

Healthy Attachment & Bonding

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Basics of Bonding

The bond between a mother and her new baby is an intense connection that is necessary for surviving and thriving. Bonding builds trust between the baby and caregivers and fosters attachment. This bond plays a critical role in lifelong development.

Robin Lim defines bonding as "the establishment of the mother/child and father/child relationship immediately following birth." Eastern cultures have long believed that bonding begins even before birth. In our society, we are starting to recognize the importance of bonding immediately after birth but this process is one that is continuous.



Figure 1 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

Bonding After Birth

In the United States, we are finally acknowledging the importance of mother/baby bonding immediately after birth. The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative is one example of how hospitals are trying to make their care more compatible with the practices we know are best for mother and baby. This means placing the baby on the mother's chest immediately after birth and not separating them but instead encouraging the mother to meet her baby and breastfeed.

Of course, homebirth is usually an excellent example of best birth practices. A mother is encouraged to reach down and grab her own baby, pulling him close to her bare chest and keeping him skin-to-skin with her. Babies often remained attached via the umbilical cord for an extended length of time. The "golden hour" of bonding after birth is treated with respect. The baby is given time to meet her mother and breastfeed when she is ready. Tests and procedures are limited and the family is largely left to have their own time to love on their new baby.

Stress is a major barrier to bonding. After birth, there are many stressors for newborns that should be avoided. Bright lights (such as bright overhead hospital delivery lights), cold, loud noises, painful procedures (such as circumcision), and separation from parents are all stressful events for a newborn.

It is important to note that bonding is a process that continues throughout life. Even babies who experienced stressful births can recover and form wonderful bonds with their caregivers. Some mothers find it helpful to have a "rebirthing" ceremony for their baby after a traumatic birth. One form of this is to prepare an herbal bath for mother and baby with candlelight. Softly spoken words, skin-to-skin contact, and warm water are soothing and womb-like. This can be a beautiful way to process the feelings that follow a stressful birth experience.



Figure 2 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

Bonding During the First Weeks of Life

Robin Lim states that she accepts that common Hindu belief that "we learn our basic lessons about love from our mothers during the first few months of life." This is an important time for parents and babies.

Babies have an intense need to be near their mothers in the early part of life. There is a biological imperative for this closeness. Breastfed newborn babies need to eat frequently, throughout the day and night. Babies who are in close contact with their mothers breastfeed more regularly, cry less frequently, and experience less stress.

Newborn babies should not sleep through the night. In fact, it is quite normal for breastfed babies to wake at night for many months. This can be difficult for tired parents but can be made easier by keeping baby close at night. Babies trust their caregivers to respond quickly and lovingly to their needs. Sleep training simply teaches babies that no matter how much they cry, nobody will respond to their needs. This is something that should be avoided, particularly with newborns and young babies.

One way to keep your baby close is to set up a safe cosleeping surface or practice bedsharing. If you are not comfortable sharing a bed with your baby, attaching a cosleeper or "side-car" crib is an alternative that still keeps baby very close. Even if you plan to use a separate crib or bassinet, the AAP now recommends keeping it in your room at night so that your baby is in the same room as you.

The photo below shows how to "side car" a crib.



Figure 3 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

If you decide to share a bed with your baby, see the "Safe Sleep Seven" tips below to be sure your bed is safe for your baby.



Figure 4 Image from Illi.org

Another way to connect with (and soothe) your baby is to practice babywearing. A soft stretchy wrap is a comforting way to keep your baby close throughout the day. As your baby grows, there are many options for babywearing. Older babies and toddlers can even be worn in a soft structured carrier on your back or on your partner's back, leaving your hands free. Babywearing can help calm a fussy baby and walking while wearing a baby often rocks them to sleep.

Breastfeeding is an obvious way to foster attachment with your new baby. The closeness and intimacy are incredible. The hormones of lactation encourage the formation of a loving bond between mother and baby. The warm, sweet milk and the act of sucking are all soothing to the baby. If you are not breastfeeding, paced bottlefeeding with your baby held close to your skin and maintaining eye contact can be very similar to breastfeeding.

Singing to your baby and talking to your baby are important ways to help him connect with you. Make eye contact with your baby and watch how he engages with you even before he can speak.

If your baby is fussy, there are several things you can try to calm her. Always start by making sure her diaper is clean and offer the breast. Even if she is not hungry, suckling at the breast is soothing. If that doesn't work, try holding her close and gently rocking her from side to side. You can whisper "shhhh" to calm her as you rock her. If nothing seems to help, make sure she is not in pain and consider taking a warm bath with her and keeping her skin-to-skin.

By meeting your baby's needs now, you are building a relationship based in trust, love, and attachment. This helps to build a bond that lasts a lifetime.



Figure 3 Image from Microsoft Word clip art

Sources:

Frye, A. (2010). *Holistic midwifery, Vol. I: Care during pregnancy*. Portland, OR: Labrys Press.

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