

## Ask the Expert

ROSS A. THOMPSON

ZERO TO THREE Board Members answer your questions about best practices and provide practical information you can use in your work with infants, toddlers, and their families.

**MEET:** Ross Thompson, PhD, is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Thompson's work focuses on early personality and socioemotional development in the context of close relationships. Dr. Thompson has served twice as associate editor of *Child Development*, was a Senior NIMH Fellow in Law and Psychology at Stanford University in 1989-90, and served on the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development of the National Academy of Sciences (1998-2000). He is the author of numerous books and has received the Boyd McCandless Award from the American Psychological Association, and the Ann L. Brown Award for Excellence in Developmental Research.

### Changing Views of Social Development

**Q: For so long we believed that infants and young children are egocentric and have little understanding of people's thoughts and feelings. What caused researchers to change their views?**

**A:** Quite simply, evidence began to accumulate that young children are not so socially insensitive. Some of the evidence came from everyday observations of young children. Watching a 2-year-old tease an older sibling or comfort a distressed friend, any observer could see non-egocentric social understanding at work. And sometimes when young children appear egocentric, it is instead due to limitations in their social knowledge or experience. When a toddler offers her teddy bear to a distressed parent, it is probably because few toddlers know how to comfort a sad adult, so she offers something that works for her.

Once researchers began to question whether young children are as egocentric as earlier believed, they realized that some research tasks that allegedly demonstrated egocentrism were probably too complex for young children. Being asked to indicate how a three-dimensional landscape would look to someone sitting across from you is a conceptually challenging assignment—it's no wonder that young children were unable to do it and appeared egocentric. When the tasks were simplified, however, children showed far greater social and emotional understanding. Developmental researchers sometimes debate whether research tasks today are too easy and infants and toddlers are credited with too much insight from simple responses like looking and reaching. But it is clear that young children are far more aware of people as psychological beings than we had earlier thought.

**Q: Does this new understanding have practical value?**

**A:** I think it does. We respond to young children based on what we think they understand. When we realize that they are trying to comprehend people's intentions, thoughts, and feelings, we can interact with them in ways that help—such as by providing emotional signals (of

reassurance or caution) when infants look to us after confronting something new, or explaining to a toddler why a sibling is angry, or enlisting an 18-month-old in building a block tower with a shared goal, or explicitly contrasting a 2-year-old's intentions with those of a friend when they are in conflict. It is fascinating to be with an infant or young child, mindful of their expanding understanding of the social world.

This knowledge is practically important for another reason. We used to believe that infants and young children could not experience depression or post-traumatic stress because they did not have the psychological maturity to be vulnerable to emotional psychopathology. We now know that this is untrue. As we begin to understand how young children are developing a sense of themselves and others from early social experiences, we can better understand their early vulnerability to emotional and behavioral problems when they are living in abusive families or with a parent who has an affective disorder.

**Q: Is our understanding of early childhood changing in other ways?**

**A:** I believe that we are in the midst of an historic revolution in our understanding of young children. The first stage of that revolution began in 1997 with the "I Am Your Child" campaign that advanced public awareness of early brain development. Since that time, the realization that the brain experiences explosive growth during the early years has become part of our thinking about early childhood.

The second stage of this revolution, also emerging over the past 10 years, is public concern with school readiness. The realization that children do not enter school equally prepared to learn has focused attention on the early influences that account for these differences.

A third stage of this historic revolution is underway—it is our growing realization of the depth and vulnerability of young children's emotional lives. Early childhood was always seen as a period of carefree joy and delight, but growing evidence that young children can

be depressed and show signs of post-traumatic stress, that the origins of conduct disorders can be observed as early as age 2, and that other serious emotional and behavioral problems emerge in the early years challenges the traditional view of carefree childhood. When young children grow up in difficult family environments, or are biologically vulnerable to emotional problems, the foundations of enduring mental health problems can emerge.

Together with our growing awareness of early social and emotional understanding, these influences are transforming our thinking about young children—with practical consequences. Research on developing brains and minds has changed the public conversation about early child care: no longer can we describe care settings as adequate if they are merely safe, and parents are now concerned about early education.

**Q: So how do we best communicate developmental science to the public?**

**A:** As practitioners, our challenge is to anticipate the questions raised by these monumental changes in public thinking about infants and young children. What does the importance of brain development mean for how we care for infants and toddlers? We need to communicate that relationships, not DVDs, are the best stimulation for an expanding mind. If school readiness begins early, what experiences best prepare young children for classroom learning? We need to convey that school readiness has origins in letter and number skills but also in the growth of self-regulation, self-confidence, motivation to learn, and social and emotional capabilities. If early childhood is important, what are the best public investments in giving young children a good start? There are many exciting potential answers to this question that are currently being debated. By starting with what people have learned about the early years, and addressing the questions they are asking about the meaning of this new knowledge, we can help translate that knowledge into wise public policy.

