



# Y Parenting Tips

## Bonding and Attachment

Bonding is the intense feeling most parents have towards their baby. It can promote powerful emotions of caring, protection and nurturing, and alerts parents to the signs that their baby is hungry, uncomfortable, distressed etc. Bonding cannot be switched on and off and it can't be forced, so don't be alarmed if it takes you (or your baby) a while to bond.

Attachment is the relationship between an infant and its caregiver that enables the infant to feel safe and secure and confident to explore their world. A secure attachment in the first year of life has a positive effect on the infants' social, emotional and mental development.

Because of babies' attachment instinct, they seek comfort and protection. Attachment can start with your first contact with your baby or, like any successful and positive relationship, it can take time to develop.

Every time you respond to your baby, you are helping to establish a bond. Communicating with them builds trust and helps them to feel safe and secure. Some cues your baby might give you are:

- making eye contact
- smiling
- making cooing noises
- crying
- imitating your gestures.

Sometimes your baby will let you know they have had enough or need a different type of care. They might do this by:

- looking away
- crying
- struggling or pulling away
- yawning
- looking tense and unsettled
- being 'fussy'
- not wanting a feed.

Remember that each baby is different and their cues or signals vary. Babies don't come with handbooks or instruction manuals and what is right for one baby might not be what another baby needs. Talking with other parents about their experiences is a good way of sharing information and advice.

Babies form attachments with the main caregivers in their lives, usually their parents, but can also form attachments with others, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and their primary childcare worker. Sometimes it can be difficult for a baby who has many different caregivers to form relationships with them all.

Just because babies can become attached to more than one person, this does not undermine your child's attachment to you. Different people can meet your baby's needs, helping them to learn about relationships and develop their social skills.

### What is 'Separation Anxiety'?

By six months of age babies will have bonded with the people who have cared for them the most, and who make them feel safe and secure. At around 6 months, they can also be fearful of people they don't know well, even if this is their other parent, this is called separation anxiety. It is normal for a baby to feel this separation anxiety with some people but not others—it is part of their learning-to-feel-safe development phase.

With practice and reassurance for you both, your baby will learn that other people can care for them as well. Initially they might be upset when you leave them—this is normal. By the age of three years—depending on their experiences and individual temperament—your toddler should be able to spend longer periods of time away from you.

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## What can I do to make separation easier?

You can promote bonding and attachment between you and your baby by:

- realising that you are the most important person in your baby's life
- getting to know your baby's likes, dislikes and needs—it's important that your baby's other caregivers also learn to 'read' your baby's individual signs and messages
- making eye contact, especially when your baby's feeding (babies love looking at and touching faces)
- providing structure and consistency, yet being flexible with baby's routine—if your baby is tired when normally wide awake, consider changing the routine
- responding when your baby cries, smiles or tries to get your attention
- comforting your baby when he/she is distressed
- copying your baby's noises and gestures to encourage communication with others
- asking for help—from your Community Health Nurse, your doctor, family or friends—if you are worried about your relationship with your baby.

## What can Dad do to help?

Dads play an important role in their baby's care, whether they live with them or not. Babies need to develop positive relationships with dads, or a male role model such as a grandparent, uncle or family friend. Children need both males and females in their lives to provide balance, nurturing and guidance.

Dads are usually more physical and adventurous with their children, whereas mums are usually more cautious. Research has shown that when dads play with their sons, they teach them how to control aggression—and when their sons see how their father relates to women, they learn by example. Fathers who are involved in their daughter's upbringing, encourage their confidence and self-esteem. Children—both boys and girls—who maintain a positive relationship with both parents tend to do better at school.

After the excitement of the birth of their child, and the lifestyle adjustments that follow, fathers can develop a range of feelings—awe, love, nervousness, joy and even terror! If Dad feels he's not up to the task, that's OK—there are plenty of parenting activities they can share. Learning these does not come easily to many men, but the more time spent changing nappies, feeding (if the baby is bottle-fed) and soothing their child, the more competence they'll develop.

Dads who wish to actively participate in their young child's care can:

- carry baby in a sling—this closeness can help soothe a baby to sleep
- read to their baby (it doesn't matter what, as baby loves listening to the sound of Dad's voice)
- carry out chores such as changing nappies, feeding, bathing and rocking baby to sleep
- take baby for a walk (even if it's just around the block)
- respond when baby cries, babbles or gestures for attention
- contact resource/self-help groups that deal with men and parenting issues, eg [www.babycenter.com/refcap/baby/.../3692.html?print=Y&submit.x=57&submit.y=1](http://www.babycenter.com/refcap/baby/.../3692.html?print=Y&submit.x=57&submit.y=1)

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