Remarkable Abilities of Fetuses and Newborn Babies

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If you hold a newborn baby upright by grasping the baby under the arms and touching the feet to the ground, the baby will swing the legs forward as if walking. This response, called the walking reflex, disappears 3 or 4 weeks after birth.

Because walking is a sophisticated skill, whether we realize it or not, I have been interested in what newborns would do if we let them practice walking even after the walking reflex naturally faded away. So I asked some 40 mothers who share with me an interest in early childhood education, to continue to induce the walking reflex in their babies. Of course, I asked them to be careful to observe their babies, not to force them when they seemed to be unwilling, and not to let them continue the practice more than a few minutes at a time.

The result of this experiment was that these babies began toddling and then walking about 2 months earlier than usual. In addition, these babies started uttering one- or two-word sentences about 2 months earlier than the average. The earlier babies start standing and walking, the further they can see and reach, so their experience is enlarged and they get a wider variety of stimuli, leading to a greater chance to develop language.

Since the old days some Japanese have had a custom to make a baby shoulder a huge rice cake as heavy as the baby itself on the baby's first birthday. The idea was that the parents would thereby be reminded that they should not overly encourage their too-young babies to walk. I do not simply believe that the earlier a baby begins to walk, the better. But I hope that, through this kind of experiment, mothers will be more observant of their babies. When mothers learn to be well aware of their babies' willingness or unwillingness to do something, and their babies are ready to do something in response to their mother's invitation – if there is such close communication between mothers and their babies, the babies' walking and mastering of language will be expedited.

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Until recently, a newborn baby was considered nothing more than a blind and deaf being which only drinks milk and sleeps. As our technology has advanced, however, we have learned that a baby, even a fetus, has incredible capacities. At the same time, the importance of the relation between a mother and her baby is becoming more and more obvious.

On the occasion of the special issue of this journal, I hope that the study of prenatal development will advance and will provide

mothers with a solid basis for the bringing up of good human beings, through the strong bonds between them and their babies, to let them know the most appropriate timing and the best way to develop their abilities in accordance with each baby's personality.