

AN OPEN LETTER  
to Jean Liedloff, author of "THE CONTINUUM CONCEPT"

Dear Jean,

Busy as I am (looking after a six-month old baby amongst other activities), I feel impelled to write a short response to your article in the July issue of "Self & Society" (which contrary to the impression given in the editorial, was taken from the preface to a reprint with some minor alterations of the same book you published in 1975).

Whilst I am wholeheartedly in favour of present trends towards more bodily contact with infants and enjoy the time I can spend holding my baby, I feel concerned at the effect your book (or even this extract) might have on parents who are uncertain of themselves and might suffer feelings of guilt about exercising their legitimate right to PUT THEIR BABIES DOWN!

On the theoretical side: Did you consider the possibility that other factors in the Yequana's social customs might have contributed to their cheerful attitude to life? And did you study other cultures where babies are carried constantly to find out if they all have the same sunny outlook? Also you do not really define what you mean by the continuum, or explain the origin of certain key ideas like the need for babies to be in physical contact in order to discharge energy.

On the practical side, babies are heavy and it is hard work carrying them about all the time. Mothers have their needs too, and if they become exhausted, will not this affect their quality of communication with and sensitivity towards their babies, which are surely as important as the amount of contact? In a deeply relaxed state of sleep, my baby needs either to be held in both arms (which prevents most physical activities) or else lain comfortably down. At other times she seems to enjoy her own company, e.g. when sitting up playing with a toy, lying down exploring her fingers and toes, splashing happily on her own in the bath, or having a bumpy ride in her pram or buggy. If you had had experience of raising a child or had even listened to the views of those who had, you would know about these situations.

Your almost evangelic style and the all-or-nothing way in which people either accept or reject your ideas suggests that strong emotional factors are involved. I am wondering if you have fully explored in personal therapy your own unresolved feelings about not being held enough and whether perhaps there is some element of projecting on to others a basic unmet need of yours?

After a period of some ten years since the publication of the Continuum Concept, I would have expected to be able to read about further development of your work or modification of your theories as a result of the discussions you must surely have had with those who read your book or attended your lectures. Your ideas seem to have arisen mainly out of the peak experience which you describe having as a young girl, and it is almost as if the whole thing has become fixed like some kind of dogma, to which one either becomes converted or not.

I feel more comfortable reading the calm sort of advice given in a book such as the Hugh Jolly Book of Child Care, where on page 104 he discusses the idea of "the family bed" and recommends the use of a sling to carry a young baby, but does so in such a way that I feel we can still decide what is best for us and our child based on awareness of what is actually happening now rather than on some theoretical idea arising from your experiences with a stone-age tribe.

Yet there is still a great need in our society for increased openness and security and how right you are that the key area is in the way in which we handle our babies in the early stages of their lives. But the way in which you have expressed your ideas seems to create unnecessary barriers to their acceptance by many people to whom they would be most helpful. I wonder if it would be possible to develop, in cooperation with others who have practical experience of child-raising, an updated model of advice to parents to enable them to take responsibility for a more sensitive way of handling their infants based on the realities of present-day western society?

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London

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