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# Bonding With Your Baby

Bonding is the intense attachment that develops between parents and their baby. It makes parents want to shower their baby with love and affection and to protect and care for their little one. Bonding gets parents up in the middle of the night to feed their hungry baby and makes them attentive to the baby's wide range of cries.

Scientists are still learning a lot about bonding. They know that the strong ties between parents and their child provide the baby's first model for intimate relationships and foster a sense of security and positive self-esteem. And parents' responsiveness to an infant's signals can affect the child's social and cognitive development.

## Why Is Bonding Important?

Bonding is essential for a baby. Studies of newborn monkeys who were given mannequin mothers at birth showed that, even when the mannequins were made of soft material and provided formula to the baby monkeys, the babies were better socialized when they had live mothers to interact with. The baby monkeys with mannequin mothers also were more likely to suffer from despair. Scientists suspect that lack of bonding in human babies can cause similar problems.

Most infants are ready to bond immediately. Parents, on the other hand, may have a mixture of feelings about it. Some parents feel an intense attachment within the first minutes or days after their baby's birth. For others, it may take a bit longer.

But bonding is a process, not something that takes place within minutes and not something that has to be limited to happening within a certain time period after birth. For many parents, bonding is a byproduct of everyday caregiving. You may not even know it's happening until you observe your baby's first smile and suddenly realize that you're filled with love and joy.

## The Ways Babies Bond

When you're a new parent, it often takes a while to understand your newborn and all the ways you can interact:

- Touch becomes an early language as babies respond to skin-to-skin contact. It's soothing for both you and your baby while promoting your baby's healthy growth and development.
- Eye-to-eye contact provides meaningful communication at close range.
- Babies can follow moving objects with their eyes.

- Your baby tries — early on — to imitate your facial expressions and gestures.
- Babies prefer human voices and enjoy vocalizing in their first efforts at communication. Babies often enjoy just listening to your conversations, as well as your descriptions of their activities and environments.

## Making an Attachment

Bonding with your baby is probably one of the most pleasurable aspects of infant care. You can begin by cradling your baby and gently rocking or stroking him or her. If you and your partner both hold and touch your infant frequently, your little one will soon come to know the difference between your touches. Both of you can also take the opportunity to be "skin to skin" with your newborn by holding him or her against your own skin when feeding or cradling.

Babies, especially premature babies and those with medical problems, may respond to infant massage. Because babies aren't as strong as adults, you'll need to massage your baby very gently. Before trying out infant massage, be sure to educate yourself on proper techniques by checking out the many books, videos, and websites on the subject. You can also contact your local hospital to find out if there are classes in infant massage in your area.

Breastfeeding and bottle-feeding are both natural times for bonding. Infants respond to the smell and touch of their mothers, as well as the responsiveness of the parents to their needs. In an uncomplicated birth, caregivers try to take advantage of the infant's alert period immediately after birth and encourage feeding and holding of the baby. However, this isn't always possible and, though ideal, immediate contact isn't necessary for the future bonding of the child and parent.

Adoptive parents may be concerned about bonding with their baby. Although it might happen sooner for some than others, adopted babies and their parents can bond just as well as biological parents and their children.

## Bonding With Daddy

Men these days spend more time with their infants than dads of past generations did. Although dads frequently yearn for closer contact with their babies, bonding frequently occurs on a different timetable, partially because they don't have the early contact of breastfeeding that many moms have.

But dads should realize, early on, that bonding with their child isn't a matter of being another mom. In many cases, dads share special activities with their infants. And both parents benefit greatly when they can support and encourage one another.

Early bonding activities include:

- participating together in labor and delivery
- feeding (breast or bottle); sometimes dad forms a special bond with baby when handling a middle-of-the-night feeding and diaper change
- reading or singing to baby

- giving the baby a bath
- mirroring baby's movements
- mimicking baby's cooing and other vocalizations — the first efforts at communication
- using a front baby carrier during routine activities
- letting baby feel the different textures of dad's face

## Building a Support System

Of course, it's easier to bond with your baby if the people around you are supportive and help you develop confidence in your parenting abilities. That's one reason experts recommend having your baby stay in your room at the hospital. While taking care of a baby is overwhelming at first, you can benefit from the emotional support provided by the staff and start becoming more confident in your abilities as a parent. Although rooming-in often is not possible for parents of premature babies or babies with special needs, the support from the hospital staff can make bonding with the infant easier.

At first, caring for a newborn can take nearly all of your attention and energy — especially for a breastfeeding mom. Bonding will be much easier if you aren't exhausted by all of the other things going on at home, such as housework, meals, and laundry. It's helpful if dads or other partners can give an extra boost with these everyday chores, as well as offer plenty of general emotional support.

And it's OK to ask family members and friends for help in the days — even weeks — after you bring your baby home. But because having others around during such a transitional period can sometimes be uncomfortable, overwhelming, or stressful, you might want to ask people to drop off meals, walk the dog, or run an errand for you.

## Factors That May Affect Bonding

Bonding may be delayed for various reasons. Parents-to-be may form a picture of their baby having certain physical and emotional traits. When, at birth or after an adoption, you meet your baby, reality might make you adjust your mental picture. Because a baby's face is the primary tool of communication, it plays a critical role in bonding and attachment.

Hormones can also significantly affect bonding. While nursing a baby in the first hours of life can help with bonding, it also causes the outpouring of many different hormones in mothers. Sometimes mothers have difficulty bonding with their babies if their hormones are raging or they have postpartum depression. Bonding can also be delayed if a mom's exhausted and in pain following a prolonged, difficult delivery.

If your baby spends some time in intensive care, you may initially be put off by the amount and complexity of equipment. But bonding with your baby is still important. The hospital staff can help you handle your baby through openings in the isolette (a special nursery bassinet). When your baby is ready, the staff will help you hold him or her. In the meantime, you can spend time watching, touching, and talking with your baby. Soon, your baby will recognize you and respond to your voice and touch.

Nurses will help you learn to bathe and feed your baby. If you're using breast milk you've pumped, the staff, including a lactation consultant, can help you make the transition to breastfeeding before your baby goes home. Some intensive care units also offer rooming-in before you take your baby home to ease the transition.

## Is There a Problem?

If you don't feel that you're bonding by the time you take your baby to the first office visit with your child's doctor, discuss your concerns at that appointment. It may be a sign of postpartum depression. Or bonding can be delayed if your baby has had significant, unexpected health issues. It may just be because you feel exhausted and overwhelmed by your newborn's arrival.

In any event, the sooner a problem is identified, the better. Health care providers are accustomed to dealing with these issues and can help you be better prepared to form a bond with your child.

Also, it often helps to share your feelings about bonding with other new parents. Ask about parenting classes for parents of newborns.

Bonding is a complex, personal experience that takes time. There's no magic formula and it can't be forced. A baby whose basic needs are being met won't suffer if the bond isn't strong at first. As you become more comfortable with your baby and your new routine becomes more predictable, both you and your partner will feel more confident about all of the amazing aspects of raising your little one.

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