Birth and Attachment

How to totally support your baby from here on



By

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Guidebook
For Co-Creating Secure Attachment

Attachment is the deep and enduring connection established between a child and parent (or significant caregiver). This bond is the foundation of the child's relationship with herself. It is co-created by two specific human beings in an ongoing mutual relationship. It could be called the cycle of the soul or the cycle of love. The pattern of attachment begins in utero. If this environment is loving, safe and nurturing on all levels, then a strong basis of secure attachment begins building. This pattern is further strengthened when the birth process is optimal. After birth the baby feels a need, then displeasure, gets a response and then gratification of the need. This pattern cycles through over and over until the baby learns to trust, feels secure and knows that the caregiver will respond in consistent, loving ways. Through these experiences the baby is able to develop the ability to tolerate delayed gratification and begins to inhibit impulses in the moment as toddler hood and preschool age is reached. Basic trust and love in the relationship with the adult is fully embodied and sets the template for the child's life.

Attachment is so important because this relationship supports the baby/toddler to develop the ability to regulate her emotions, learn strategies for coping with stress and forms the pattern for being in relationships for the rest of her life. It dramatically affects the child's ability to learn and pay attention. It also is vitally important to the child's physical health as attachment plays a large role in regulating the heart, neuroendrocine and immune systems. From the last trimester of pregnancy until about 8 months the infant's brain is mainly operating in delta and theta waves, which is the brain state where deep imprinting occurs. It is as if the baby is 'downloading' directly into the emotional centers of her brain all that is happening to her and all that she sees and hears around her. These experiences form her view of herself and of life. (Note: this booklet will use the feminine for brevity to avoid saying he/she; his/her).

When does the Attachment Relationship Between the Baby and her Family Start?

The newly conceived baby inside her mother is inseparable from her mother's experience and is, in fact, experiencing everything the mother is experiencing. So what her mother is experiencing during the pregnancy and automatically passing on to the baby is already teaching the baby about questions like: Am I loveable?; Am I safe? Will my mother be able to protect me? Will my mother be there to meet my needs? How the baby's body, nervous system and mind develops during pregnancy is directly related to what her mother is experiencing in her life. Bruce Lipton, a cell biologist, states that this is true even before conception (Lipton, 2001). He says that the experience of the mother as her body is preparing the egg for ovulation about two months before conception will influence what genes are "turned on" in the egg and therefore be in the half of the genes that go to join with the genes from the sperm at conception. This is also true of the genes that are 'turned on" at the time of sperm development in the father.

While developing in utero the baby is building her body in response to her experiences. She is building a body suitable to the conditions of the outside environment she is perceiving through her mother. She is learning her mother's ways of coping with stress. Does she light up a cigarette or have a drink? Does she take a rest, and readjust her pace or workload? The unborn baby is learning her mother's eating and sleeping habits, her rhythms and movement patterns, what kind of music she likes….everything about her. She is getting to know about who will take care of her when she is born and what to expect after birth. By 6-7 months of pregnancy the unborn baby responds with precise muscular movement to each unit of sound in her mother's speech when she is awake. They are doing a dance with each other constantly.

If the baby's Mom is living a high stress life, due to depression, violence, overwork or any other cause then the high level of stress hormones in Mom result in the baby developing her own body geared to cope with high stress. The fetal muscles, cells and mechanisms for flight or fight will be well developed. This means that the blood supply, nerve supply and number of cells in the internal organs will be less than if Mom was in a low stress state. The child may be more susceptible to illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, and immune system diseases later in life (Nathanielsz, 1999). At birth the baby already has a sense of the world as safe or hostile due totally to how the mother felt or experienced her world prenatally, be that high job stress, fighting with the baby's father, money issues, war or whatever the situation was. After birth this sense continues to be built on or is repatterned depending on the baby's experience.



By one year of age the baby will have this basic sense of trust or fear well established. If the trust in her parent hasn't happened she will already be developing strategies to protect herself from further pain. By 18 months, her core view of the world, and herself and the strategies for being in the world are hard wired into the emotional brain, and will regulate emotional behavior lifelong. This does not mean that change is not possible after this time, but it is more difficult and takes focused work by both parent and child as it is now a case of repatterning a well established core way of being.

Stages of the Attachment Relationship after Birth

Immediately after Birth

The birth process of the baby, her weight, maturity and condition affect how available she is for the next step in attaching to her Mom. If the newborn is in an excellent, strong, healthy and mature condition, she will be able to orient to sounds, sights and touch and to coordinate her clear eyes. She will be present and contactful and will self attach to her Mom about 20 minutes after birth, if she is left quietly on her Mother's bare tummy. She will crawl, using the strength in her legs, and bouncing her head, up her Mom's bare belly to the breast. She can pick out her Mom's voice, photo, breastmilk and smell from any other woman's. She can also recognize her Daddy's voice, if he has been present and talking with her in utero.

If the baby is premature or has experienced medications or a long, hard birth or other difficulties during the pregnancy or the birth, she may not be so available for attaching and contact. She may be disoriented, unable to respond consistently to sights, sounds or touch. This will disrupt the natural cycle of attachment and movement towards her Mom and towards her breast for milk. In situations like this it is very helpful to the baby for the Mom to hold her skin to skin on her chest as much as possible. Here, she feels her mother's warmth, smells her skin, hears her heart beat and voice. This will help the baby regulate her heart rate, temperature, respirations, feel safe and orient to this new place outside the womb. It is like reminding her that she is still with her mother who she already knows and she can rely on her to be there and meet her needs even though hard things have happened. This simple act of skin-to-skin holding will support the attachment process necessary for them both at this very early stage.

Birth to Three Months of Age: Knowing I am Welcome Here

To understand from the inside out how the attachment process really works, we need to understand a little about how the brain and nervous system is developing in the first 18 months of life, and what types of actions support optimal functioning and development of the emotional or right side of the brain. This information comes from the work of Schore and Seigel. (see Bibliography). The brain and the nervous system of the baby develops in relationship with the mother and father and other significant caregivers. The developing brain is extremely sensitive to stress.

From birth to three months the amygdala, the primitive limbic system, takes in information from the outside and inside the baby's body in a crude way and creates a response. The baby needs physical contact with her Mom to help her regulate her emotions and her body as this system is still so primitive. If she receives this from her Mom in a gentle loving manner, her brain grows a rich supply of connections into the higher emotional brain centers in an optimal way. She starts to be able to regulate herself a bit more. The baby is taking in information primarily through smell, sound and touch, often through her mouth, as a way of perceiving her world. Babies will suck harder in order to see or hear better. Vision becomes much more important about 6-8 weeks. So when the baby is nursing or being bottle fed, in an in arms position where she can see her mother's face, eyes, mouth and feel her warmth and her skin and smell her Mom, then she is learning if she is loveable, safe and wheather or not her Mom will respond to her. This is the core of her self esteem.

The baby is also learning to manage more excitement and be able to mutually interact and play in a pleasurable way. **The mother must be able to recognize when the baby needs to pause and rest, and respect the baby's space. When the baby turns away the mother must be able to wait for her baby to turn back to play some more or the baby will get agitated and**

move into distress. If this happens repeatedly or Mom doesn't interact often enough in this way she will learn to turn away and be alone.

The other important aspect of these first three months is that when the baby is distressed from the inside, for example, hungry, wet, cold, she is relying on her caregivers to understand her communication about her state and to respond quickly and effectively to comfort her and provide for her needs. The more this happens the more she can relax and feel safe and happy and the more she gets the message inside her body that her caregivers will respond and help her move from an uncomfortable feeling back to a comfortable feeling. She is learning that life here is pleasurable and good. This is all happening at a preverbal, subconscious level in this emotion regulating part of the brain.

Of course, for Mom to be able to be fully present, relaxed and able to sit with her baby singing, talking, cooing, looking and touching in the best possible way she can, **she needs lots of support herself. No one can be expected to care for a newborn baby alone. Help and support for Mom is absolutely vital.**



By the end of the third month if this time has gone well, Mom and baby are forming a secure connection. The baby is easier in her body, sleeps, eats and digests more easily and can communicate messages to her Mom. Mom is getting better and better at reading these messages and is able to respond appropriately.

Three Months to Nine Months: Knowing This Person is Here for Me

The baby is now orienting even more to her Mom's face especially but she is also interested in other family members or regular caregivers. She is learning how to accurately read faces, what different facial expressions mean emotionally. She is learning if Mom's facial expressions, tone of voice and what Mom is doing matches. If she is experiencing this congruency in the people around her, she learns to do this inside herself. If the communication is incongruent she is learning that she can't count on this person.

By six to seven months she is becoming much more sure she wants only people she knows well to be with her. She will show fear and stranger anxiety with people she doesn't know very well. She will be outgoing in her usual situation but withdraw when new situations seem threatening or unfamiliar people are around her. This is a natural and normal part of her learning that her Mom, Dad and other well known caregivers are her secure base in life.

As the higher centers in her emotional brain now slowly begin to control the primitive amygdala, her ability to focus her attention increases. This is the time when the brain tracts for focusing and directing attention are getting laid down. This is a vital development for all future cognitive learning.

If the baby's needs have been adequately responded to, she can now hold confidence in her self as loveable, worthy of care and attention and protection. She is well on her way to being a securely attached child.

Nine Months to Eighteen Months: Knowing This Person will Stay with Me & I Believe in Them & They Believe in Me

Around nine months the right prefrontal orbital cortex starts rapidly growing. If the attachment process is going well, the baby is growing more and more neural connections into this area of the brain in response to rich loving experiences. The right orbital prefrontal cortex is the most sophisticated social center of the brain. It specializes in understanding the social intentions of other people by reading their gestures and facial expressions as well as their voice tone. It encourages the rest of the brain to report on what is happening in the social environment and allows the baby to regulate her emotions and attention even better. The baby is receiving a constant flow of unconscious positive or negative emotional appraisal of social events and responding to this input. This perceiving mechanism is organized in a healthy way if she has been loved, kept safe and had her needs met most of the time. Her response will be appropriate to the external situation most of the time.

If the child's parents are congruent, they will move in and out of deep contact or attunement with the baby, and when they miss something important with their baby, they will recognize it before too long. They will then make a repair so they come back into attunement with the little one. This teaches the baby/child how to do that as well. The baby is learning to flexibly regulate her emotional state through relationships with other people and also within herself. Her behavior is guided from the unconscious right side of the brain.

This right side brain system fundamentally shapes the organization of new learning and the capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. The right brain plays a superior role in the regulation of fundamental physiological functions, the immune system, the motor control system, and the cardiovascular system. After 18 months the left side of the

brain starts to grow rapidly and the preschoolers' cognitive abilities start to develop rapidly. The right side of the brain remains primary until about age three, however.

If the child has lived in relationships where she is fearful and her basic needs for care, love and attention have been unmet much of the time, her brain will have developed in such a way that she will not be able to regulate her emotional states very well or cope with stress well. She will be living in a neurochemical stress soup that doesn't allow her to know when she is safe and when she is not. Even small events take on life/death significance.

What can Parents and Significant Caregivers do to Support Secure Attachment Developing in their Relationship with Their Baby?

If either parent has unresolved issues left over from their own childhood coming to terms with these issues is important. What is more important than what a parents' early childhood was like and how they were parented is if they have come to terms with what happened to them as children. Parents who are in a settled place with their own childhood will raise children who will thrive.

The next thing prospective parents can do is look at their life and do everything they can to reduce stress in the pre-pregnancy and pregnancy and post-pregnancy year. Each family and each woman is individual about what is stressful for them. Overall, what creates the best growing environment for a little one is a relaxed and spacious experience for everyone in the family. Every Mom and every Dad need lots of support when they are having a new baby. The saying "It takes a whole village to raise a child" is a very true statement, but many families are experiencing isolation, loneliness and lack of support in their life at this precious time.

This is a time to reach out to others and get connected with other families with young children and the available supports in your community. Trying to "go it alone" is too much for any new parent. If either parent is experiencing depression, anxiety or having a struggle to adjust to this BIG BIG change in life it is really important to look for help. Calling your Public Health Nurse or other community agency is a good place to start. We now know that if Mom is suffering from post partum depression and/or anxiety, this can affect her attachment relationship with her baby. Many, many mothers experience depression and don't seek help. But this is coming 'out of the closet' and more and more women actually get the support they need and deserve now when they are struggling to adjust in the postpartum year.

Essential questions for Moms to ask themselves are

1. **Am I able to sleep when the baby sleeps?**
2. **Am I getting out?**
3. **Am I eating, and, if so, what am I eating?**
4. **Am I having scary or repetitive thoughts?**



The answers to these questions will help Mom decide if she needs more support than she is getting with what she is experiencing. It is always better to talk about what is really going on with someone you can trust, rather than not talk about it. Partners and friends need to be aware that it is very important not to take the distress a Mom is talking about lightly and suggest she 'just get it together' or that 'it will just pass shortly".

Tips for Parenting that Support Secure Attachment

The following principles for healthy parenting and therefore developing secure attachment between baby and parents and other significant caregivers were adapted from the work of Dr. Ray Castellino with families at BEBA (Building and Enhancing Bonding and Attachment) and further developed in the Strengthening Families Project in Nelson, BC.

1. Slow the pace

The modern world we live in is moving too fast for most people, and in particular it is moving too fast for infants and children. A little one's nervous system takes longer to process events and make a response than an adult nervous system. The baby is easily overwhelmed and over stimulated when events move too fast. The baby's only way of coping with this is to withdraw or go into distress. **The baby needs the parent to slow way down and use the parent's own body rhythm to help the baby get back into connection. The only way a baby can slow down is if the parent can slow down.** Parents can help their babies come into their bodies in a comfortable way by buffering them from overwhelming feelings and protecting them from frightening events.

Parents also have a right to take a pause and slow down.

This makes it easier to think more clearly about how to handle a situation and to settle inside oneself. This is exactly what babies and preschoolers need their parents to do, so that they can learn to settle and center themselves.

When should a parent or caregiver take a pause?

- when there is a question of safety
- when they feel overwhelmed themselves
- when communication needs clarifying or is breaking down…with baby or other adults

If the adult is speeding up, getting anxious and feeling overwhelmed it is wonderful to say to the baby or child what is happening for you and that **you need to settle in yourself.** Slow down, reorient, so you can reconnect with yourself and with her.

It is also good to let your baby know if you are upset about something that has nothing to do with her. You may come home from shopping upset about something a friend said to you, and it is important to let your baby know, saying something like "I'm upset about something that happened during my visit with Mary today….it doesn't have anything to do with you, but you may feel my upset". Or "Daddy and I are upset and angry with one another, and it doesn't have anything to do with you, but you may feel us being upset".

Babies need to know
what is about to happen before it happens.

Babies understand more than we can ever imagine. They are conscious and aware beings, learning about who they are from others around them. Part of slowing the pace is to let even newborn babies know what is going to happen next and to give them a chance to adjust to it. Much of the time the baby doesn't have a choice about what is about to happen, but they need to know a transition is coming. Even though a baby doesn't yet understand the words in a rational way, she will understand something is going to happen and she is being included in the plan. For example, if a baby is lying down, and Mom is going to come and pick her up and change her diaper, Mom should let her know

first, before picking her up, that this is going to happen. Then Mom can leave a little space for the baby to respond. Remember, babies' nervous systems are going slower than adults, so there will be a little gap of time in the response. An example is when the adult wants to pick up a baby. The adult would tell the baby "I'm coming closer and I want to pick you up". Then watch for the baby to respond. She may turn towards you, reach out a hand or give you some other way of indicating she wants to be picked up. After this little gap, move to pick up the baby. If the baby cries or indicates she doesn't want to be picked up then the adult needs to acknowledge these feelings and decide if it is really necessary to pick up the baby right then. It might sound like "Oh, you don't want to be picked up. You like what you are doing right now. I'm sorry but Mommy needs to take you with her to the store. So in a few minutes I need to pick you up."

The language of baby response:
How do babies say YES or NO?

Before babies and children can express their wants and needs in language, they use their body movements, gestures and body states to communicate what they want and what is happening for them. Below is a list of some of the ways that babies communicate with their bodies.

Saying NO! or "I need a pause"
or "I don't like it"

1. wary, fearful, angry facial expressions
2. blank expressions or glazed over eyes
3. wrinkled nose and raised upper lips
4. increased sucking noises when baby is not nursing
5. attempting to move or turn away with their body
6. shuddering or jerking suddenly, startling when there is no really loud sound or fast movement

7. trying to protect themselves by covering their body with their arms, or by raising an arm between the adult and themselves. We adults usually think these are just random movements but they are a baby's way of expressing a 'no' with their body
8. turning their head away, or simply closing their eyes to avoid contact
9. stiffening their body, or pushing and arching away from the adult holding them
10. vocalizing in a way that seems to say 'no'
11. showing a baby stress response such as hiccupping, spitting up, yawning or sneezing
12. pouting expressions and whimpering
13. tight fists and also curling toes into tight 'fists'
14. getting agitated and crying for no apparent reason
15. once mobile, crawling or walking away or trying to

Saying "Yes" or "I like this"

1. reaching or moving towards the adult with their body
2. relaxing in their body and molding into the adult
3. showing excitement and pleasure
4. face brightens
5. making direct eye contact
6. smiling or doing other inviting facial expressions
7. being quietly alert and attentive

Or the baby may be saying "I want you"

1. crying for a reason you are able to figure out… hungry, cold, lonely, wet
2. arms up, reaching for the adult
3. looking at the adult directly
4. making more sounds, increasing in volume
5. leaning or crawling or walking toward the adult

Acknowledging the baby's response or need

Even if the baby doesn't have a choice about what is going to happen, (for example, a diaper change), it is very important that the adult acknowledges what the baby's response to being told it is time to have a diaper change. If the baby is indicating "no" by trying to turn away with her body or turning her head away or agitating the adult needs to say, "Oh, I see you don't want your diaper changed…you still want to play" or some such response. And then give a little time for the baby to adjust. Saying, "Mommy needs to change this wet diaper now…let's play while we do it"

If the baby really does have a choice, it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the choice based on the response the baby has made. If the adult asks the baby a question, i.e. "Do you want to be picked up and cuddled now?" and the baby turns her body and eyes away, the adult can respond "Oh, I see you aren't ready to be picked up yet, let's wait a little while". The adult can wait until the baby indicates she wants to come towards the adult.

It is also important that the adult let the baby know when they are going to take their attention away from the baby and then give the baby a moment to adjust to that. Often, if the adult quickly moves their attention to another adult or child or situation without letting the baby know ahead of time the baby will go into distress, primarily from the suddenness of the movement.

Slowing down, acknowledging your feelings and the baby's feeling helps the baby validate their experience and integrate it. This helps the baby feel secure with you, even in times of upset.

2. Eye Contact

By age 6 weeks our human eyes are the windows of the soul. It is through eye contact that we can most directly understand and connect with another person. A baby is neurologically wired to seek eye contact with her parents, unless she has already experienced trauma that causes her to look away and avoid eye contact because of fear. Deep eye contact between Mom and baby during feeding helps build the attachment relationship, helps with relaxation, sleeping and digestion.



When a new baby comes into the family, often the focus of the adults goes to the baby and stays with the baby as she grows into a child. The parents or adults in the home are often so focused on the baby/child that they forget to maintain good eye contact with each other. Then they can easily misunderstand or lose deep connection with each other. It helps the baby and the developing attachment relationships if the adults in the home maintain eye contact with each other frequently. The baby's system will relax when the adults around her connect in this way. She will experience a strong circle of support around her.

3. Touch

Physical touch, and skin to skin contact is essential to human life. In the early days of life outside the womb the Mom's body is regulating the baby's body, both physiologically and emotionally. Nothing is better for an upset baby than skin-to- skin contact, lying on her mother's or father's chest, being rocked or nursed.

As the baby grows, close physical proximity and touch is essential when the parent is making contact with the baby/toddler, because the communication needs to be somatic (body oriented) as well as verbal. The child is responding from the right side of the brain, which is unconscious and somatic, and best receives signals through loving, gentle, sensitive touch and also firm, loving touch when appropriate. Parents claim their children as their own, communicate their love and manage their young children's behavior through touch. The absolute felt sense in the body of belonging to each other comes through touch.



4. Motion

Rocking, jiggling, gentle bouncing, swinging, being held while the adult is walking is part of the body language of secure attachment, especially in conjunction with food, eye contact, and touch. Motion is often overlooked as a facilitator of attachment. But motion is forever associated with the sense of being loved and cared for. Even though motion is a subtle input, the importance of vestibular stimulation (the part of the inner ear associated with motion and position) cannot be overemphasized. Achieving these benefits involve the parent actually holding the baby themselves on their body. Slings or other ways that the baby is on the parent's body are helpful. Items like swings and other moving devices do not enhance attachment. Sometimes swings or the like are useful because they help parents take a pause when they really need to.

5. Watching for and Respecting Activation and Settling Cycles

All babies and young children naturally have a cycle where they will be active and then settle, be active and then settle. But their environment can interfere with their natural cycle as well as support it. Sometimes this begins with their labour being induced and/or augmented with pitocin. The infant may have a strong experience of the labour being too fast, too abrupt and intense, just as the Mom may have such an experience. This can have the effect of confusing natural rhythmic responses with their Mother and taking longer to settle. Sometimes Mom has so much going on that she rarely settles in herself during the day. Sometimes, especially if there are other young children in the house, everything is moving fast and there are many different rhythms for the baby to adjust to.

It is important for the parents to provide periods of activity and periods of quiet time and rest for their young children. Parents need to notice when a young one is getting tired or restless and support that child to go into settling. This helps the child to feel her own natural rhythm and will greatly assist her in regulating her emotions. Families going into active play together and then settling into quiet time together strengthens attachment, because they are sharing their natural rhythms in a cooperative dance. The parents having space to go into rest periods at times during the day may be one of the BIG keys to effective attachment parenting. Without this it is impossible for any adult to stay present with their child. **An example would be building in a routine group pause, where the family members would be relaxing together for a short time after coming home from time away. Everyone could fall down on the couch or the floor for a few minutes before making dinner or starting other activities.**

6. Recognizing when babies and children are relating to their history

It is unavoidable that sometimes difficult events happen. Babies are born prematurely, they do have illness that necessitate hospitalizations and surgery, parents do fight and separate, parents do experience depression, anxiety and other major stresses that impact on a little one. It may be, for example, a child who has experienced many heel sticks for blood samples in an intensive care nursery will hate having her feet touched and will fight like a tiger if someone touches her feet or tries to put on the wrong kind of socks or shoes. If the parent can figure out what is happening based on the child's history and be empathetic about it, space will be created for the child to work through it with support. Parents can name it for the child and accept their feelings. This will support the child to work through the feelings and come into a more cooperative place about dressing. An empathetic parent can first say "Oh, I know you don't like having your feet touched,

Mommy knows your feet got hurt when you were a tiny baby". Although the child still needs socks, there is a place for coming to up with a creative way for the parent or the child to put on the socks in a good way. Then a good chance of healing the trauma and strengthening the attachment bond is created. Another example could be a preschooler who has been hospitalized for an essential surgery. When she comes home she is very angry and withdrawn. She is showing her parents she did not like being left and hurt.

Recognizing when Parents and Infants or Preschoolers Need More Support

1. The baby/preschooler doesn't respond with comfort and relaxation to the parent's efforts to soothe and console
2. The parent becomes anxious, angry, insecure and begins to lose confidence in parenting abilities (What am I doing wrong? is often experienced)
3. The parent is withdrawing or becoming increasingly punitive or intrusive
4. The baby/child responds to the parent's heightened stress and anxiety by becoming more anxious, fearful and unresponsive. Her cries may escalate, she may become very withdrawn or begin acting out aggressively in a persistent manner.

Summary

Secure attachment provides the basis for a happy, fulfilling life within self and in relationship with others. It is never too late to work on healing the original attachment patterns established between parent and child if it is less than optimal. The principles discussed in this guidebook will support establishing secure attachment or developing secure attachment once a disrupted pattern has been established. One of the benefits of using these principles in families is that often the parents and other family members notice that their relationships with each other improve and are enriched.

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www.allanschore.com: this website contains articles by Allan Schore that have contributed to this guidebook, as well as other interesting articles on attachment and early trauma resolution.

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Myrna has 40 years experience working with people therapeutically as a nurse, public health nurse, family therapist, Integrative Body/Mind Therapist and teacher (IBP), Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapist/ Teacher.
She has been in full time private practice and teaching Pre and Perinatal Workshops, Seminars and full Professional Trainings since 2000.

When her children were growing up, she was Director of Nelson and Area Mental Health Services and when they graduated from high school and went off to university she created the EarthSky Foundation [formerly Kutenai Institute of Integral Therapies] and began teaching about and practicing early trauma resolution work with babies, young children and adults full time.
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