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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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