

Conscious Conception: Foundations of Emotional Development and Considerations for Professionals Working with Families

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Abstract: Conscious conception encompasses physical, emotional, spiritual, and practical considerations that prepare parents to welcome, nurture, and parent their baby, and that form foundations for bonding and secure attachment. Parents' thoughts and feelings before, at, and after conception and discovery of pregnancy influence the baby's developing core beliefs of self, relationships, and the world. Parents' abilities to differentiate their thoughts and feelings from those of the baby are critical to the baby's developing felt sense of emotional safety and optimal development of self. Differentiation of thoughts and feelings also provides a foundation for healing and repairing ruptures within the parent-baby relationship. Very early needs for belonging, love, and support can be met with optimal very early parenting. The discussion of conscious parenting highlights five specific considerations for the work of professionals working with families with babies and young children.

Keywords: pregnancy, parenting, pre- and perinatal psychology

Conscious conception is the foundation for conscious parenting and is defined by David Chamberlain as "very early parenting" (1997, p. 3). Conscious conception is very early, attuned, emotionally present, and aware parenting, where parents prepare emotionally, spiritually, physically and practically to welcome and parent their baby. This kind of early parenting supports the parents in meeting the baby's physical needs

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as well as emotional and spiritual needs to feel welcomed and loved. Conscious conception considers the spiritual and conscious nature of the incoming baby before conception.

Verny and Weintraub (2002) stress that conscious conception is the ideal for all parents and babies, because it ensures both that babies are planned and wanted, and that parents are emotionally and intellectually ready to meet the child's needs; these factors, in turn, support emotional health, optimal development, and life potential. McCarty and Glenn (2008) stress that human development occurs on a continuum starting with preconception; the most influential period of development occurs within the "primal period," from preconception through one year of age (p. 121). This period is critical to the formation of belief structures, implicit memories, and perceptions of life, described by McCarty and Glenn as the "core implicit patterns" that "profoundly shapes our being in life-enhancing or life-diminishing directions" (p. 130).

Conscious conception is important for babies because babies are conscious, spiritual in nature, and have awareness even before birth. McCarty (2012) explains that babies have a transcendental awareness at an implicit level, which is in existence before conception. Before conception, babies have a subconscious ability for taking a "witness perspective" and facilitating "mutual and intentional mind-to-mind communication" and perception of the emotions, feelings, and intentions of parents (p. 90). Therefore, if parents are consciously attuned and resonate with their incoming baby in thought, feeling, and intention, and ensure a healthy, nurturing womb environment, the baby's sense of welcome, emotional safety, trust, and optimal health and growth are supported. Melton (2015) describes the proactive concept of "nourishing the attachment womb" before conception with the woman being the womb: Within this nurturing environment, the baby grows, matures, and develops perceptions and impressions of self and life (p. 3).

Parents' Preparation

Parents need to be aware that their health and their baby's future womb environment will directly influence their baby's physical and emotional health and development. They also need to be mindful in the preparation and examination of their own physical and emotional health and readiness for conception and parenting. Consideration of lifestyle, habits, and nutrition for both parents will support the baby's growth, health, and development. Michel Odent (2006) stresses the need for intentional preparation of the intrauterine environment for the baby's optimal health and development. Intrauterine chemical pollution related to man-made fat-soluble chemicals is detrimental to gene expression, which can potentially hinder optimal growth, health, and development. Chamberlain (1997) explains that habitual use of teratogens such as

alcohol and tobacco may damage the father's sperm and increase risk of childhood cancers and sudden infant death. Further, Chamberlain explains that a mother's alcohol intake at conception may result in the baby developing facial abnormalities. Mothers can ensure a sufficient intake of omegas 3, 6 and 9 very early in pregnancy to support development of the baby's brain and nervous system, as well as the mother's own nervous system (Axness, 2012).

Reducing stress through conscious consideration of practical factors is important for parents who hold the intention of attuning to and meeting the baby's needs. Maternal stress can be toxic for babies at conception and for developing babies throughout pregnancy. Axness (2012) cites research that indicates that stress before conception can seriously increase the risk of premature birth and miscarriage. Axness also explains that the mother's stress during pregnancy can negatively influence the developing baby's stress responses, neuro-circuitry and brain development, as well as increasing risk of low birth weight, irritability, fussiness, and sensitive temperaments. In my experience of supporting parents with baby and child sleep, irritability, sensitivity, and fussiness often result in settling and sleep difficulties, such as inconsolable crying and underlying agitation that prevents the baby *letting go* into peaceful sleep, as well as agitated and disturbed sleep with frequent waking and crying. Sleep and settling difficulties often increase parental anxiety and stress, contributing to bonding difficulties.

Conscious parents are more likely to bring awareness to day-to-day financial and practical affairs, balancing work with home and relationships, and making emotional as well as physical space for the incoming baby to enter into their lives. Making practical preparations for parenting supports the ability to attune to the baby's emotional needs. As Gabor Maté (2000) explains, optimal emotional development requires non-stressed, emotionally-present caregivers: However, distracted, depressed, and overly-stressed parenting will impact negatively on the baby's emotional development.

Pam Leo (2005) explains that parents' styles of parenting are related to cultural practices as well as their personal experience of being parented. Some parents may have experienced harsh parenting and are aware that they don't want to repeat those practices with their own children. Leo (2005) explains that parents are more likely to parent their children best when they can, "forgive, heal and not pass on previous hurts" (p. 33). Parenting unconsciously is more likely to replicate the past hurts and experiences and most likely to trigger reactive and impulsive parenting based on the parent's past experiences (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004). Mindful awareness and reflection of past experiences and how they impact present feelings, actions, and behaviors, however, opens the opportunity for choice. Maté (2011) stresses that parents become conscious when they come into the present; in present awareness, an

individual has the opportunity to not be influenced by past experiences. Patrick Hauser (n.d.), in the video *Fathers* concurs, expressing the importance of the father's reflection and bringing awareness to how they want to parent and why. Hauser explains that there is a shift towards fathers having more time to be home and opportunities to be involved in family life: However, fathers are often overlooked in parenting preparation. It's important that fathers are empowered to consider balance in work/home life and both reflect with their partners and concur with parenting decisions. As Elmer Postle (Postle & Owl Productions, 2007) explains in *The healing of birth* video, fathers need to know that they really do have choices in how they want to parent.

Connection and Attachment

Melton (2015) stresses that the foundations of secure attachment are set before conception; this occurs through the attunement of parents to the incoming baby within "conscious two-way connection" (p. 3). McCarty and Glenn (2008) describe this connection as "mother-baby interconnectedness" (p. 131). Communication with the incoming baby may be achieved naturally for many mothers: Conscious connection and communication can be achieved through visualization, prayer, meditation, and invitation (Melton, 2015).

Research by Schroth (2010) on prenatal bonding and its outcomes, concludes that prenatal bonding helps babies feel heard and respected at a deep level. Outcomes for mother and baby include less pain and anxiety during birth and more intuitive communication between mother and baby. After birth, babies are emotionally more stable, socially more mature, and have a greater self-awareness and self-esteem. The connectedness between mother and baby results in fewer interventions at birth, and reduced rates of postpartum depression for mothers (Schroth, 2010).

Thoughts, Feelings and Differentiation

Maté (2000) stresses the need for parents to heal previous trauma so they are more able to create emotional safety for their child. Critically, he says, it's the feeling of absolute emotional safety that allows the baby to be their authentic self. Maté (2000) describes the environment of emotions, feelings, and thoughts surrounding the baby that are critical to feelings of emotional safety and optimal development as the "invisible environment" (p. 56). The emotional states of parents impact the feelings of emotional safety of the incoming baby. Therefore, differentiation allows conscious parents to distinguish and separate their own emotions and issues from those of their incoming baby (Melton, 2015). The ability and awareness for differentiation is more likely to result in attuned, conscious, and emotionally-present parenting. This in turn is more likely to result in

responsive parenting and secure attachment, described by Siegel and Hartzell (2004) as *high road* parenting rather than reactive, impulsive *low road* parenting.

The Influence of Thoughts and Feelings on Discovery of Pregnancy

McCarty and Glenn (2008) acknowledge that experiences from preconception throughout the primal period set the “core blueprint” of belief structures and perceptions that influence later life experiences and relationships (p. 130). The nature of parents’ thoughts and feelings and their ability for conscious differentiation is critical before conception, because as McCarty (2012) acknowledges, the baby is aware and has the ability for mind-to-mind communication even before conception. Parents can set a foundation for secure attachment and their incoming baby’s felt sense of safety when they communicate welcoming thoughts and feelings to their baby (Melton, 2015). Axness (2012) stresses that welcome and joy at discovery of the pregnancy supports the feelings of belonging for the baby and contributes to development of positive self-esteem. Sometimes, as Axness explains, parents are not aware they have conceived, and therefore, are unprepared for pregnancy. For some unprepared parents, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes at the point at which the pregnancy is discovered may not be welcoming and loving, and therefore, may have lasting negative effects on the baby. Specifically, when a mother holds feelings of anger, fear, or blame at the point of discovery, a “foundation of existential rejection and terror” can be set within the baby, which may have implications on development and life experiences (Axness, 2012, p. 94).

Axness (2012) describes joy and welcome at discovery as profoundly influential to the baby’s felt sense of belonging. Grille (2005) concurs, stressing that the parents’ feelings of joy and welcome are important elements that set foundations of the baby’s emotional wellbeing, feelings of physical and emotional safety, and of belonging and feeling wanted (p. 285). Feelings of being wanted and accepted are more likely to support attunement between mother and baby. Therefore, the supportive feelings and emotions related to discovery of the baby are more likely to result in mother and baby *interconnectedness*, which McCarty and Glenn (2008) stress is of high priority during pregnancy and the primary period (p. 131). In turn, interconnectedness will more likely ensure the baby’s innate needs for belonging, security, love, and nurturing are met, which supports optimal development (McCarty & Glenn, 2008).

The most wounding emotional experiences influencing the baby are feelings of rejection and being unwanted, and consequently, the baby may develop negative belief structures based on feeling worthless and unwanted (Grille, 2005). Research evidence concludes that being *born*

unwanted negatively impacts psychosocial development, and is related to poor mental health (David, 2006). Specifically, in adult life, those born unwanted are more likely to require psychiatric treatment and experience unsatisfactory sexual relations, more unwanted pregnancies, and more anxiety/depressive disorders (David, 2006). Further, Appleton (2017) stresses that early experiences relating to parents' being welcoming will result in the baby developing a felt sense that will encourage the baby to "expand out," to meet the world with pleasure, and the expectation of welcome and needs being met (p. 100). Appleton (2017) goes on to explain that when the prenatal experience is less pleasant, babies are more likely to "contract away from the world" with an underlying sense of anxiety (p. 100). Schroth's conclusions concur with Appleton: When the mother can reflect the baby's feelings and perceptions, she builds "a safe container for the fetus to expand and express itself, so profound self-esteem can grow" (p. 5).

Conscious Repair

It can be empowering for parents to know that striving to be perfect in parenting isn't realistic, and that previous unhealthy or negative thoughts and feelings related to conception or discovery can be repaired. Melton (2015) explains that conscious repair is based on the differentiation of one's own emotions and feelings from those of the baby, and as such, within the parent-baby relationship, repair can heal ruptures within the early relationship.

Conscious and attuned repair is relevant at conception and at the discovery of pregnancy, because as Patrick Hauser (n.d.) explains in the video interview, *Fathers*, at discovery of a pregnancy, a parent's previous history of being parented may surge forward. Hauser explains that fathers in particular can find themselves feeling nervous, unprepared, or even fearful about the future.

As explained above, the point of discovery of the pregnancy is an important stage in consciousness for both parents and the baby, and some repair may be necessary if initial feelings and emotions have been rejecting of the baby in any way.

Repair can be simple for parents to implement if they have understanding of the conscious and aware nature of the baby, and ability to differentiate their feelings and emotions from those of the baby. It is important that repair occurs after reflection and when the parent is emotionally attuned to the incoming baby. Melton (2015) acknowledges the repair process can be easy to practice along with differentiation of feelings, and can happen at any age, even preconception. Pam Leo (2005) suggests the "3 R's of reconnection": rewind, repair, and replay, as a parenting tool (p. 38), and I suggest these can be an effective foundation for very early repair. Leo (2005) describes rewinding as simply acknowledging that the parent's thoughts, feelings, or actions were

hurtful for the baby. This then flows onto the repair—apology from the parent, where the parent acknowledges the thoughts, feelings and/or actions were about the parent’s feelings not, about the baby (or child), hence the importance of differentiation. Finally, replay can follow, responding with love and responsiveness, and supporting reconnection.

Conscious Conception and Meeting Needs

Conscious conception, then, is about attunement and connection with the incoming baby, which ensures babies feel wanted, welcomed, and loved, and as such, is the foundation for secure attachment and optimal development. Attunement and connection in this way will ensure the baby’s sense of physical and emotional safety and emotional wellbeing, because holistic needs will be met. Conscious conception will also ensure core emotional needs are met, as identified by Grille (2005), which support optimal emotional development and health.

Grille (2005) identifies five stages of emotional development he describes as “rites of passage” that babies and children will universally experience from before birth, through to seven years of age (p. 270). At each developmental stage, Grille describes the core emotional needs of the baby or child related to the readiness for learning “emotional competencies” (p. 285). As emotional needs are met, the child develops an innate sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and healthy relationships: These are based on their experience and learning of core competencies, their *rights* within healthy relationships, and as a valued, unique individual. Optimal emotional development and health occurs when core emotional needs are met, and the child develops positive beliefs about themselves and healthy relationships.

The practice of conscious conception may also ensure that the baby develops a felt sense of their rights, as emotional needs are met before conception and after. This will then support the development of early core beliefs that support optimal emotional development, secure attachment, and health.

Grille (2005) defines and describes these 5 developmental stages as follows:

The first right is the baby’s *right to exist*. The right to exist encompasses the baby’s need to feel wanted, welcomed, and nurtured. As described above, these needs are met when parents are consciously and emotionally present for their baby from preconception, or from the point of discovery of the pregnancy. When parents practice conscious conception and very early conscious parenting, they are more likely to support the baby’s right to exist, promoting a core sense of feeling wanted and welcome.

The second right is the *right to “need.”* This right is related to the building of innate trust in others that they will respond to and meet the baby’s needs. The baby then develops the early core belief that life is

nourishing, “plentiful and abundant” (Grille, 2005, p. 313). At its core, very early conscious parenting is about attuning to the incoming baby’s consciousness, emotional awareness, and needs: Therefore, very early needs are more likely to be met and trusting relationships established at a very early stage, promoting optimal bonding relationships.

The third and fourth rights of children are the *rights to receive support* and the *right of freedom*. The very early attunement of the mother to her baby can support mother-baby communication and interconnectedness, so the baby feels supported by the mother’s awareness. As McCarty (2012) explains, the preconceived baby has the ability for intentional mind-to-mind communication with parents: Therefore, with optimal mother-baby interconnectedness and attunement, the incoming baby has the freedom to telepathically communicate to parents and express her own will. Specifically, conscious conception supports the parents’ abilities to differentiate their own feelings and emotions from those of their baby, allowing the baby emotional freedom for optimal development unhindered by his parents’ stress and difficult emotions. Schroth’s (2010) research also concludes that babies feel respected and heard, and are more likely to “expand and express” when mothers are reflective of their feelings (p. 5). This concept is in alignment with Maté’s (2000) view of the importance of secure attachment, and the baby and child’s need to develop into their unique authentic self, which promotes optimal emotional and social development and health.

Finally, the fifth right is the child’s *right to love*, meeting the needs to feel love and be loved, and developing the core belief in oneself as loveable, and to experience pleasure. Within the conscious conception paradigm, the baby is more likely to be conceived in love and will feel love and welcome throughout early life. The parents are more likely to have loving relationships with the baby and each other, which forms the foundation of secure attachment—the template for future healthy, loving relationships.

Considerations for Professionals Working with Families with Babies and Young Children

In discussion of the main elements and importance of conscious conception, there are five specific considerations related to the work of professionals supporting families with babies and young children. These considerations address the consciousness and awareness of the professional, and the nature of approaches in support of parents, babies, and children. Considerations also address the professional’s role in empowering parents and families through provision of appropriate and supportive information and strategies, signposting to appropriate therapists, as well as supporting very early parenting.

1. Professionals working with families with babies and young children may not be working from a “conscious” mind of differentiation.

There is a risk that some professionals working with families with babies and young children work from an *unconscious* rather than *conscious* awareness. As described above, adults’ beliefs, behaviors, and responses are typically related to their own childhood experiences. It is the personal development of conscious awareness and understanding of how early experiences influence an individual’s beliefs, behaviors, and responses that is more likely to result in differentiation of thoughts and feelings, and therefore objectivity. There is risk that some professionals will be working from their own personal belief systems, their personal blueprint, and/or from their experience of parenting their own children.

When working with babies, children, and their families, there is a requirement for professionals to work with objectivity and awareness. Specifically, professionals need to be aware of the nature of possible parental stress that may be influencing attachment, relationships, and the child’s felt sense of connection and emotional safety. They also need to be aware of any early experiences that may be influencing, or have previously influenced, the family, baby, or child’s emotional and physical health, behavior, and sleep.

2. Pressure to *fix* sleep and/or behavior problems.

In my experience, some parents are unaware of the need for conscious attunement to their baby or child around sleep, and will view behavior and sleep difficulties as a baby- or child-focused problem. Sleep consultants and professionals supporting families often feel pressure from parents to “fix” the sleep and/or behavior problem, which is in alignment with Harms’ (2017) discussion on emotional first aid. Harms stresses that if the level of distress and anxiety of parents is high, there can be high expectation placed on the therapist to provide a baby- or child-based solution to resolve the problem quickly. Unfortunately, the pressure of anxious, unaware parents towards unaware and unconscious sleep consultants, results in some sleep consultants providing guarantees and claims that they can fix sleep problems in a set time period, usually in about two weeks. Other professionals may feel pressured to suggest disconnecting approaches such as *time out*. The methods used to address behavior and sleep problems under these circumstances are more likely to be behavioral approaches aimed at fixing behaviors and training the baby or child, which may not be appropriate for the family. These approaches may trigger and reinforce a cycle of distressed, anxious parents seeking *quick fixes* from unaware and unconscious professionals. Consequently, in

these cases, there may be higher risk of cycles of trauma and disconnection being reinforced.

3. The need to balance parent and baby needs.

In relation to the previous point, there is often pressure to fix a sleep and/or behavior problem in the belief that the baby or child alone owns the problem. In some cases, there may be specific adjustments that can be made, such as adjustment of routines so they are in alignment with circadian rhythms, adjustment of sleep environments, reduction of screen use, and increased connection time, which may improve sleep as well as behavior. However, there is a need for professionals to look deeper to explore and recognize possible social and emotional influences on sleep and behavior, which can support the parents' understanding of how previous experiences may be underlying sleep or behavior difficulties. The need may arise for professionals to refer the family to other appropriate therapists or professionals for further support in order to ensure all underlying influences on sleep and behavior have been fully addressed.

4. The need for repair.

In some cases, parents will have previously implemented behavioral approaches to address sleep and/or behavior problems that have enhanced the parent, baby, or child's felt sense of disconnection. It is my experience that some parents, particularly mothers, feel distress and guilt over having used behavioral techniques in their desperation to resolve behavioral or sleep difficulties. It is important for professionals working with families to offer parents appropriate support. Providing reassurance and information about rupture and repair can be deeply reassuring and empowering for parents and healing for the whole family. Recovery from previous use of detrimental and disconnecting approaches is possible through repair and taking a slow pace.

I have also often found that parents who parent to extremes of the attachment parenting paradigm often become distressed if their baby cries. These parents will often experience a sense of failure for not soothing their baby immediately when their baby cries, in combination with an unhealthy exhaustion from striving to keep their baby happy. Guilt and distress can be eased with reassurance and provision of information about differentiation of feelings, i.e., the normality of ruptures and how repair can happen, and the baby's need for freedom of expression, and to be their authentic selves, as described by Maté (2000). In these cases, professionals also need to consider the possibility of the parent's early experiences influencing his or her parenting approach and refer to support as appropriate.

5. Supporting very early conscious parenting.

Aware and conscious professionals working with families with babies and young children have a wonderful opportunity to inform, support, and guide parents with very early consciousness and parenting, setting the foundations for optimal bonding and attachment, which results overall in easier, more settled babies and less anxiety for parents. Babies and young children are more settled if parents are attuned and consciously aware of the emotional needs of their baby from the very early stages of parenting.

I suggest these five specific considerations are applicable to all professionals working with families with babies and young children. Professionals need to be aware of how their own early and very early experiences may influence their beliefs and responses, and how these beliefs may influence their approach and support for families, babies and young children. Conscious awareness of self and the ability to differentiate feelings and emotions encourages objectivity, as well as openness to considering and understanding early experiences and present circumstances of the parents, babies, and children they support. Objectivity, exploration, and understanding are more likely to result in the provision of appropriate, empowering, and supportive care and approaches that address parent, baby, and child emotional needs. Specifically, when professionals work with conscious awareness, parents are more likely to feel empowered and supported in meeting their baby or child's needs for emotional safety, trust, feeling wanted and supported, experiencing freedom to express and be heard, and feeling loved. Meeting these needs holistically supports, promotes, and enhances optimal emotional development, secure attachment, and achievement of life potential.

Conclusion

Very early conscious parenting supports parents' emotional, spiritual, and practical preparation for welcoming their baby. Parent preparation in terms of conscious conception can reduce parent stress, and in turn, promote parent attunement and responsiveness to the incoming baby. Attunement and mother-baby interconnectedness as described by McCarty and Glenn (2008), needs to be prioritized, because research shows that responsiveness to the incoming baby promotes growth, optimal development, bonding, and secure attachment.

Parents' feelings and emotions during preconception and at discovery of the pregnancy are influential to the incoming baby's development of core belief systems that will play out in their development and relationships. Therefore, the parents' understanding of the need to recognize their own discordant feelings and how they may impact the baby is important, because they can then differentiate their feelings from those of the baby, and repair can happen. This awareness and ability sets a firm

foundation for babies to develop to their full potential, and ensures the baby's core beliefs are those of belonging, feeling wanted, welcomed, emotionally and physically safe, and loved.

There is a need for professionals working with families with babies and young children to work from a state of consciousness and objectiveness. Professionals need understanding and awareness of how their own early experiences may influence their approach and objectivity when working with families. They also need to understand and consider how early experiences influence the parents, babies, and children they support. Professionals working with families have a wonderful opportunity to support parents in providing information and supporting understanding of conscious conception. Optimal preparation, in terms of conscious conception, supports the incoming baby's developing belief systems of self, promotes mother-baby interconnectedness, and supports optimal emotional development and secure attachment.

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