

# Bonding Can Begin Long Before the Baby Is Born

by Ruthanne Carosio

**Few** will deny the importance of bonding between infants and parents, but many think that the process begins only after a child is born.

Developing an emotional attachment with a baby can begin long before birth. Parents can get a head start on knowing and caring about their child. Feelings of love and protection that have already had months to grow are easy to transfer to a real rather than imagined baby.

When bonding begins in pregnancy, it's often less of a shock to the couple when the baby is born and they face its needs; they have already established a caring relationship.

Babies who experience love and care during their development are very fortunate. Their transition into the world will be easier.

In early pregnancy, it is sometimes difficult for a couple to feel a sense of attachment to their baby. At first, nothing seems different. The pregnancy can feel somewhat unreal, and there may be a question as to whether there is really a baby growing "in there."

As a woman's body changes and grows and fetal movement is felt, the reality begins to set in for both parents. Seeing the woman's belly grow or sitting together feeling the baby kick and move makes the baby feel real. As this occurs, attachment and loving feelings toward the baby begin to grow.

There are many things expectant parents can do to develop and foster a bond with their growing baby:

- A nightly ritual of telling the baby good night, singing a song or humming a tune that is especially for her can help. Naming the baby also furthers an attachment. Couples who know the sex of their child prenatally can begin to call her by the name they have chosen. Or, the baby can be given a nickname unrelated to its sex. If there are other siblings or close family members, they too can become involved in talking, singing or calling the baby by a name. As the baby grows in its mother's womb, it will feel the loving sentiments and caring from family members, and hear the comforting sounds of familiar voices over time.
- Visualization is also a wonderful tool for prenatal bonding. Simply close the eyes, begin to breathe slowly and deeply and allow the body to relax. From there, feel the presence of the baby, visualizing him floating in utero. Sitting with this image in mind and generating a warm, loving feeling toward the baby facilitates a deeper connection. Dads can do the same, relaxing with their hand on their partner's belly or lying close to her, allowing the same visual image and warm, loving feelings. More extensive visualization

can be done if desired. Guided visualizations can be found on pregnancy tapes or experienced in local classes and groups for pregnant women.

- Journal writing is another tool. Both parents can keep a journal of their thoughts, feelings, dreams and fantasies throughout the pregnancy. There may be things that they want to write to their baby about how they feel about the pregnancy, the baby herself, what is happening in their lives or what is happening in the world. In later years, if the parents feel like sharing it, the journal makes a wonderful gift for the child.
- Throughout pregnancy, a family makes many decisions and choices about prenatal care lifestyle. These decisions also reflect a deepening bond. Good nutrition and a healthful lifestyle during pregnancy indicates a willingness to care for and parent this developing baby. Regular prenatal visits and good childbirth education classes can help a family fully grasp that their child is soon to be born and that they can already make choices to take the best possible care of themselves and this child.

As the due date grows near, the baby will often become a primary focus for both parents. Nurseries are being painted, cribs assembled, pediatricians chosen and birth plans made. Mothers-to-be can feel particularly preoccupied at this time, but this focus on the baby is normal and healthy.

Throughout pregnancy, good communication between partners is important. Pregnancy and an imminent birth touches deep feelings that can be hard or scary. Talking together keeps couples connected to one another, and able to stay connected to their baby. If communication is difficult and the relationship becomes strained, choosing to seek help shows commitment to one another and to the baby.

All this making ready is an important aspect of embracing the baby soon to be born. A place is made in a couple's home and in their lives.

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