

COMMITTED TO MEMORY

Can your baby really
remember being born?

BY CAMILLA RANKIN



"Babies are conscious," says psychologist and author of *The Mind of Your Newborn Baby* Dr David Chamberlain. "Babies are more sensitive, more emotional, and more cognitive than we used to believe and are affected by their birth experience." Dr Chamberlain believes that every child remembers being born. He believes that they are able to interact with their environment from within the womb, feel physical pain and experience emotions, and therefore that they are able to form memories. He also says that this memory can have a long-lasting impact on your child's life and mental health – especially if the birth was traumatic.

Dr Chamberlain bases this conviction on two things: one, that science has developed so that we have deeper insight into the foetal life of a child – the world of the womb – and see how the developing foetus does interact with its environment and responds to it cognitively. "Because of these capabilities, we know babies remember at a deep level their primal journey, the way they entered the world," he says. And secondly, his premise is based on adults (under hypnosis) and children (aged two to three years) recounting in accurate detail their memories of birth. Dr Chamberlain recounts amazing stories of three year olds as they describe their births in ways that only a person experiencing that birth could know – such as the specific right and left turns, black and red colours, the coming light or a "window" being opened to help a child out in a Caesarean section.

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Do you want to test if your child is able to remember his birth?

Here are Dr Chamberlain's guidelines:

- 1 WAIT UNTIL THE CHILD'S** verbal skills are developed enough before asking, about two to three years of age.
- 2 MAKE SURE THAT YOUR CHILD IS CALM** Don't bring it up when there are other children around who may interfere or make fun of the child.
- 3 CALMLY CALL YOUR CHILD BY NAME** and casually him ask something like, "Do you remember being born?" or "Can you remember being in Mommy's tummy?"
- 4 NO MATTER WHAT THE CHILD SAYS, DON'T OVERLY REACT.** You can calmly ask, "What was it like?" or "Then what happened?" or "Oh, so why did you do that?"
- 5 THANK THE CHILD** for telling you about it. Don't make a big deal of it, but as soon as you can, write down exactly what was said.
- 6 DON'T DISCUSS IT WITH YOUR OTHER CHILDREN** if you plan to ask them the same questions.
- 7 THERE CAN BE A WIDE RANGE OF ANSWERS.** Some may simply say, "Uh-uh," or "No." But be prepared for remarkable responses as well.

Making memories

Biologically, your baby's brain is forming synapses and nerve cells from the moment of conception. Scientists have pinpointed that the nerve cells responsible for memory are fully formed by the third trimester of pregnancy. Which could mean that they are able to form memories from inside the womb, right? Well the answer is not so clear, as memory making is a little more complex than just having the right nerve cells for it in place. Retaining a memory also relies on being able to give it a context and therefore meaning – in biological terms, to make a memory you need to create synapses or connections between brain cells.

Your newborn or even pre-born has little awareness of context and time, so she may be able to recognise your or Dad's voice and react positively, but she can't remember when she heard it first. Johannesburg based child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Brendan Belsham explains: "Very few

adults have memories from before two and a half years of age. Those who do report memories from before this age are usually unable to tell the difference between personal memory of the event and simple knowledge of it, which may have come from other sources, such as photos or being told about the event. This inability to recall memories before the age of two is referred to as *infantile amnesia* and is completely normal. The brain structures which are known to be important in memory formation and retrieval, such as the hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex, are not fully developed for the first three to four years of life. What do they do? The hippocampus is important in the formation of autobiographical/episodic memories, whereas the amygdala is primarily concerned with the emotional content of memories.

"There seems to be, in research, a very close correlation between the development of language in children, and the earliest age at which they are able to obtain childhood memories. Infants do

talking point



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the intra-uterine environment. Good evidence suggests that maternal stress hormones cross the placenta and can negatively affect the developing brain, increasing the risk of several negative outcomes. Similarly, postnatal depression is known to affect the attachment process and increase the likelihood of temper tantrums and other childhood difficulties. The emphasis needs to be on those factors that are under the parents' control," – and exactly what happens at a child's birth is not always under a parent's control. Dr

Belsham adds, "I know many completely well-adjusted children whose births were traumatic, and many very disturbed kids whose births were completely uncomplicated."

Testing the theory

Still intrigued by the idea that my children could possibly remember their totally uneventful elective Caesarean sections, I followed the guidelines given by Dr Chamberlain, and asked my two eldest if they remembered their birthdays. My five year old lit up and said, "Of course I do, Mommy." I was astounded. What do you remember about it? "It's 25 January, silly!" Aah, right. "Okay, so do you remember being born?" I asked. The answer? "Oh, Mom, that was just SO very long ago." I later asked my three year old, and he nodded vigorously. What do you remember? "I came out of your tummy, Mommy." I got excited... Here we go, Dr Chamberlain! "What else do you remember?" To which I got a shoulder shrug and: "Did I come out your tummy or your fanny, Mom?"

not have the language capacity necessary to encode autobiographical memories." Belsham argues scientifically infants' brains are simply not capable of storing and retrieving those early memories.

What if it is true?

It seems that the debate about whether or not your baby remembers being born is a debate between scientific and anecdotal evidence – both valid in their own way. But what does it mean if your child *does* remember his birth? Does this not add to all the things that a mother can feel guilty and anxious about, especially if the birth is unavoidably traumatic, such as an emergency Caesarean?

Dr Belsham agrees with this. "Mothers don't need something else to feel guilty about, especially when the available evidence does not support such an association. I do not believe a child can remember their birth. What is far more important is the emotional milieu into which the child is born. This includes

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TEBOGO DITINTI I really hope they do not because I don't want my little boy to remember the things I said during his birth!

KERRIN JANE MOORE I always thought they couldn't until my son (who will be eight soon) told me he could remember being born and how scary it was! I asked him to explain what he remembers and he said: "Mommy, it was dark and I was in a tight place and I was scared and there was a strange sound like whooshing. Then all of a sudden there was lots of very loud noise and very bright lights and that's when I was really scared, until they gave me to you, Mommy. Then I knew everything would be okay." He was

born by emergency Caesarean after I was in labour for three days. He had twisted around in the womb and when they took him out he was face up and screaming.

CHANTELL JOUBERT I don't think they remember the actual process. I do think, however, that they make associations with the physical feelings they experienced during birth (like temperature, light and sound).

HAYLEY O'DELL Gosh, I sure hope not! The birth of my baby was very traumatic for both of us; I would hate to think it would affect her now as it still affects me.