

Valley General focusing on parent - child relationship from birth

By Jana Alexander

Touching, holding, cuddling and singing is communication to a baby that can result in higher intelligence and better emotional balance.

"We focus so much on the moment of birth, but we need to also think of it as the birth of a relationship," said Martha Dankers, Community Relations Director at Valley General Hospital (VGH).

"When the baby is first born, their sense of touch and hearing is very highly developed, particularly skin touch, and so stroking a baby, cuddling a baby, rocking a baby can really affect the brain and body chemistry in newborns," Dankers said.

Nurses encourage bonding and communicating with a baby through songs and words.

The communication parents and children have, through touch, sight and sound are what form the brain. Ninety percent of brain development happens in the first three

years.

"I think probably the most important message here at the hospital that we want to give our new parents is that you cannot spoil a newborn," Dankers said.

Babies are not just a bundle of reflexes, as common knowledge used to state. They're also not manipulative, Dankers said. When they cry, it is a form of communication that is more complex than one might think.

A baby's cry signals its needs, and different tones of cries signal hunger, fear, boredom or fatigue, Dankers said.

"As you become more tuned in to what that cry means," you can learn to communicate with the child, Dankers said.

Studies show that toddlers who were picked up when they cried as infants, cry less often when they learn to communicate in other ways, such as speaking.

When parents have their children

at the VGH birthing center, they also get advice. A video called "The First Years Last Forever" is one shown to new moms. It tells about the importance of communication between parent and child. Dankers said the hospital is looking into funding so they can begin sending the video tapes home with new parents.

Communication from the parents also helps develop inquisitiveness and security in a developing person. Children develop their senses of safety and trust in their environment "by the messages we give them in the early years of their life," Dankers said.

"It's a fine balance, you don't want to overstimulate them either...sometimes they get so overstimulated they'll just shut everything down," Dankers said.

Reading out loud to babies does so much, Dankers said. And babies are receptive to any kind of language when they're very young.

A child needs that infant-parent communication with one parent.

"So it's not to say that single parent families are in trouble," Dankers said.

"What we hope to gain from our education program is to realize that there is no perfect parent. Clearly, we have all made (little) mistakes," Dankers said.

Prevention of abuse, neglect

The reason parenting information is so important is for an understanding of normal infant behavior, and the importance of the parental role, Dankers said.

"About a year ago the hospital identified child abuse and neglect as one of the community health indicators that we want to pay attention to," Dankers said. "Because in Snohomish County there is a higher incidence of reported cases of child abuse than there is statewide."

The rate of child abuse cases in Snohomish County is 55 per thousand, while the rate statewide is 48 per thousand, Dankers said.

"Maybe we're doing a better job of identifying these cases, or maybe we actually have a number higher (than) cases out there. Either way, the cases are out there," Dankers said.

VGH does its part in preventing child abuse and neglect by teaching parents "what they can do to develop healthy, secure, trusting children. And how they can feel connected to their kids and confident in their parenting."

For information on parenting, infant massage or other classes at Valley General Hospital call 360-794-1411.