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## Essay on the Unborn Child

By Rebecca Pugh

As a midwife I ask my clients to be conscious during pregnancy. I ask them to take personal responsibility for their own well being and that of their unborn child. I ask them to eat well and exercise, to get the correct amounts of vitamins and minerals in their diet and to stay stress free. Why do I ask them to stay stress free? Stress has a proven physiological impact on the body. It can lead to high blood pressure, muscular tension that results in pain and headache, or elevated pulse. If we are stressed we lose sight of what is really important, taking care of ourselves. Then it makes sense that we ask mothers to stay stress free also for the sake of their unborn baby. Stress affects the fetus. Hypertension restricts blood flow to the placenta and therefore, the baby. Babies respond to the stimulus that surrounds them including light and sound. They also respond to the elevated stress hormone levels in the mother such as cortisol. Babies seem to not only react to hormones on a physiological level, but they respond on a consciousness level by reacting to stress in their environment. It is now becoming understood that the mind of the fetus is consciousness and is capable of sensing and feeling. If the baby is unwanted or the mother is living in an abusive relationship, those things impact the baby.

We know as midwives how important those first few moments of life are, how bonding should not be interrupted and the importance of skin-to-skin contact and breastfeeding are. So why is bonding less important in utero? After all, the fetus is even more connected to the mother at this point. As midwives, if we can initiate bonding between unborn baby and mother we are investing in a meaningful relationship between mother and child. The more the mother is invested in the baby, the more she will truly want to take care of herself. This leads to a well nourished and healthy mother invested in the care and well being of her baby and herself.

Scientists now know, as evidenced by books like *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* and the film *What Babies Want*, that the structure of the brain is actually shaped in utero by outside stimuli. What the mother experiences, the baby experiences. The baby is capable of sight, sound, taste and smell very early in gestation. Not only is he capable of these senses but he can actually respond to the stimuli, as seen when a fetus covers his eyes in response to a bright light held up to the mother's abdomen. These senses require the involvement of the brain. A fetus is not a blank slate, but thinking and feeling conscious being. Vervy's research suggests that the patterns the mother sets up while pregnant map out the consciousness of the baby after birth and throughout the rest of its life.

The great benefit of having this information as a midwife is to help the mother establish positive groundwork for the life of her child right from the beginning, from conception. As mentioned earlier, we teach the mother to take an active role in the care of herself and her baby. One of the tenets of midwifery is the acceptance that no one else can give birth to a woman's baby and the mother is the best caregiver for herself and the baby. The mother is more likely to be compliant with our suggestions if we engender an intimate relationship between baby and mother. When we educate the mother about the notion that her baby is a conscious being able to absorb the stimuli she encounters, both negative and positive, then the mother will deepen her investment in her health during pregnancy. Midwifery care is so greatly based on choice that we must set up the woman to make the best choices during her pregnancy. With the knowledge found in books like *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, the mother becomes more aware and capable of making the best choices. It is a great burden lifted off the shoulders of the midwife when she has a client who is genuinely concerned about her own health. Compliance doesn't come easily in our practice. I greatly welcome any additional awareness the mother may have that facilitates optimal personal responsibility and therefore optimal health.