BY WILLIAM G. WILKOFF, M.D.

LETTERS FROM MAINE

This Shot Won't Hurt

If there is one quality that predominates among new parents, it is self-doubt. Fortunes have been made, (although not by me) in the publishing industry by tapping into the large and predictable market of confidence-deficient neo-parents. I suspect that to some extent it's always been this way. While familiarity may breed contempt, unfamiliarity has always bred trepidation.

The drive to make babies is a powerful force we are comfortable with because Mother Nature does the driving. But we often feel she has abandoned us the moment she hands us that wet, wailing, and totally dependent newborn.

While I am sure that back in the 1700's new parents worried, I suspect they suffered far less from self-doubt than new millennium parents. Several generations ago, new parents were surrounded by their families and grandparents who had been there, done that a dozen times. They grew up in large families and were familiar with what babies and children do.

Contrast this to the parents we see today. They are often geographically divorced from their own families. They come from small families, and may not have participated in raising their siblings, if they had them. They have delayed having children, and it may have been decades since they had any close contact with babies. Their only experience that is anywhere close to parenting has been raising a Labrador retriever. Although they may have been initially deluded that there will be some carryover, it takes only a few minutes to realize that parenting is a whole new ball game.

New parents are older and, to some extent, wiser. They have seen more and read more and know that the world presents much more to worry about than they imagined as teenagers. Of course, the media compounds this with horror stories about how even the most everyday events can go awry. We physicians unwittingly compound the situation with well-meaning suggestions about things like how long to breastfeed.

The bottom line is that new parents seriously need reassurance. Too few of them articulate this by asking, "Am I doing this right?" And too few of us answer the unasked question by unambiguously stating," You're doing a great job!"

In a recent issue of AAP News (October 2009), Dr. Martin Stein and Dr. J. Lane Tanner reported on some findings from their study of 20 parent focus groups and 31 pediatric clinician focus groups. Among other things, they asked how an ideal pediatric practice would look. They observed, "Parents spoke to an issue that many doctors may be less aware of—how much they value the reassurance that the pediatrician or PNP can give, not only that their child is healthy, but also that they are doing a good job as parents."

Sometimes we feel that saying, "That's a good weight gain" or complimenting parents on their child's cuteness is sufficient. But I've found that it's not. Parents hear those platitudes from their family and even strangers in the grocery store checkout line all the time. There is nothing more powerful than a respected child health provider saying, "I just want to tell you that you're doing a nice job!"

It's even more important when things aren't going well. Be reassuring during those first few weight checks in the office for the mother who's struggling with a marginal milk supply or who has terribly sore nipples. One doesn't have to be specific. "I know you're worried about how the breastfeeding is going, but you are doing a very good job of parenting."

There are so few overconfident new parents that it is easy to recommend a shot of confidence at every well-child visit. I promise it won't hurt. ■

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