



Bonding may be defined as the intense attachment formed between parent and child. Bonding is the instinctual feeling of love and the urge to protect. It is vital to the growth and development of a baby's mind and body.

Bonding occurs when natural opioids and oxytocin are released by the brain. This results in a feeling of oneness and contentment. The best way for these chemicals and hormones to be released is through touch.

Bonding became the buzzword of parenting in the 1980's when it was first described by the paediatricians, Marshall Klaus and John Kennell. They emphasized the importance of parents and newborn babies needing to be together as much as possible in the first few days following the birth.

Bonding in Pregnancy

From seven weeks of pregnancy, contentment inducing opioids can be detected in the fetus's blood stream. They continue to be released throughout pregnancy and even more so during the intuitive touching of the stomach and talking to the unborn baby that a mother does whilst pregnant.

Stress, anxiety, alcohol and drugs have an adverse effect on the emotional chemicals and hormones in both mother and fetus. The fetus is especially vulnerable during the last trimester when there is significant brain growth. Try to get as much relaxation and emotional support as you can.

Dads can also bond with their unborn child. Taking time to talk to the fetus and touch the pregnant stomach can have the wonderful result of baby recognizing dad's voice from birth, resulting in a strong bond from day one.

Bonding at Birth

We have Drs Klaus and Kennell to thank for the changes that have occurred in hospitals with regards to childbirth policies. Babies were brought out of the nurseries and allowed to room in with mothers. Dads were allowed to stay for longer periods not just for the visiting hour.

We also have to blame them for the immense pressure parents feel to immediately bond with their newborn so that they can form a long lasting attachment. Just like falling in love it can be instantaneous or a gradual experience, either way it results in an unbreakable attachment. Even if you felt an immediate, strong attachment, it needs to be strengthened every day. If bonding is a gradual experience for you, be gentle on yourself and have patience. It may need that first smile at six weeks for the bond to become unbreakable.

If you are concerned that there is no bond forming and you have feelings of being detached or resentful, please seek help. It could be an indication of a postnatal depression and early intervention can help prevent a deterioration of the parent/ infant bond.

Luckily, the way in which we bond with a baby lies in the vital but simple tasks we perform on a daily basis in caring for our baby. The most important being touching and talking to your baby. Get close and make eye contact. Make expressive faces - baby may even try imitating you. All of this will help baby feel secure, loved and trusting of his parents.

Bonding behaviour does not take place only in infancy, it continues through childhood and throughout life.

More ways to bond with baby:

- By regularly holding and cuddling with your baby.
- By talking to your newborn throughout the day. Babies LOVE the sound of your voice. They recognize it from the womb. Look into your baby's eyes as you talk with her as it can really strengthen the level of understanding between you.
- Make eye contact, if possible, during feeds.
- By gently stroking your baby's skin. Babies love to be touched and they cherish being touched by their parents. If you feel awkward, take a baby massage class to learn loving ways to touch your baby and to strengthen your bond.
- By cuddling your baby often you are giving her the opportunity to get to know your smell. A baby's sense of smell is very strong. She'll be able to recognize your smell in a very short period of time if you spend time holding her.
- By responding immediately to your baby's cries. Over time you'll get to know the subtle differences between these cries and respond effectively to her needs. You can never give a baby too much love.
- By imitating your baby's sounds and facial expressions.
- By trying to make time for frequent skin to skin contact. This type of touch allows for the release of those wonderful loving chemicals and brings a feeling of warmth and security to you both. Let dad hold your newborn baby skin to skin on his chest. All baby needs to be wearing is a nappy. You can put a baby blanket over her if she is feeling cold.

Challenges to Bonding

A long or difficult birth may mean that you need time to physically recover first before being able to focus on the emotional bonding with your newborn.

Having a baby in the Intensive Care Unit of a hospital can be very distressing and can make bonding a little challenging. Ask staff to help you find ways to care for your little one. Ask if they have a “kangaroo care” program in which babies spend time lying against their mother or fathers chest. It can be overwhelming and scary to hold your baby when they have tubes and medical equipment hooked up to them – but you can do it. The staff are there to help you feel comfortable and confident. Over time, you will adjust to the ICU and you will look back with amazement and pride when you remember how you learned to hold and care for your little one in such a challenging environment.

Exhaustion – it is hard work looking after a baby. Ask your partner, family or friends for support as you adjust to life with a little baby.

Stress - try to reduce the overall amount of stress in your life so you can have the emotional energy to “bond” with your baby.

Lack of support – be as proactive and creative as you can to get the support you need. Ask friends and relatives for help. Join a new mother’s group, or an online support group, invite other mums and their babies over for morning tea, read the newspaper to find support groups etc. Actively seek out the support you need. It will benefit both you and your baby.

Dads and bonding

A fathers presence is important in the role of caring and loving a newborn baby. As with mothers, bonding can happen immediately or it can grow over time. Encourage your partner to take part in the day-to-day care of your baby. For example, bath time could be his special time to share with your baby. Research has shown that endorphins and opiates get released in Dads brain when bathing his baby.

Both of you will learn through the uncertainties of every day routines like nappy changes, burping, bathing and dressing. When a parent feels confident about caring for their baby, they are better able to bond with them.