

Parents have the power to set their baby up for life

Giving your child the best possible start begins way before the birth – and even before conception. *Harry de Quetteville reports*

I can vividly remember the morning that my wife discovered she was pregnant with our first child. We were in France. It was midwinter, just after New Year's Day, and we were on the way to the supermarket. As we wrote our shopping list, I had an odd feeling that something was up.

"Let's get a pregnancy test," I said.

"Let's get two," she replied, before we discovered, like everyone else, that pregnancy tests that promise 99.9999 per cent accuracy first time round are actually sold in pairs. So monumental is the news, we all demand a second opinion.

When we got home, she rushed off to do the test(s). But then she nipped back. "I was just thinking," she said, "if it is positive, I won't be able to eat that delicious pâté we just bought. So I might just have a few bites now. You know, before I'm officially pregnant."

"Righto."

Is it going too far to suggest that this vignette, with its mixture of crafty self-delusion and virtuous planning, the promise of good behaviour tomorrow and the indulgence of today, sums up human nature?

Parenthood tests us as do few other trials. We all know about how hard things can get once babies arrive: the sleep deprivation, the colic, the tantrums and the nappies. The endless worry about little rashes and infections.

The occasional feeling of utter helplessness.

Unless you are

struggling to conceive, however, we talk less about how planning to become parents can and should stretch us, too – about how the factors that in so many ways define life's opportunities begin at conception, not at birth.

But we should. Because new evidence shows that ensuring your child gets off to the best possible start, physically and cognitively, means planning for pregnancy, not delivery.

And if that sounds draconian, another guilt cosh to slug women over the head with, it's not. It's actually the incredibly optimistic fruit of a groundbreaking study that crushes ethnic or genetic determinism under the weight of its findings. No matter what you look like, or where you live, you can give your children the best start. A healthy child is a healthy child, and can hit the same neuro-developmental benchmarks, whether it is born in Somalia or São Paulo or Somerset.

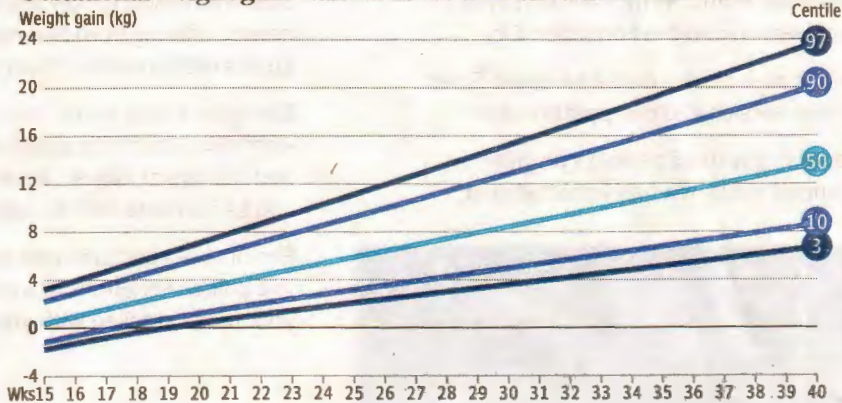
Indeed, those far-flung newborns have more in common with each other developmentally than the healthy child from Somerset does with an unhealthy newborn from neighbouring Dorset. "Nurture

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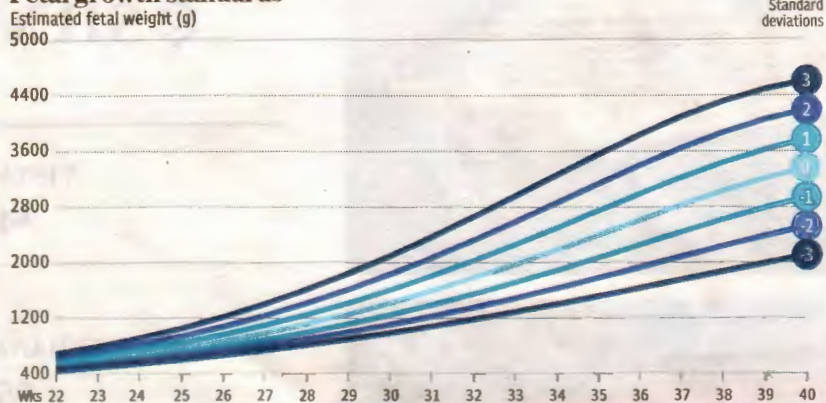


International newborn size standards for healthy children

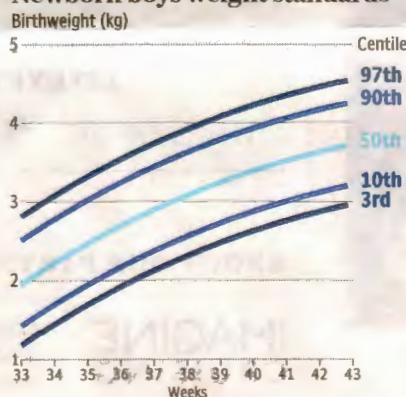
Gestational weight gain standards for women with normal BMI



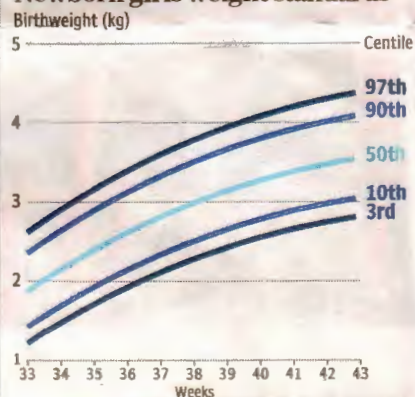
Fetal growth standards



Newborn boys weight standards



Newborn girls weight standards



SOURCE: INTERGROWTH-21ST/UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Weight of the world: changing attitudes in the medical profession will take time

out of 509,332 born in England, when assessed using current charts, were over the 90th percentile by birthweight, the point at which foetuses are deemed Large for Gestational Age (LGA), which can be associated with health problems and may lead to special medical observation or attention.

However, when the international Intergrowth-21st standards were applied to the same 509,332, it turned out that another 42,988 babies were LGA - almost twice the initial number, or one in five of babies born.

"Those babies are at risk of childhood obesity but are currently

being ignored," says Kennedy.

So the final lesson of the study for prospective parents may be to forget what is normal. Amid what Kennedy and his fellow researchers at the Nuffield Department of Women's and Reproductive Health describe in a letter to *The Lancet* as an "unprecedented rates of obesity in pregnant women and children in England", normal is actually becoming a problem. Instead, focus on optimal. And for the first time, you can access the figures to show what optimal is: "Our charts describe optimal growth," says Kennedy. "This should be the aspiration for all children everywhere."

Get nutrition and healthcare right, his team notes, and the impact is

astonishing. Neuro-developmental differences between infants melt away. Wonderfully, the ability to hit cognitive milestones turns out to be universal. Human beings are not pre-programmed for success or failure. "Across a comprehensive set of indicators of physical and early child neuro-development," notes Villar, "less than 10 per cent of the variability was based on the child's genes (nature); the rest is environment (nurture)."

It really is up to us parents. That may mean more guilt, more self-recrimination, more pressure - as if parenting doesn't come with enough of that. But it is better, surely, than your child's development depending purely on genetic pot luck. The power is in our hands.