

Foreword for J. Ronald Lally  
**For Our Babies: Ending the Invisible Neglect of America's Infants<sup>1</sup>**

By T.B. Brazelton and Joshua Sparrow

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It is not news that infants are born both highly competent and highly vulnerable. In the 1950s, I (TBB) began studying newborns and discovered through careful observation of their skin color, activity, neurological reflexes, sensory function, and social responsiveness that they indeed come into the world as highly competent beings, wired for human interaction that shapes their brains (Brazelton & Nugent, *Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale Manual*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1971, 4<sup>th</sup> edition 2011). Back then we didn't have the non-invasive brain imaging technologies of today, but our scientific methods were already revealing that far more was going on in infants' brains than was once thought.

Future scientific advances will no doubt reveal much more about the developing brain, and how crude our current understandings are. Yet for decades we've known enough to know that the workplace's increasing demands on families and the unraveling of informal neighborhood supports are incompatible with what babies need at the beginning of life to thrive later on.

It is also not news that babies shape their caregivers to be responsive to their unique, individual needs. For this, caregivers must be present, emotionally available, and protected from too many other demands. Otherwise, the critical signals babies send to their caregivers may go unheeded. The role of such exchanges in healthy infant and parent development was first established in the *Face-to-Face* experiments that I began with colleagues back in the 1970s. In the 1980s, I began to see in my pediatric practice the transformation of families described in *Invisible Neglect* that can jeopardize this kind of early communication. I wrote *Working and Caring* to address the challenges that families were facing as they found themselves with too little time for their young children and not enough support for themselves as parents. Since then, real wages stagnated and then declined, pushing parents to spend even more time at work, and less with their children. To counter this, a few years later, I worked with Congressional leaders to bring about the Family Medical Leave Act. As Lally says, it hasn't increased the time parents actually spend with their babies because it is too short and unpaid.

With more parents in the workforce, and without paid parental leave, more babies are spending more time in childcare. Yet we've known for years that the majority of childcare in this country is poor quality. Some small steps have been taken on this front in recent years. Despite the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the first Obama administration invested more money in quality early childhood education than at

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any time since the creation of Head Start more than forty years ago. Yet most babies and young children still do not receive the quality of care that they need for success later in life.

These critical policy gaps in parental leave and quality early childhood education have been exacerbated by additional stresses on families, for example, the dissolution of extended families and communities by the relentlessly increasing requirements of the workplace, the contamination of family and neighborhood values by TV shows designed to make us pay more attention to things to buy than to each other in our vanishing free time, and the paving over of neighborhoods to accommodate cars rather than human connections. In 1991, I published my first book on the *Touchpoints* of children's development, the predictable developmental crises that are major challenges for the whole family, because I saw that their successful resolution was being jeopardized by these gaps and stresses. These normal and necessary crises that ultimately propel growth are times when parents need the support of extended family, friends, and neighbors. With that support, temporary disorganization leads to reorganization at a higher level – with new skills and capacities for the child and parents. Without it, developmental derailment is a major risk. At that time, I thought the only solution was to help healthcare, educational and other human service professionals to learn to fill in for the relationships in families that were being lost. Since then, I've realized that although this can help, it is not enough. We must instead reorient our priorities and our communities around families raising children.

In 2001, I wrote a book with the late Stanley Greenspan, *The Irreducible Needs of Children*, which was motivated by a mission similar to this book – to use science to inform new policies to address these gaps. But Ron Lally's book comes at a different time, a time when the trickle down economics and deregulation culminating in the Great Recession of 2008 have increased the number of children living in poverty, and stretched families' and communities' resources even further. With an historic Federal deficit, effective programs for children and families are at risk of being cut back or dismantled altogether, at a time when more children need them more than ever. This is a dire time, a touchpoint for our country through which we can grow and gather strength, or be derailed.

This book is an urgent call to action. In it, Lally decries the fact that the U.S. is the only wealthy industrialized nation without paid parental leave and affordable quality early education. For years, he and others have presented such comparisons with other countries in order to stimulate constructive debate and spur progress. Instead, the result has been knee-jerk responses about American exceptionalism: "Are you saying we're not the greatest? How dare you compare us with *those* countries?" As a result, the point is missed: the most successful businesses study the successes of their competitors and their own failures in order to make their products better than anyone's. We need to do the same with our policies. We can *expand* the exceptionalism of our great country, but we will need this crisis to push us to think differently, and then to act. Together.

*Invisible Neglect* proposes a science-based approach to policy. Much of the science we need to shape policy for babies and their families is actually already a few decades old. We've seen the effects of this mismatch between knowledge and policy coming for a long time. What have we been waiting for?

One oft-cited obstacle is lack of funding. That only looms larger in the current economic climate. Yet for years now, Lally and others, including some of the economists cited in this book, have shown how investments in quality early education and preventive healthcare will more than pay for themselves when children reach adulthood. This bottom line wisdom has begun to spread, but won't go far enough as long as the business world's cycle goes from quarter to quarter, and the political one only looks four years down the road. The return on this investment takes longer than that, but too many of our institutions are focused on the short-term only. And as Lally says, the total investment cost is so trivial relative to other budget items that the issue really isn't money at all. The issue is priorities.

Lally is reluctant to use this economic argument for investing in children because he believes the moral one should suffice to make this a priority. Shouldn't we do everything we can to protect our babies, whether it saves money or not? Not everyone thinks so. The moral path leads in different directions depending on one's fundamental belief system. For example, Lally points to the strongly held belief that families should take care of themselves on their own as an obstacle to science-informed early childhood policies. Yet such beliefs can neither be displaced by simply citing the moral position that Lally and many of us share, nor by an appeal to science, which is regarded skeptically by many who harbor these beliefs.

We have a cultural divide in our country: science is on one side, certain ideological beliefs on the other. Individualism and the greater good are polarized too. The urgent changes that we, Lally, and others have called for over the years may not occur until we can learn to listen and understand across the divide, and reach for common ground. This book is a starting place for urgently needed dialogue that will finally lead to action.

We believe that beneath these differences, we will find common values and goals, and shared concerns about the weakening of families, neighborhood and communities, the erosion of values by a consumption-driven economy, and the consequences of these for the future of our country. Although we may disagree about the details, there is a growing understanding, on both sides of this divide, that professionals, families and communities need each other and better policies to raise the next generation. Until recently, the gulf between those who feel a moral obligation to all children, and those who limit themselves to those they are related to by genes or adoption was wide. Now, though, on both sides of the aisle there is a new call to protect *our* children's futures – whether from future federal debt, or from inadequate healthcare and education in the present.

What is new is that we have arrived at a crossroads – a critical period or nation's development when the choices we make now will lead to a prosperous future or

condemn us to stagnation and decline. Not only have our babies been neglected, but our families, neighborhoods, schools and healthcare system have too. Too many babies born in the 1980s and 90s are now adults who cannot stand up to the global competitive workforce. Too many have become parents whose brains were not prepared in early childhood to allow them to nurture their own babies' brains. If we do not act now, we will soon tip into a point of no return with too few healthy and well-educated adults in this country to protect it and keep it strong. Along with Ron Lally and others, we have been calling for decades to act on what we know. What is difference now is that, in addition to the scientific evidence, we also have the kind of urgent crisis that may finally push us to act.

We all want a prosperous future for our country and our children. Out of these dire times may come a powerful new consensus that to accomplish this we must raise all of our children to grow up to become adults who have the resilience to cope with adversity, strengthen their communities, engage as active participants in civic life, steward our fragile planet's limited resources, and who can nurture the next generation to be prepared to do the same\*. We are grateful to Ron Lally for this book and his life's work to advance this critical mission.

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*\*Adapted from the Brazelton Touchpoints Foundation Mission Statement*