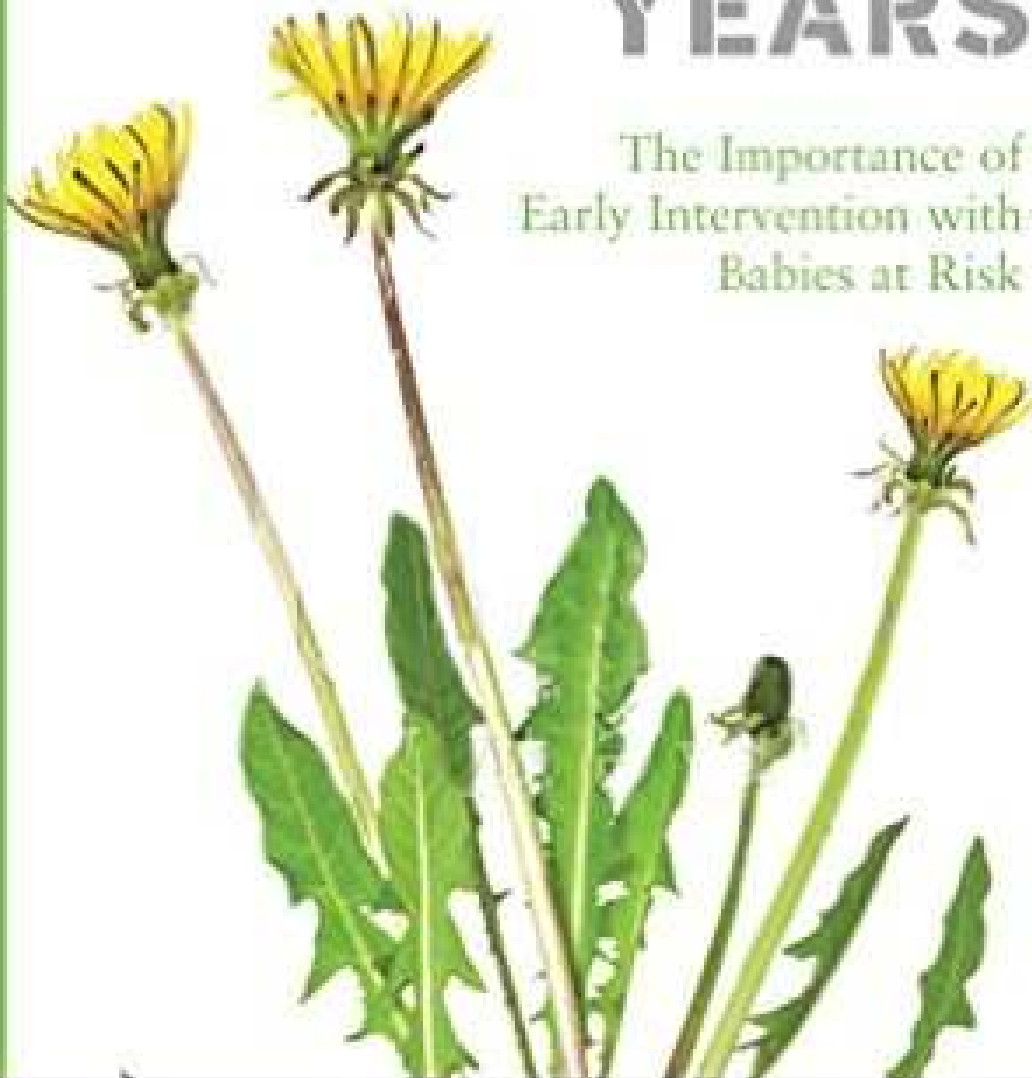


# SURVIVING THE EARLY YEARS

The Importance of  
Early Intervention with  
Babies at Risk



**Stella Acquarone**

*Editor & Contributor*

**UKCP**  
UK PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS  
**KARNAC**  
**SERIES**

*Containing Excellence in  
Psychotherapy and Counselling*

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn, PhD

**“We cannot expect people to ‘manage’ or ever forget their experiences, but, through reflection they are able to acknowledge their impact and keep them at bay so that they can get on with everyday life” Zack Eleftheriadou**

Editing an anthology isn't easy. Theme-based anthologies are not simply a random collection of professional essays; the contributions must work well together. The theme must be narrow enough to support cohesion yet wide enough to appeal to a large enough audience and attract them beyond page one. The editor must consider a coherence of tone and theme—the interplay between various voices, different writing styles and content that must not only fit together but read with a sense of commonality and flow.

Stella Acquarone's anthology, *Surviving the Early Years: The Importance of Early Intervention with Babies at Risk*, succeeds on many counts. The authors—all noted as experts in their clinical specialties—discuss themes relevant to the development of healthy parent-child relationships. They address dangers that can easily jeopardize the natural development of these key developmental relations and what's important to improve and repair what's been damaged by trauma (be it developmental, generational, situational and so on) (pg. 272).

The sad reality is, not all babies are born into perfect environments, into loving, skilled, healthy families. Many babies are born into difficult situations, ranging from experiences in intensive neonatal care units to contending with mothers with health conditions or extreme personal situations (the mother, or father for that matter, may be incarcerated, may be abused, may live in a war zone, may be depressed and affectively void). As well, one must consider the society and cultural practices the baby enters. Many families simply slog along, unlike mothers who, as Acquarone writes,

recall the early years with their babies as a dance of understanding and development. Acquarone highlights the need for better parental and infant support during the prenatal period and the need for greater availability of appropriate services and clinicians to accompany and support families beyond mere physical survival and innate resiliency in order to calm the fears and fallout of early traumatic beginnings, and to help make connections between these traumatic experiences and the traumatic consequences of survival. There's much conversation about the capacities of newborns and the potentials that exist for parents and children.

Acquarone begins the book with a quote from the "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

There passed a weary time, Each throat  
Was parched, and glazed each eye  
A weary time! A weary time!  
How glazed each weary eye

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner depicts the story of a ship that set out "into a sunny and cheerful sea" yet sailed into frigid water and was caught in a maze of mast-high ice. It's noted as an epic tale of despair and in this text functions as an emotional allegory of "the despair resulting from the unmet needs of infants, parents, and careers (with their little albatross) and the 'sea' of society in the early years" (pg. xxi).

Mariners, it seems, cling to hope to survive. Acquarone notes that the early years for many infants and families can be as despairing as what those sailors felt on their fateful journey. Sure, she writes, they may manage to survive but at what cost?

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“This book is about the hope underlying the ability to survive the early years” (pg xxii). It brings readers face to face with the “wonderful capabilities of the newborn and the great potential for parents (mother and father) and child to continue growing together in a society that cares for them” (pg. xxiii).

*Surviving the Early Years* comprises three sections: Thoughts in Search of a Thinker; Reaching the Vulnerable at Risk from “External” Circumstances; and Vulnerable Groups Coming from “Internal” Fragile Circumstances. Acquarone writes the introduction, conclusion, and a chapter dealing with autism. Her introduction clearly sets the stage for the overall flow of the book and the topics of each paper (13 in total). Each section begins with a clear topic statement, repeated from the introduction, to further guide the reader’s focus. The content is academic, researched—extensive in-text citations and reference lists accompany each paper. The tone is clearly scholarly and the data meant to instruct though the authors write from personal (albeit) professional clinical experience. The papers in section one are clearly longer and have a more theoretical feel, more heady reading that without previous background knowledge means more time to assimilate the content. The papers in section two are shorter and contain more case examples—user friendly reading. Those in section three, also using case examples, contain more pictures and graphics to highlight the content, feeling a bit more like presentations within a textbook. The authors have much to offer and readers have much to gain by reading this book. This review simply offers a snippet of each paper and will let readers explore the content more in-depth when they read the book.

### **Part 1: Thoughts in Search of a Thinker**

“Consider a particular dialogue of emotions: the principal physical and psychological ideas and thoughts of what happens to parents from the moment they conceive” (pg. xxiii).

*The Emotional Dialogue: Womb to Walking* by Joan Raphael-Leff. Raphael-Leff writes from the mother’s perspective—noting the

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mother's mental representations and emotional contributions to the primary relational system (pg. 3). The womb is considered a 'habitat' and pregnancy is considered a shared emotional experience between parents. The strength and presence of the couple has a tremendous impact on the new experience of parenthood about to occur in their lives.

*Sharing Joyful Friendship and Imagination for Meaning with Infants, and Their Application Toward Early Intervention* by Colwyn Trevarthen.

Trevarthen describes the effects caring has for a developing newborn who arrives with the desire to fully interact. He shares how babies communicate via his theory of infant intersubjectivity then traces changes in motives and interests due to maternal factors, e.g. depression. He also discusses the positive effects of music and song to help promote attachment and intimate relationships. He writes that recovery is more difficult when neglect starts early and ends with a powerful comment on autism—it may not simply be a genetic disorder but perhaps a product of the parent-child relationship.

*"Happy Birthdeath to Me": Surviving Death Wishes in Early Infancy* by Brett Kahr.

Brett divides his paper into three sections. He begins by reviewing ideas about unconscious death wishes toward infants from the time of the ancient Greeks. Next, he analyzes clinical scenarios—the sense of being killed off but still being alive . . . what he calls infanticidal attachment—a type of disorganized attachment where there's no safety for the child that could potentially stimulate severe psychopathology (pg. xxv). Lastly he offers a working model to help clinicians identify death wish symptoms in adults and thus avoid potential catastrophes in children (pg. xxv).

## **Part Two: Reaching the Vulnerable at Risk from "External" Circumstances**

Contributors discuss mothers at risk because of external situations such as trauma.

Acquarone writes that "to be reflective and thoughtful about babies and themselves, they have to overcome their trauma."

*Creating Safe Space: Psychotherapeutic Support for Refugee Parents and Babies* by Zack Eleftheriadou. Eleftheriadou writes about Winnocott (a holding environment) and Bion (containment) and how these approaches permit different points of entry into parent-infant relationships.

*Interventions with Mothers and Babies in Prisons: Collision of Internal and External Worlds* by Pamela Windham Stewart. Life in prison is clearly not conducive to healthy mother-infant relationships. Mothers in Stewart's group learn how to have new relationships (not repeat past patterning) with other mothers in the group as well as with the therapist, and in turn with their child. They learn how to move away from what they grew up with and what they currently contend with in prison.

*Talking To, and Being with Babies: The Importance of Relationship in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit* by Lucie Zwimpfer. Zwimpfer works with NICU babies and discusses ways to be with babies in this environment, which offers limited time and access and an overworked staff (who are also stressed out). She talks about attuned vocal soothing as one pain management tool during painful procedures.

*"Toward the Baby": First Steps in Supporting Parents in Early Encounters with their Infants. A Reflection from Poland* by Magdalena Stawicka and Magdalena Polaszewska-Nicke. Stawicka and Polaszewska-Nicke write about changing viewpoints in Poland, which is noted as war torn and rampant with social difficulties such that the concept of infant mental health doesn't exist.

They write about their baby program and how it helps parents develop healthy parent-infant relationships to potentially avoid future emotional and behavioral disorders.

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*Adoption and Fostering: Facilitating Healthy New Attachments Between Infant and Adoptive Parent* by Maeja Raicar, with contributions from Colette Salkeld and Franca Brenninkmeyer. Raicar looks at concepts related to loss and mourning when an adoption occurs whether from choice or the infant/child is removed from the home. The contributors offer positive effects on the family when they generate a circle of security as well as the negative impacts of vicious cycles that become repetitive and pathological.

*In a Strange Country without a Map: Special Needs Babies* by Julie Kitchner. Kitchner writes that babies must deal with their deficits (*a concept often not considered*). Attention is more likely given to the parents who often feel overwhelmed and disoriented, due to unbearable feelings of loss, dislocation, and anger about what they expected with their new child and what they received. She notes the need for imaginative engagement to strengthen the quality of their relationships and to enable the child to gain a sense of self and other like any other child.

### **Part 3: Vulnerable Groups Coming from "Internal" Fragile Circumstances**

Vulnerable groups of babies due to internal fragile circumstance learn what's essential for them to develop in a healthier way. Acquarone notes the need to recognize the power of the relationship and to be grateful for ways to prevent the occurrence of disorders and difficulties that can be avoided.

Four chapters include:

*Early Recognition of Autism* by Daphne Keen. Keen explores, from a neurodevelopmental pediatric point of view, the importance of recognizing the condition (autism) as early as possible. She looks at co-existing medical and developmental conditions and how diagnosis is made through recognition of sensory impairment, psychosocial deprivation, selective mutism, attention and hyperactivity deficient disorders, intellectual disability and developmental syndromes.

*The Power of the Relationship to Awaken*

*Positive Emotional Potential* by Stella Acquarone. Acquarone writes about autistic evolution, noted as when infants and children retreat into their own world. She describes her program designed to help these children move out from their world and in a sense normalize. She presents a clinical case study to illustrate elements that are considered when helping children form relationships.

*Early Pediatric Intervention: To See or Not to See, To Be or Not To Be, With Others* by Jo Winsland. Winsland discusses the importance of doctors' listening to parents' concerns about their infants when there is nothing obviously physically wrong with them. Emotional development is just as critical and effective care can be hampered if doctors don't listen and monitor their concerns. She offers clinical case examples showing how early intervention can make a tremendous difference when done skillfully and sensitively.

*Working in a National Health Service Setting with Toddlers at Risk of Autistic Spectrum Disorder* by Maria Rhode. Rhode works with infants at risk of autism and describes a program where toddlers considered at risk are offered an infant observer (a therapist) to visit them at home. The therapist's role as observer is to make links between parent and child. Rhode writes about a 17-month-old who needed to be treated after presenting various signs that alarmed parents. Through collaboration with the family, she writes, they can overcome the "vicious circle of discouragement" (pg. xxx).

### **To Close**

Acquarone, in conjunction with the contributing authors in this anthology, is helping to promote public awareness of the need for better support for parents and infants throughout the perinatal period. The comprehensive nature of this book—centered on the psychodynamics of traumatic early beginnings—and the presentation of multidisciplinary interventions offers both clinical applications that may potentially serve to help clinicians working with families today, and it offers a significant contribution to help broaden mental health debates about babies and families and the importance of prenatal and perinatal care.