

# New mothers can learn a lot from watching their babies

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The best teacher for a young mother is her baby, contend experts who train social workers to interact with first-time moms.

"We like to think of babies as 'ordinary miracles,'" said Victor Bernstein, a research associate at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. But adjusting to a baby can take work, and the task of [social workers](#) often is to help young [mothers](#) learn to focus on an infant's needs, say Bernstein and other SSA experts. "Mothers are not only important to their kids, but kids are really important to their mothers," Bernstein said.

For instance, a social worker may ask permission to pick up a newborn, ask the mother to call out the child's name, and then watch as the baby turns to her voice, Bernstein said. This hands-on experience can show a young mother the importance of talking to her infant, much more vividly than any discussion could.

Bernstein and others at the school have done extensive research on the needs of young mothers, particularly unwed teens. Their work shows that a wide variety of parenting styles can be effective in rearing children, but helping a mother focus on her baby and make the baby a priority is key. SSA is the only school of social work in the country that prepares students specifically to work with infants.

Early attention to children's needs is becoming an increasingly important part of the work of social workers, said Sydney Hans, the Samuel

Deutsch Professor at SSA. The health care act that President Obama signed into law in 2010 funds home visits to new parents and their infants through programs that research has proven effective, Hans pointed out.

Work at SSA helps prepare students to be effective in home visits. Bernstein is teaching a class this spring titled "Strategies for Working with Infants, Toddlers and their Parents," in which he helps students understand the interaction between mothers and their babies so that they might help in the nurturing process. The students videotape and later discuss interactions between mothers and children.

Bernstein's clinical work shows that videos taken of teen mothers interacting with their children are an effective part of the home visiting program. "A central component of the home visitor's role is to help the parent interpret the meaning of the child's behavior," said Bernstein. His teaching and training, along with Hans' research, have been supported by the Irving B. Harris Foundation in Chicago.

"Making and viewing the video is fun for parents and provides a concrete and lasting means of showing parents how they and their babies grow together," Bernstein points out in "Strengthening Families through Strengthening Relationships: Supporting the Parent-child Relationship through Home Visiting," published by the Infant Mental Health Promotion Project.

Video also functions as a sort of instant replay to help parents understand their children better. "If a parent observes a child becoming upset when watching the tape, most often the parent identifies what the problem is and what she might try instead — without the home visitor needing to make any type of suggestion," he said.

Teen mothers often face problems that prevent them from developing

their natural talents for mothering, Bernstein and Hans said. Some mothers' pregnancies may have concerned their families, and yet they need family support to handle the challenge, researchers pointed out. In many cases, the father is also absent.

"But my own research has shown that for many young women, becoming a mother is a positive life experience. They realize they have accepted an important responsibility and take steps to ensure that they will be able to support themselves and their children in the future," Hans said.

Hans has studied the effectiveness of doulas as an intervention for young mothers and has found that having support during pregnancy and in the first months after the birth can lead to a more positive relationship between mother and infant. The effects of the intervention dissipate with time, however, suggesting the need for longer-term home visitation programs for vulnerable mothers.

Provided by University of Chicago

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