Book Review
The Baby as Subject
New directions in Infant-Parent Therapy

From the Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne

Edited by Frances Thomson Salo and Campbell Paul.

Reviewed by Miri Keren, M.D., Israel

This book is about holding the sick/vulnerable infant in our own minds and speaking directly with him/her, in the parents’ presence. The authors show, through vivid clinical vignettes, how understanding the infant’s experience in vulnerable environments, is a major Infant Mental Health professional’s task. Safety, Reliability, and Truthfulness in the relationship between the parent and the infant, the therapist and the infant, are the three rules of thumb that reflect the approach to the baby as a subject, regardless of how vulnerable the baby may be.

The poignant vignette of a dying lively three year-old boy, illustrates the application of these three principles in the therapeutic working-through of the impending ultimate separation of the child from his parents and brother, and brings a new dimension to the role of the IMH therapist in these no-win situations. The therapist’s role is to show the parents, as well as the pediatric setting, the capacity of these vulnerable infants to experience creative moments in spite of their suffering, and thus facilitating a new perception of the infant as a subject. Special clinical situations are evoked, while asking about ways infants perceive them. For instance, what does the infant born of a rape glean from the look in his/her mother’s eyes? Campbell Paul asks.

Modes of therapy may be variable, such as individual treatment with a withdrawn, almost autistic 28 month old boy with food refusal, or a mother-infant group psychotherapy, or a music therapy, but all of them should be characterized by “serious playfulness”, as a new dimension brought by the therapist.

This book has a special flavor of keenness, the one that characterizes clinician who dare “talking true” to infants and toddlers, regardless of the nature of their suffering and prognosis, as the French child Psychoanalyst Francoise Dolto wrote and taught.