

OBSERVATIONS ON SARA'S FIRST EIGHT MONTHS BY HER MOTHER

by Grazia Honegger Fresco

Grazia Honegger Fresco gives us direct observations of her daughter from birth to eight months, grouping her observations by age even further into birth to fourth month, fifth and sixth months, and seventh and eighth months. Within each age range, she focuses on Sara's sensory life and her relationships. Her observations are detailed and gentle as she strives to be free of preconceived judgements. She offers a lovely example of what it means to use observation as a tool to learn the inner life of the child.

BIRTH TO FOUR MONTHS

Sensory Life

To me, the most moving aspect of the study of child development is observing as interests and sensory capacities are awakened in the young child. It is not until one has lived with a child night and day, however, as does a mother, that one realizes with what extraordinary gradualness nature has enjoined that the child should advance, both in the sensory and the motor areas.

During the first month of life with Sara we watched as her field of vision very slowly enlarged and very slowly her waking periods increased as compared with her sleeping periods. At first she only

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heard sounds which were nearby and distinct, then she began to hear distant sounds too, which was apparent by her stillness and fixed gaze as she listened. She also showed interest in simple little songs (middle of the third month), in snapping sounds made with the mouth or fingers (two and a half months), in the ringing of the alarm clock (fourth month) and in the squeaking of a rubber doll (three and a half months) These interests were of long duration and alternated according to her degree of tiredness and the time of day. After the twilight of the first ten days, visual interest began with the sky at dusk (around fifteen days), walls, lights, gleams of light through the shutters for all the first month, and at around two and a half months she discovered the human face and smiled at it a lot. From three months, for the next fifteen days, she showed great interest in my face during feeding times—she clung to me and looked at me, smiled and had long conversations on the basis of “eh.” At the same time she had a great interest in a little red horse hanging over her cradle and a Siamese “scare-devil” (red and yellow fish) hanging and moving in the air. Right from the start I kept Sara in the garden in the open air a great deal, but I did not take her out in



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the baby carriage until around three and a half months. Sara became very upset by the street noises, such as sudden motor sounds which made her cry, so I looked for quiet streets. I think that alternating the outings with the hours in the garden and those in the house, alternating also the light with the shade, is a good remedy against the boredom which always threatens. After three and a half months Sara enjoyed going around the paths in the garden, which she would watch with great concentration until she sometimes fell asleep. She also liked the large hanging balls, one red and one green, which I put her near according to the mood she was in, rattles, the sound of a flute, a little kite hanging from a stick, and a Chinese lantern.

I was careful not to overstimulate her so that she became tired, and watched to see that she enjoyed these things on her own. The rattle which she found in her cradle was different from the one in the baby carriage. In the third to fourth month she seemed to take pleasure in “discovering” things. At around two and a half months she felt the discomfort of wet diapers but would calm down when I changed her. This, together with constipation and the occasional inability to get to sleep, were the only causes of crying.

Relationships

Sara’s interest in people around her developed in a way that was incredibly subtle and not much was needed to disturb it. One of the moving things about infants is without a doubt the fact that so early, before the development of intelligence and self-consciousness, they reveal a great “affective” interest in seeing people. Sara’s interest displayed itself in a range of smiles which, after two and a half months, became different from those to be seen during sleep. She began, lying down, with smiles for everyone; she still smiled at everyone. Then being held in arms, and she also smiled at me during her feedings. After four and a half months she did not smile straight away at everyone but, when she saw a new face, she gazed at it fixedly at first, without smiling, but then smiling—also according to the fuss the other made of her.

Likewise in the bath, Sara remained still with her fists closed at first, as though absorbed in herself. After two and a half months she began to look around, to kick, to lift up her head and to smile at me.

When one follows a child's development attentively, one sees more than ever the truth of Gesell's words: "the child masters his environment above all with his eyes." But I would go even further: the child loves the world around him. This can be seen in Sara, who cried only because of discomfort (and even this was very rare). She grew and took shape in a positive atmosphere with no offenses, denials, or frustrations. Her response could be seen in her joy when someone looked at her or even when she was moved to a new room. Every time we went into a new setting she smiled happily (age four months) unless she was too tired. Tiredness is as dangerous as boredom because an excess can do as much harm as a deficiency, such as being tired of sitting, of too many faces, too many sounds, too many objects. From time to time I removed her from the sources of stimulation when I put her alone on the terrace or on my bed: she gazed at the sky or at the light. I kept an eye on her from time to time, without being seen. The canopies on her cradle and carriage were also very useful because they made it possible now and again to moderate the light, to isolate the child from her surroundings, and to help her to get to sleep, if necessary.

After three months it was necessary to alternate the periods when Sara was horizontal and when she was carried in arms about the house. The child should be able to hold its head erect—at least it was after this conquest that Sara showed interest in the contents of the house. Around four months of age I began putting a cushion behind her, then two, so that she was almost sitting. At first she would sit contentedly for only a few seconds, then longer. At four and a half months she remained willingly in this position even for as long as ten minutes, but it was necessary to keep careful watch so that she did not become tired. Seated in this way she was able to discover her hands at which she gazed attentively and which she tried to bring

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to her mouth, but not to suck. She would draw them away at once, look at them, and then begin again.

Interest in Colors

The color red definitely made the most impression on Sara at three months—the little horse or a bright red bow. At three months and ten days she detached herself from the breast in order to observe the little red hearts that stand out on my Tyrolean-style apron. At three months and twenty days the little red spots and checks of our maid, Carmela's, apron attracted Sara more than her smiling face, at which she always smiled a great deal. She also liked very much light green and the little yellow rubber doll (three and a half months) but who could be sure that the attraction was the color, the objects in themselves, or the fact that they moved?

Movement

From the immobility of the first month, development of movement took place gradually. Rather an interesting fact is that if she liked some object very much, for example the little horse hanging above her, she concentrated hard, screwed up her mouth, sometimes with her tongue protruding a little, and rhythmically moved her tongue, her arms, and her legs. During the first month, when she was held she stayed very still, absorbed in the task of bringing up wind. In the second month she began to hold up her head and look around. The development of movement began visibly with movements of the head and eyes, then with grasping at the hair and clothes of the adult at three to four months. Already after two and a half months Sara was clinging to the strap of her cradle and the band of its canopy and to the edges of her blanket and sheet. Towards the end of the third month she began holding a tiny plastic club if I put it in her hand for her. By the middle of the fourth month the game of grasping something and then letting it fall had still not begun.

FOURTH AND FIFTH MONTHS

Sensory Interests

Sara's visual and auditory interests were particularly vivid by this time. Her range of vision had slowly increased and already half-way through the fourth month she smiled at me across the room from a distance of four or five meters. Her interest in furniture, walls, etc.,

seemed to decrease in the middle of the fourth month in favor of objects that she could take in her hands and keep near her. After the first week of the fifth month, however, interest in her surroundings was once more intensified: she gazed intently in one direction, and when I came near she tried to take hold of the curtain, the handle on the window, or the face of the person who attracted her attention. Interest in the human voice began to become more evident after the second week of the fifth month: she watched the movements of the mouth and laughed if I spoke or sang to her. There was no evident reaction to music, even the flute. She laughed happily if I squeezed one of her rubber toys several times at brief intervals. If I shook a rattle in the fifth month she moved her legs and stretched herself, screwing up her mouth and stretching out her hands.

Relationships

I should say that what interested her most of all, apart from the toys, was the human face. Sara obviously reserved particular smiles of recognition for those she knew, especially for her papa and me.

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My helping Sara to be independent came from a great faith in the capacity for self-regulation shown by young babies. I never put her to bed at a set time, nor did I put her in the dark. The hours of sleep varied during the day and were repeated for several days, until there was a new change. In general, during the fifth month, Sara slept eight to nine hours at night and four, five, or six hours during the day. She always awoke relaxed and smiling, ready for "action."

After a feeding was the best time to leave her alone in a corner or in a room. She chattered away on her own and played with the objects in her cradle. Her "gh gh gri eh gh gh" was only heard after mealtimes. In conclusion, the timetable of feeding on request is the best aid to independence at an age when dependence on the adult

is so evident and necessary. The on-request timetable prevents the mother from knowing exactly which hours she will have “free” on the following day, but the sacrifice that it entails is repaid by a tranquil and satisfied child. People who come to the house are full of wonder that Sara does not cry, that she does not always want to be carried in arms, etc. I believe that a child who is fol-

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lowed as much as possible in his normal rhythm develops without attitudes of defense and irritation towards his environment. The result is that the child accepts everything without protest, as Sara did, and indeed enjoys it: the bath, being dressed and undressed, going out and returning home, everything of course except boredom or when she cannot find one of her objects. Sometimes she made up for this by playing with her binding cover, with the blanket or sheet, or with the canopy of her cradle.

Naturally one must always be alert for difficulties as soon as they arise. After the bath Sara was frightened if I dried her face. The problem was solved when I dried half of her face at a time, covering only one eye. On her own, however, in contrast to her fear of having her face dried, she found a game which she liked very much (end of the fifth month): she covered her face with the hood of the towel and stayed under it, kicking her legs and laughing. She pulled it away and then she covered herself again. If I came close and slowly and delicately uncovered her; she would laugh very contentedly. In the bath she never protested if I changed her position: on the other hand, she would not allow anyone else to bathe her. Before touching her I washed my hands well in hot water because I noticed that hands that were a little cold frightened her, at least such was her reaction.

With regard to new faces, at around four and a half months Sara often displayed perplexity, confusion and even fear that caused her to cry I do not rule out however that it may have been because of too loud voices or of too-rapid gestures in front of her. After five

and a half months this behavior disappeared. When I took her into a shop she remained calm and gazed around her, without protest, smiling at anyone who spoke to her.

I could see the same perplexity on her face if I was not wearing my glasses or if she saw me while I was washing my hair. She gazed in astonishment at my face and my hair and would only smile later, when she seemed to recognize me.

One afternoon I left Sara for about ten minutes with a trusted person while she was in her carriage in the park. She played with the little balls on elastic that she liked so much and was sucking the toy. The person, thinking this was a bad thing, took the toy away from her and gave her instead the tambourine rattle which she generally enjoyed. She burst into desperate tears but calmed down as soon as she was given back the first toy. Her reaction was so violent, I think, because I had never taken anything away from her hands or mouth, nor had I placed anything in her hand unless she asked for it by stretching out her hands (five and a half months).

SIXTH AND SEVENTH MONTHS

Sensory Interest

Sara was very interested in the human voice. Often when she was upset her father would sit near her and talk to her in a very sweet, low voice, repeating the words and recounting something to her. She calmed down and followed him as though fascinated. My little songs had an identical effect. (I sang to her in the evening when she was in bed to create a peaceful atmosphere as a prelude to sleep and during the day in moments of tiredness, after a great deal of activity, or if she had a fright and began to cry, etc.) She liked above all "The Rascally Hare" and "The Little Man" (or perhaps they made her more cheerful because they had become more familiar to her).

Relationships

By the end of the seventh month we held her very little, and she did not ask to be held. She realized that when someone approached with arms outstretched that she would be taken in their arms and she responded to this with joyful movements of her body. The fact



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that we alternated her various activities with outings, that we took her in our arms only when she wanted to be held, that we played and laughed with her sitting near her cradle or on the carpet (after the seventh month) without holding her, helped to prevent excessive attachments thereby rendering everyone free, we for our work and she for her activity.

Sara reacted with joy and interest to her outings. From the age of about six and a half months she preferred to sit up in the carriage when we left the house—if I laid her down, thinking she was sleepy, she continued to stretch her neck in order to look around her. Then, after about half an hour of movement, she usually fell asleep for one half to three quarters of an hour. In the house, on the other hand, she slept more but all the same I did not observe any difference in her behavior. If anything, on the days when we did not go out because of strong wind or heavy rain, she was less tranquil even if, all things considered, she had slept more. This could be because of the influence of the weather, the interruption of her habits, or one less activity in the house.

At this age Sara was no longer frightened by noises in the street, and she always gazed with increased interest at what was passing. As for the causes of fear; it is very true that a child of this age is still so new to all experiences that even things which for us are the most harmless can disturb a child deeply. For example, we have agreed with Carmela that we will call Sara from a distance before we go to her. We know that she turns towards the voice that calls her, smiles at it, and waits for the person before she has yet seen him. Sometimes, if she is crying, she quiets down while she awaits us for a few seconds. If we go to her we try not to appear unexpectedly before her eyes. This is necessary because it frightens her.

In the silence, such unexpected sounds as cellophane paper being folded or a person being called from another room can frighten a young child. One day at the beginning of the eighth month, after I had already seated the baby in her carriage to go out, I found I needed help. I did not want to leave her alone because by then she leaned out and it became dangerous, nor did I want to carry her because she was ready to go out and would become agitated; so I called Carmela from downstairs. Perhaps because of the echo from the stairs she gazed at me in fright and her face and mouth showed she was about to cry. I called again, more softly, but she burst out crying. Two days later, when she was in the bath, I called Carmela again and immediately she screwed up her face as if she wanted to cry. I comforted her right away and distracted her attention, giving up the attempt to call. Maybe she was frightened because she was accustomed to usually hearing low voices, not shouts. Another time while we were listening to a play on the radio, which was on low volume, one of the characters cried out. Sara, who had been quite tranquil, turned to me with a worried look, an inclination to tears in the expression of her mouth. I smiled at her and her fear passed. These, which basically are quite minor incidents, have put me more on my guard, for I know that fear sows dangerous seeds at just that age when a child has above all need of security.

CONCLUSION

I was continually occupied with Sara, especially during the first months, never leaving her entrusted to others. Following her step by step has been for me a source of great interest. The discoveries

I made as time went by and the fact that I could help her gave me great joy and no sense of fatigue. Outsiders would comment that I am fortunate, to which I explained, plainly and simply, that it was not a question of luck but of the fact that I have never hastily concluded that the child was being capricious or forming vices whenever new demands were made. During the holiday period between Sara's third and fourth months, when my husband was at home, he too realized to his great wonder and interest that every demand, every fit of crying had its reason and how, through our following her in this way, that she had laid the foundations of a great inner tranquility and a joy in life which every day moved and gladdened us.

