

Early Nurturing and Attachment



By Dr. Lin Day, Baby Sensory

Bonding is an intense emotional tie between the parent and baby that often begins during pregnancy and continues after birth. Nevertheless, after all the excitement and anticipation, when the baby finally arrives, some parents find it difficult to form an attachment with their baby. In the past, researchers thought that time spent with the newborn was sure to seal the bond between them. However, there is no evidence to suggest that bonding begins at birth. We now know that parent-baby bonding is very complicated and that there are many reasons why relationships take time to grow and develop.

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula that makes parents feel overwhelming love and affection for their baby. The trauma of birth, ill health, lack of support, sleeplessness, depression and other difficulties may affect the bonding process. It is important that practitioners understand why some parents find it difficult to bond with their baby. Only then can they provide the necessary reassurance and support when it is most needed.

Postpartum care

In the UK, the mother may resume external occupations and household activities within hours of the birth, and before she is ready. This may be due to the reduction in service and care provision or the decline in extended family support. However, the postpartum period is a critical time for the health of the mother and her baby. In some cultures, special postpartum treatment may last from two to six weeks and care of the new mother by other women, friends and relatives is common practice. This prevents the sole responsibility of looking after the

baby falling on the mother and allows her more time to get to know the baby, an experience which is not easily recaptured once she returns to work. In some cases, it is not uncommon for the new grandmother to stay several weeks after the birth, helping with housework, cooking and childcare. Where extended care is impossible, fathers may assume much of the responsibility. This increases the potential for closeness and relationship building between the parents and their baby. That's how it should be. Even without complications, giving birth is an equivalent, if not greater endurance challenge than running a marathon! However, even under the best of circumstances, parents live busy fast-paced lives that make time out to rest and bond with the baby very difficult.

Attachment

Bonding can happen in many different ways and at many different times. For many parents, the first smile is when they fall in love with their baby for the first time. For others, strong affection develops when they find out what makes their baby feel happy and secure. Some parents feel closer to their baby once a regular sleeping pattern has become established. Sometimes, the depth of love and feeling grows when the baby becomes more amenable, sociable or mobile. Like any relationship, emotional ties take time to grow and develop. Research suggests that parents separated from their babies soon after the birth, or who adopt babies much later, can still develop enormously close, loving relationships.

The desire and capacity to form relationships is related to the organization and functioning of specific parts of the brain, which develop rapidly in infancy and early childhood. During infancy, the right hemisphere of the brain structures the neural systems that are responsible for emotional, behavioural, social and physiological functioning. By the age of three years, the development of social and emotional intelligence occurs on the left side instead. However, the most critical period appears to be in the first year of life, and is related to the

capacity of the baby and primary caregiver to develop a positive interactive relationship.

Studies show that between the ages of six to nine months, babies form long-lasting bonds with people who are comforting, responsive, available, and most sensitive to their needs. Factors crucial to bonding include quality time with the baby, face-to-face interactions, close physical contact and sensory experiences such as smell, sound, taste and touch. The most important factors in creating attachment are physical contact and touch, which influence neural functioning and activity in the brain. Although *delays* in the establishment of relationships do not necessarily have side affects, babies that are consistently deprived of close physical contact or touch stimulation may lose the ability to form meaningful relationships in the future.

Secondary attachment

For parents returning to work, day care plays a crucial role in facilitating the baby's healthy emotional development. Psychoanalyst John Bowlby found that securely attached babies aged six months or more were not usually affected by short-term separation, if they had formed a secure attachment to a regular, warm and responsive secondary person. However, researchers have found elevated levels of cortisol in babies that have not had the opportunity to form a bond with a secondary figure. If the brain develops in response to high levels of stress, this may affect the ability to control emotions and behaviour in later life.

The transition to parenthood

Having a baby is a life-changing experience, and for many parents, the transition to parenthood is not easy. Many women find themselves without the support network of relatives, friends and family and with little or no experience in the practice of baby care. Some of these women may be recovering from premature birth, difficult delivery or caesarean section, which is major abdominal surgery. New research has shown that between two and five percent of women develop post-traumatic stress disorder because of incomplete recovery. The condition can have a detrimental effect on early bonding and attachment. However, many women think that asking for help is a sign of failure; others don't realise that they need it.

New dads thrown in at the deep end may also find the sense of responsibility overwhelming and need support if they are to function effectively as parents. Bonding can also be delayed if the baby has significant health issues or special needs. Other problems such as sleeplessness, loneliness and depression are shared by many parents and it can be a great relief for them to talk to a sympathetic and uncritical listener.

Post natal depression

To get the mother through the birth, endorphins, adrenaline and natural chemicals course through the body. After a few days, the post birth euphoria declines leaving the mother with a strong sense of anticlimax or the 'Baby Blues', which usually disappear within a day or two. Post natal depression (PND) however, is much more serious and usually starts weeks or even months after the birth. A survey carried out by the Royal College of Midwives in 2006, suggested the numbers of women suffering from PND to be as high as 27 percent. Some experts believe that individual brain biochemistry makes some

mothers more prone to the condition than others. Most agree that certain situations, such as depression during pregnancy, sleep deprivation, financial problems, marital conflict, isolation and loneliness can increase the risk. Even though the mother really enjoys looking after her baby, she may become overly anxious, irritable or miserable and then gradually more and more depressed until she is unable to concentrate on anything at all. Some of the most common signs include low energy and motivation, changes in sleeping patterns, eating disorders, low self-esteem, loss of concentration and memory, and at the worst: thoughts of suicide. Feelings of guilt in returning to work may also exacerbate the problem. Because PND can interfere with the parent-baby relationship, it is important to get help. Treatment options may include antidepressant drugs and 'talking treatments', which can be just as effective.

Good health

In general, women who are well nourished and in good health during pregnancy, eat and rest well afterwards are less vulnerable to depression. Even though many women want to regain their pre-pregnancy size, good nutrition is important for continued emotional health, strength and energy. Recent research shows that poor diet and even iron deficiency in new mothers can delay bonding.

Bonding strategies

Bonding is a complex, personal experience and there are many reasons why it can be delayed. In any event, the sooner a problem is identified, the better. Understanding what parents are going through and knowing how to help can make a big difference. As well as giving general emotional support, practitioners can help by offering strategies that may help parents to feel closer to their baby. They can also implement strategies in the day care environment.

Support strategies

1. Massage is one sensory delight that really strengthens the bond because it provides an opportunity for parents to express their love. Babies usually feel very relaxed afterwards and sleep better.
2. Skin to skin contact has significant benefits on relationship building between the mother and the baby. It also reduces the baby's stress levels, builds up resistance to infection and gets breastfeeding off to a good start. Skin to skin contact also facilitates the bond between father and baby.
3. Looking into the baby's eyes is a fantastic way to get to know and understand them and a vital means of communication. Parents are usually delighted when the baby makes eye contact for the first time, which in turn strengthens the two-way relationship.
4. Some experts advocate carrying the baby in a sling. The theory of Attachment Bonding argues that babies are less likely to cry if they are continuously carried. Being close to the parent creates an intimate and secure environment for the baby and promotes deep bonding between them.
5. Early communication is extremely important. Establishing a dialogue between the parent and baby brings them closer together.
6. Babies love music and movement being held close. Dancing also helps parents feel much closer to their baby.

7. Singing is a musical way of speaking and babies just love it. Songs and rhymes do more than entertain; they enhance the parent-baby bond, they improve socialisation skills and they introduce babies to speech patterns.
8. Cuddling up and reading a book is a wonderful experience for a baby, no matter how young they are. For parents that find it hard to talk to their baby, reading aloud may be one way of making conversation. It is also a wonderful way to bond with baby.
9. Parents recognize the unique smell of their own baby, and the baby is similarly attracted to maternal and paternal odours such as the smell of breast milk, perfume and after shave. Familiar smells on a blanket or inanimate object can provide psychological comfort to a baby during periods of transition (e.g. leaving home for nursery, hospitalization). Even adults have been known to be comforted by their baby's smell on a favourite bear or doll.
10. Research shows that bouncing and rocking games that encourage parents to interact with the baby in a fun way activate maternal and paternal hormones, which allow them to connect more deeply with the baby. However, the *quality* of interaction between the parent and the baby is the real benefit.

Practitioners can also suggest supportive networks and parent and baby groups where parents can meet others in a similar position to themselves and so find support. The Primary Care Trust and the National Childbirth Trust can also help parents who feel overwhelmed or depressed after the birth of their baby and through all the different stages of parenthood. Parents can also talk things over with their GP or health visitor.

For advice and support on postnatal depression, bonding issues and all aspects of parenting, parents and practitioners may find the following websites helpful:

CRY-SIS

www.cry-sis.org.uk

Support for families with excessively crying, sleepless and demanding babies.

Fathers Direct

www.fathersdirect.com

Information aimed specifically at fathers on all aspects of parenting.

National Childbirth Trust

www.nct.org.uk

Information and advice on all aspects of pregnancy, breastfeeding and early parenthood.

Parentline Plus

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Advice and information for parents and carers

Working Families

www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Information and advice on parental leave and childcare.