

C-sections are producing a whole generation of anxious children, says psychologist

By Nicola Byrne

A LEADING psychologist has claimed that increasing medical intervention in childbirth is leading to a generation of anxious children.

Owen Connolly, a consultant psychologist and marriage and family therapist, says that interventions such as caesarian sections, epidurals and forceps deliveries were having 'profound effects' on children in later life.

Mr Connolly said he was now treating upwards of six new cases

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of childhood anxiety every week at his clinic in south Dublin.

He said that in many of these cases, the anxiety stemmed from the birth process when their 'fight or flight' instinct was triggered and remains primed through early childhood.

'We have a situation now in our maternity hospitals where the policy is to have your baby out in 10 hours, now matter what effect is has on the baby or the mother.

'Instead of letting the birth progress naturally, there is a rush to conclude labour.

'The stress feeds down to the infant, altering their brain chemistry, sometimes for life.'

Ireland has one of the highest rates of C-sections in the developed world. Latest figures show that in St Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny, more than 38% of babies are delivered by C-section. Every one of the Republic's 19 maternity units has a higher rate of C-sections than the World Health Organisa-

tion's recommended 10-15%.

Mr Connolly said that birth was the first encounter with anxiety in an infant's life. There was always some degree of stress during birth but when that stress was exacerbated, the anxiety could result in children as young as three presenting for help, he said.

But Mr Connolly said it was possible to reverse the effects of trauma, sometimes without the help of a professional.

'For very young children, parents can do the work using a series of toys to show the children that the

anxious thoughts they have are not real and can be separated from themselves. For older children, we use a computer programme to monitor the extent of their anxiety and then teach them that their brain is lying to them and tricking them by sending anxious thoughts,

'We teach them visualisation and breathing techniques to help them relax and to great effect.'

In 1999, Shirley Ward, an Irish prenatal psychotherapist, wrote a paper called Birth Trauma In Infants And Children in the Journal of Prenatal And Perinatal Psychology And Health describing C-section babies.

'They may sit back and wait for everything to be done for them; they lack the empowerment and self-worth. They have difficulties in doing things for themselves and in setting boundaries; for them, help is a putdown or a disempowerment,' she wrote.

'If older babies (from about one year old) come for therapy, this pattern can be seen clearly.'

An international conference on the issue in Miami last year was attended by several hundred psychologists including Mr Connolly.

Sarah, a 10-year-old from Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow, had a difficult birth that Mr Connolly says resulted in a childhood marred by anxiety.

In a testimonial provided by Mr Connolly, Sarah describes the problems and fears she faced.

'I used to have problems sleeping and I used to worry about my parents a lot,' she says.

'Whenever my parents went out at night or day I would always ask what time they would come home at and how far they were going. I would always worry something bad might happen to them.

'But I've now learned about the reptilian part of my brain, which is a good thing in the event of an

'I've learned about the reptilian brain'

emergency (fight or flight), and how to reset my alarm (my worrying) by breathing through my nose and out through my mouth which calms me and helps the oxygen get to my brain quicker.'

Mr Connolly said research into psychological trauma associated with birth interventions had been largely ignored by obstetricians.

'We need to look at a holistic approach to infants' health. I'm hopeful the obstetrics profession will be open to a conversation about this,' he said.

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Expert welcomes call for ban on smacking

CONSULTANT psychologist Owen Connolly has welcomed this week's EU ruling that Ireland should outlaw all corporal punishment, including parents smacking their children in the family home.

'Smacking is never right. Even by lightly tapping a child on the bottom, you're teaching them it's okay to hit,' he said.

'What children see, children will do. You smack your child and suddenly your child is smacking their siblings or smacking in the playground.'

'How can you smack a child and then in the next breath, tell them they're wonderful, special and irreplaceable?'

'Children can't tie up those two messages.'



BACKING: Expert Owen Connolly

