

# Louise Emanuel

Dedicated child psychotherapist and inventor of popular techniques for understanding the inner world of traumatised infants

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Louise Emanuel was a perfectionist

When Louise Emanuel made a breakthrough with a deeply unhappy and withdrawn little girl living in a children's home that was about to close, it was clear that the young psychotherapist had found her *métier* in the field.

Her acute observation of infants gave her an insight into their inner world and how they think and feel. She would spend hours watching how a child related to its parents and had an innate ability to connect emotionally with young children in a matter of minutes.

If the child was reluctant to play, she would try to gradually involve them through carefully watching their reactions. For example, if they glanced at a toy, she might pick it up and let it move towards the child. "The strategy was based on communication through play," said a colleague.

Emanuel was intrigued by different approaches to infancy and childcare. For example, in Turkey, she discovered, it is considered extremely unlucky for a baby to be called "beautiful" as this might invite the evil eye. Instead, infants are taught to scowl at strangers for fear of invoking hubris.

While psychotherapy is usually seen as a lengthy process, Emanuel understood the benefits that even a few sessions can have. The importance of developing swift connections was

emphasised in the 2008 book she co-edited with Elizabeth Bradley, *What Can the Matter Be?*, particularly in the chapter “A Slow Unfolding at Double Speed”.

The book became a valued resource in her field, as did her 2004 title, *Understanding Your Three Year Old*. “How a three-year-old thinks, feels and behaves is in part connected to her relationship with her parents as a baby,” she wrote. “How she copes with new experiences like going to nursery, or a change of teacher, depends on how she was helped to deal with earlier frustrations, transitions and developments, for example, weaning or learning how to crawl.”

Louise Sharon Berkowitz was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1953, the only girl of the four children born to Abraham, a chemical engineer, and his wife Valerie (née Levy), a primary school teacher.

She completed a BA in English and French at the University of Witwatersrand then a diploma in higher education, before teaching English at King Edward VII school in Johannesburg.

She moved to London in 1981 and met her future husband, Ricky, at a party two days later. He was training as a child psychotherapist and she was immediately fascinated by his work. They married in 1982 in her parents’ garden, and she began her pre-clinical training the same year, working with under-fives from deprived backgrounds at the Langtry Young Family Centre in Camden. She qualified as a child and adolescent psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic in north London in 1992 and took over its under-fives service in 2000.

She had an innate ability to swiftly connect with troubled children

By then she had helped to advance the growing recognition of infants’ innate communicative skills. There had hitherto been little focus on the child’s inner world, and, although not a pioneer, Emanuel was a significant part of the movement that changed the understanding of infant mental health. She set up a “brief intervention model” which focused on observational skills and addressing underlying feelings.

The skills she had developed in Johannesburg revealed themselves in her new career. Her talks and papers were notably well-written, and when she moved to Enfield to set up a psychotherapy service for fostered and adopted children, she drew on her teaching as well as her clinical skills to grasp the relationship between the emotional needs of the children and their carers.

She was always busy, finding it hard to disengage from work. Even on holiday she struggled to switch off and only really relaxed by losing herself in activities such as visiting Greek ruins. When she and her husband built a kitchen extension on the north London house they shared with their two sons — Alex, who became a documentary filmmaker, and Adrian, a social anthropologist and musician — she insisted on a second cutlery drawer so that it was always easy to reach for and put away utensils, shaving off crucial seconds in her frenetic life.

Her professional achievements were underpinned by an anxiety about doing enough. Brought up in apartheid South Africa by a fearful father, she had a keen sense of the more sinister side of human existence. Close family recalled a kind of prescience that her time might be

curtailed, which translated into a hunger to see and experience as much of the world as possible.

She loved hiking and wrote poetry. She had been a keen artist, but the easel her husband bought her gathered dust for 35 years as she focused on her work. She planned to return to art in retirement, but developed Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a neurological condition.

A perfectionist, Emanuel was not easily satisfied by her own efforts — and she was not shy of letting colleagues know that more should be done to achieve a particular outcome. However, she was popular among her peers, with a talent for making everyone feel as if they had a unique connection with her.

She retained a special affection for South Africa, and worked with the charity Siya Phula Phula (“We listen”), helping households sometimes headed by children as young as 12 whose parents had died from Aids, and training mental health workers to support them. She made a last visit to her homeland in a wheelchair in 2016.

In recent years she undertook adult psychotherapy training, and had hoped that her clinical work with adults would become a central part of her professional life. This year, the Association for Infant Mental Health UK will award a Louise Emanuel prize for a significant contribution to the field of infant mental health. The groundbreaking model of work with under-fives that she introduced to such a variety of countries endures.

**Louise Emanuel, child psychotherapist, was born on December 10, 1953. She died of CJD on May 7, 2017, aged 63**