tronick: Even in this two minutes, when they don't get the normal reaction, they react with negative emotions. They turn away and they feel the stress of it — they actually may lose control of their posture because of the stress that they are experiencing.

[Baby crying]

Mother: Okay... Maggie... I'm here. What are you doing? Oh, yes— oh, what a big girl.

Edward Tronick: It's a little like ***The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly***. The good is that normal stuff that goes on, which we all do with our kids. The bad is when something bad happens, but the infant can overcome it. After all, when you stop the 'Still Face,' the mother and the baby start to play again. The ugly is when you don't give the child any chance to get back to the good; there's no reparation and they're stuck in that really ugly situation.