

PARENTING



SHEILA WAYMAN

Babies can tell us who they are and what they need if we can recognise the signs, according to Irish psychologist Dr Kevin Nugent

IT IS NOT the first time I laid eyes on my eldest child in the delivery room that I remember most clearly, but rather a moment some hours later when it was just him and me alone in the hospital room.

The exertion and mess of labour were over, my husband had gone home and I was about to climb into bed for much needed rest. I stood looking down at my peacefully sleeping baby in the cot beside me, his perfectly formed face a little battered from the momentous journey.

A surge of love, undoubtedly mingled with relief that we had both arrived at this point in good health after months of wondering and worrying, almost took my breath away. I had discovered new heights of happiness, which I believe only parents are lucky enough to access.

Dr Kevin Nugent, a Boston-based Irish psychologist specialising in the development of newborns, sees the transformative power of infants over and over again in his work. "I thought in the past that parents change babies, but babies change parents," he says.

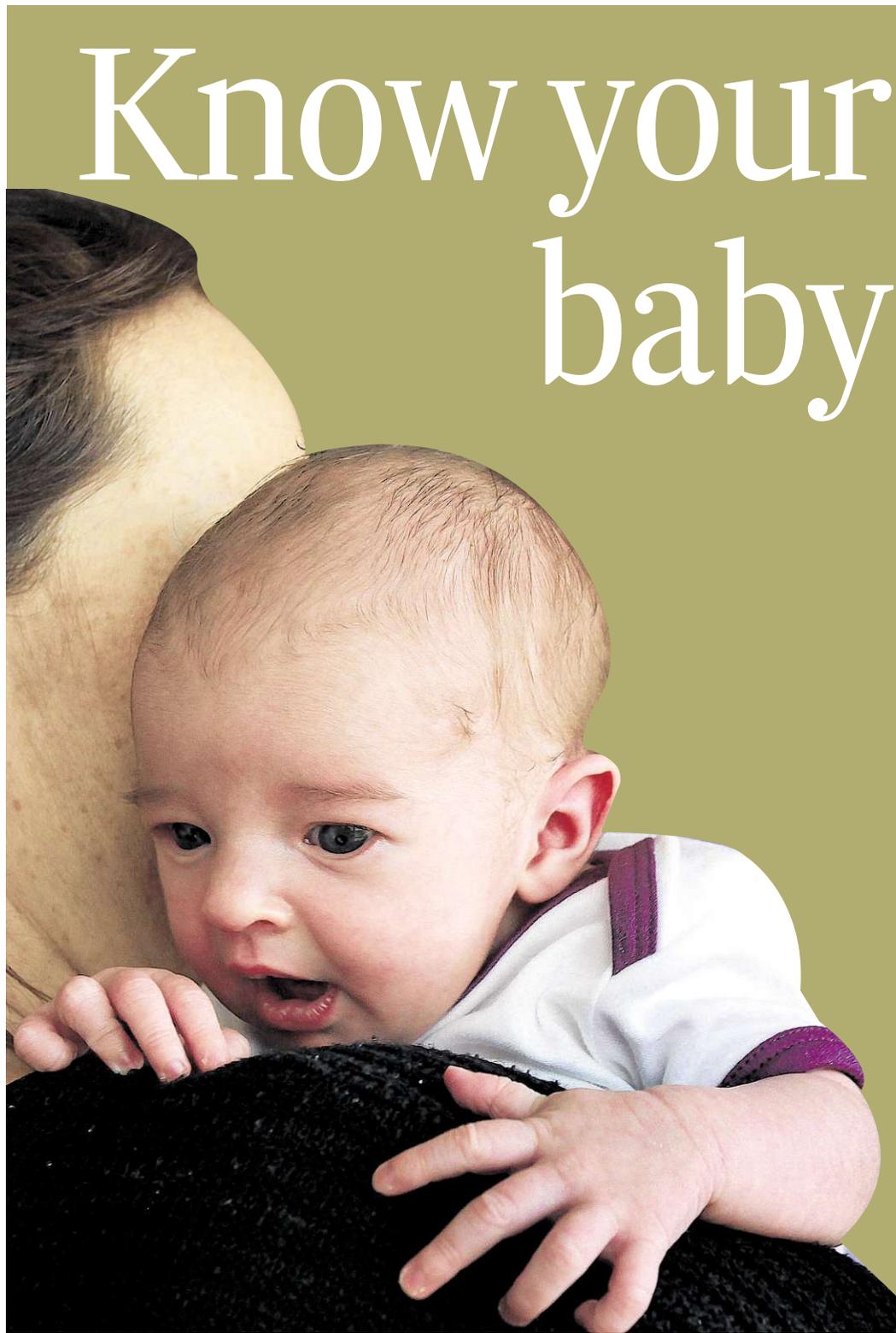
Babies work on us from day one, not just by looking cute, but through a wide range of what he calls "stunningly precocious communication strategies". They are telling us who they are and what they need, if only we have time to stop, listen and can recognise the signs.

Nugent is passionate about helping parents understand their baby's cues, so that they can respond appropriately and build a joyous relationship. There are few things more anxiety-inducing than having a bawling baby in your arms and not knowing what the problem is and what to do.

It is very stressful for the baby too. Biologically, babies expect to be cared for and he has seen the beginnings of depression in babies of just three or four weeks when their needs are not being met.

"They are almost puzzled because there is no match between what they need and what they are getting." The key is to find that match for a mutually satisfying relationship between parent and infant and lay down rock-solid foundations for a lifelong attachment.

The day Nugent first witnessed a newborn's readiness and capability to engage with her environment, and the dramatic effect it had on her mother, was a turning point in his own life. It came while on a ward round in a Boston hospital with a pioneer in infancy research, Dr Berry Brazelton.



Fresh to his career in psychology and not yet a father, Nugent was astounded by the day-old baby's ability to lock her eyes onto a bright red ball held out by Brazelton and to track its movement. When the doctor talked to baby Sarah, calling her by name, her eyes widened and brightened.

The watching mother's reaction also made a deep impression on him. She was overcome by her baby daughter's responses, her eyes filled with tears and she held the baby close to her breast, repeating her name and suddenly oblivious to the crowd of white coats around her.

"I was struck by the strength and tenderness of the mother-infant bond. It was as if this mother had just discovered the sheer depth of her feelings toward her baby," he writes in the introduction to his latest book, *Your Baby Is Speaking to You*, a visual guide to the behaviours of newborn babies and what they mean.

He traces his interest in infant development back to that moment, more than three decades ago. He also realised at the time how his responses to baby Sarah in the ward that day were an

echo of his childhood. The eldest of five children growing up in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, he was just 11 when his mother, who suffered from multiple sclerosis, died.

"I was totally lost and feeling abandoned," he recalls. "At that time, you can imagine, not many people talked about it. You were left in a terrible abyss, trying to understand it."

He took responsibility for looking after his baby brother, Joe, who was only a few months old. Looking back, he sees how caring for this infant was "a rebirth for me".

"He brought out something of hope in me – that there was a future. It helped me overcome my sense of desolation. I had forgotten about that until the moment with Berry and I saw the effect the baby had," he explains in a gentle voice.

Nugent went on to specialise in the study of newborn babies and co-authored with Brazelton the *Neonatal Behavioural Assessment Scale*, which is used in many hospitals. He is now director of the Brazelton Institute at Children's Hospital, Boston where he and colleagues developed a simpler, Newborn Behavioural Observations (NBO) system, designed to build a profile of a baby through a set of 18 different observations and manoeuvres to explore responses.

NBO is not diagnostic, he stresses, but rather a relationship-building tool. "It is simply to help parents see what this little baby is trying to say to them."

He is sure it captures the core of the child – "I know it sounds outrageous," he says with a smile over coffee in a Dublin city centre hotel. But he can ex-



HAND TO MOUTH: A baby's "remarkable ability" to get his hand or fist into his mouth – even when he is not hungry – is no random movement. He may do it when he is upset and then settle himself by sucking on it, enabling him to remain alert and examine his surroundings. By this simple act, "your baby is showing you how competent he is and how, even in these early days, the urge to explore his new world is paramount", writes Nugent. Photograph: Abelardo Morell

CUDDLY BABY: Many babies are naturally cuddly and as they nestle into your neck, the physical contact stimulates a release of oxytocin – often referred to as the "love hormone" – in the endocrine system. This starts a reinforcing cycle, Nugent explains, as the oxytocin encourages the parent to prolong the contact, which in turn releases more oxytocin. However, parents who find that their newborn seems to resist cuddles by going rigid, should not take that as rejection. It is just a matter of finding another way of sharing physical contact that suits the baby's style and disposition. Photograph: Abelardo Morell

amine a baby and, in some cases, be sure it is going to be very easy for parents and in other cases know that a baby is going to be very challenging.

NBO enables you to see the baby very much as a person, he explains, with individual strengths and vulnerabilities. How does the baby protect his sleep? Can he develop good wake-sleep patterns, which are so crucial in the first few weeks? What makes him cry and what does he want when he cries? When he is alert, how open is he to so-

