

Parenting and Attachment

Advice For Bonding With Your Baby

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The attachment bond is a special parent-baby relationship that influences future mental, physical, and emotional development. When this bond is *secure*, it fosters self-awareness, flexibility, and trust. But when this bond isn't secure – as can happen when a parent feels overwhelmed, suffers from depression, or lacks parenting skills – it can lead to future problems for the baby.

The good news is that anyone can learn how to successfully bond with baby – even if you had a troubled attachment relationship yourself. It's never too late to learn the skills. You can also improve the attachment relationship with older kids.

What is secure attachment and why does it matter?

At birth, an infant's brain is wired for connection to his or her primary caregiver, usually the mother. This connection between the primary caregiver and the baby is known as the *attachment bond*. The success of the attachment bond depends on the parent's ability to understand and respond to the infant's physical and emotional needs. When the parent and the baby are in sync with each other, then the baby develops a *secure attachment*. The baby feels safe, knowing that mom or dad will be there when needed.

Why secure attachment is so important for your baby's future

The success or failure of the parent-baby attachment bond has a life-long effect on the way your child feels about him or herself and about others. Individuals who experience confusing, frightening, or broken emotional communications during their infancy often grow into adults who have difficulty understanding their own emotions and the feelings of others. This limits their ability to build or maintain successful relationships.

But when people develop a secure attachment bond, they are better able to:

- Develop fulfilling intimate relationships
- Maintain emotional balance
- Feel confident and good about themselves
- Enjoy being with others
- Rebound from disappointment and loss

As important as a secure attachment is, it is not beyond the reach of most parents – including working parents. Nature has programmed mothers to love connecting to their babies as much as babies love connecting to their mothers. The process of bonding successfully with your baby releases endorphins, powerful chemicals in your body that motivate, energize, and make you feel happy. Creating a secure attachment with your infant may take a little effort, but the rewards are huge, for both your baby and you.

Myths and facts about parenting and attachment

Unfortunately, secure attachment is sometimes misunderstood as far more complicated and time consuming than it is.

- **Always responding to their needs makes babies spoiled.** On the contrary, the more responsive you are to an infant's needs, the less "spoiled" the baby will be as they get older because they have a solid bond of trust. Children with secure attachments tend to be *more* independent, not less.
- **I'm a working mother and can't respond to my baby's needs 24 hours a day.** You do not have to be with your baby 24 hours a day to develop a secure attachment bond. What matters is maximizing the quality of the time that you do have, and ensuring that your baby has a caregiver who also realizes the importance of attachment.
- **There is no way I can always figure out what is wrong with my baby, so he or she must not be attached.** It is not necessary to meet a baby's needs one hundred percent of the time in order to develop a secure attachment bond. Focus on learning your baby's needs so that you can better respond. As you get to know your baby, you will become more and more confident of what he or she is communicating.

How does secure attachment work?

Secure attachment doesn't happen overnight. It is an ongoing process between the parent and baby. Newborn babies are completely dependent on others meeting their needs. As you consistently respond to your baby, the baby will learn that his or her needs are important and will be met.

Remember that you don't have to be a perfect parent all of the time in order to bond with your baby. Just do your best, and don't worry if you don't always know what your baby wants. What makes attachment *secure*, rather than insecure, is the *quality* and *responsiveness* of the interaction with your baby.

Every infant is different

As parents of several children know, there is no one simple formula for meeting a baby's needs. From birth, every baby has their own personality and preferences. Some babies may have more trouble sleeping than others, or feed more frequently. Others might get easily frustrated and over stimulated, preferring to stay in one person's arms. The key is to learn what your baby needs and respond to that. Watch out for peer pressure from well meaning family and friends. What worked for their baby may not work for yours.

It's not just mom

Dads, grandmothers, or other caregivers: don't feel left out of this process. Loving, responsive caregivers are tremendously important. The primary caregiver gets a chance to rest and recharge, other caregivers get to know the baby better, and the baby learns that others can love and respond as well.

Parenting tips for bonding with baby

Learn the developmental stages of babies

The first step in meeting a baby's needs is learning different developmental stages. While every baby is different, it will be easier to respond to your baby's needs if you have a rough idea of what is age- appropriate. For example, you may be frustrated because your newborn isn't smiling at you no matter how hard you try, but often newborns don't smile until about 6 weeks after birth!

Learn how to communicate with your baby

Building a secure attachment requires all your nonverbal communication skills. Your baby can't talk yet, and young babies can't understand what you mean verbally. That means your body language and nonverbal cues are vital in communicating with your baby. Don't underestimate the importance of holding a baby. Touch is as important to a baby's development as food or sleep.

Communicating is not just about providing basic needs, but the quality and “back and forth” of the interaction. Watch to see how your baby responds, and adjust accordingly. For a newborn, responses are limited and may simply be sleeping or watching peacefully. Older babies may smile, widen their eyes, giggle, or wiggle excitedly.

Nonverbal tools for communication between parent and baby include:

- **Eye contact and facial expressions.** Eye-to-eye contact between parent and baby is key to feeling connected and developing a secure and loving bond. A warm smile goes a long way, too. Babies also like to imitate facial expressions, which can be a fun way to play with your baby.
- **Feeding.** The act of feeding can be very soothing to a baby. Watch for cues that your baby is still hungry or if s/he needs to be burped during feeding. If you are breastfeeding, you will naturally be holding your baby close. If you are bottle feeding, make sure you are holding your baby, ideally cradling him or her while feeding- don't “prop a bottle”.
- **Gentle handling.** Avoid rough, abrupt movements in very young babies and be sure to support a newborn's head. Older babies might like more active, playful movements at times, but check frequently to make sure they are comfortable.
- **Rhythmic movement.** Babies love rocking, swaying, swinging, and even gentle jiggling (*not* shaking). They may enjoy “dancing” with you.
- **A soft soothing voice.** Talk or sing to your baby. Your baby can't understand what you're saying, but he or she can enjoy just listening to you. While you are also building language skills, the reassurance of your voice is very important in building secure attachment.

Sometimes babies will be fussy no matter what you do, as when teething, sick or undergoing a big developmental change. When this happens, keep up your efforts to communicate with your baby. Your presence and attempts help even if he or she continues to fuss.

Establish routines and boundaries

In a very young infant, you will often be going by what the infant wants and needs. However, as your baby gets older and grows into a toddler, you will want to start developing routines and setting some limits and boundaries. Predictability and stability is important in developing a secure attachment bond. Although older babies and toddler are more independent and will test limits, they need to sense that their parents are lovingly in control.

Taking care of yourself while caring for your baby

Don't obsess about being a “perfect parent”

You might be wondering how in the world you can be paying such close attention to your baby all of the time while still tending to work, other children, and chores and errands

around the house. Relax. Parents don't have to be perfect to create secure attachment in their children. Sometimes you will be on autopilot, and that is OK. Experts estimate that if communication with the infant is secure *a third of the time or more*, that is enough to support a secure relationship.

The old saying "if mama isn't happy, no one is happy" certainly applies to building a secure attachment. Since babies can't communicate verbally, they are especially attuned to signs of anxiety or stress. Your baby can sense when you are frazzled, worried, or upset. Babies also need outside help to calm down. But an anxious caregiver can actually add to the baby's stress, making him or her harder to soothe. So if you are the parent of a young baby, it's important to take care of yourself. The attachment bond depends on it.

Parenting is frequently touted as the hardest job you will ever do. Its amazing how one tiny being can be so much work. There is no such thing as supermom or superdad in this job; no one is able to be fully present and attentive to an infant 24 hours a day. Every parent needs help and support in order to be relaxed, calm, and focused on infant cues.

- **Get adequate sleep.** Sleep deprivation is not only bad for health, but affects concentration and mood, making you cranky, listless and irritable. Some parents have found trading night duty, or having at least one morning a week where the primary caregiver can sleep in, helpful.
- **Ask for support around the house.** It's tough to focus on the needs of an infant when you are trying to keep up with laundry, meals, cleaning and shopping. Especially in the newborn stages, get as much help as you can in these areas. Strategize with your spouse about how you can divide some chores. Family and friends usually are more than happy to help new parents with shopping, some meals, or watching the baby for a bit while you run some errands.
- **Schedule some down time.** Everyone, no matter what the job, needs some rest and relaxation, and parenting is no different. While a wonderful experience, caring for a young infant is demanding and time intensive, and you need some time away to be the most effective parent. Make sure to take some time just for yourself. An hour in a café with a cup of coffee, a yoga class, a long, uninterrupted bath-- brief getaways like these leave you refreshed and ready to take on the challenge again.



Baby blues or postpartum depression?

Just because you don't feel bonded to your baby immediately after birth does not mean you're a bad mother. Exhaustion, rapidly shifting hormones, and the challenges of new parenthood might have you feeling like you are just going through the motions. Keep communicating and responding to your baby's needs, and give yourself some time to

develop the bond. However, if you find yourself feeling especially resentful or indifferent towards your baby, don't try to tough it out. Get some help.

To learn more, visit [Postpartum Depression](#).

Making secure attachment work for you

If both parents work outside the home...

If both parents are working, it is more important than ever for the primary caregiver to maximize quality time with the infant. Take as long as you can on your maternity leave. Be sure to do your research carefully and find a caregiver or daycare in tune with the principles of attachment. As much as possible, avoid places with high staff turnover and changes in environment. Make every minute count when you are home with your baby; try to outsource whatever household tasks you can.

If you're a single parent...

Single parents have the challenge of sole responsibility for their children. If you are a single parent, it is more critical than ever to have a strong support network so that you have the time you need to bond with your baby and foster a secure attachment. You may find support through community or religious organizations, informal networks of friends, or family if you have them in the area.

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