

# Newborns, New Parents Develop Deep Ties

by Ruthanne Carosio

**Sensitive** bonding time occurs immediately after birth, so parents are often left alone with their newborn child. However, this time is only a small part of the bond we forge with our children. Babies need consistent loving care in order to thrive. This special care forges an ever deepening bond that provides not only for their physical well-being, but also for trust and emotional health.

In the first hours after birth, important bonding occurs. Often, babies will be very alert and will lie quietly, looking with great intensity at their mother and father. This quiet, alert state facilitates bonding. Looking into a newborn's eyes is a special experience for all family members, and touches a deep place in many people. The resulting behavior is talking, cooing and singing to the baby. Deep feelings of protection are stirred, and a desire to care for this helpless being comes instinctively.

In the first few weeks of life, infants will spend about 10 percent of their time in this quiet, alert state. Most of the significant communication between parent and child happens with eye contact and a few simple words. Parents will feel they are "falling in love" with their infant. This is all part of the bonding process.

During these early days and weeks, everyone in the family should spend as much time as they want with the baby. The mother has carried this infant within her body for 9 months. To ease this profound separation, mothers and newborns need to be together. After birth, mothers will often feel frightened or depressed if their babies are taken away for even a short time. Fathers, too, benefit from extended time with the baby. Given an opportunity, new dads will hold, touch and talk to their infants with great tenderness. If new fathers get involved during the first days with tasks such as diapering, bathing and holding, they develop stronger attachments to their children, and this bond carries forward as the children grow. In hospital stays, families can insist that the baby room in with the mother and that the father be allowed to stay with his new family. Ask staff to support this need for the family to be together.

Breast-feeding also fosters bonding. The mother makes the absolutely perfect food for her newborn to thrive and grow. The baby's suckling produces the mother's milk in just the right amounts for his or her needs. Nursing allows for extended eye to eye contact between mother and baby. In addition, the frequency of nursing keeps them together many hours of the day. This continues the important relationship they developed prenatally.

Most nursing mothers will talk about the incredible pleasure of nursing their baby and the hours spent in relaxation, continuing to nourish the child that their body helped create. While nursing, a woman's body secretes hormones that cause feelings of relaxation, attachment and protectiveness. When a new mother hears her baby cry, her milk will let down on its own and she will be compelled to pick up her child to comfort and nurse him or her.

Newborns will recognize and turn their heads toward their own mother's milk by the third day of life. They already know who brings them what they need. When they are born, they begin to deal with the awful discomforts of life: hunger, cold and loneliness. Nursing alleviates these discomforts and satisfies the infant's need to suck frequently. When babies are hungry and consistently have that need satisfied, they develop a sense of trust. They also become deeply attached to the person who satisfies this need.

In bottle feeding, fathers can play an important role. Mothers and fathers should hold their baby during feeding to provide the close contact needed. Holding the baby so that eye contact is made is important and serves to build the connection between parent and child.

Fathers can also involve themselves in other ways. Diapering and bathing offer Dads opportunities to talk, sing and interact with their baby. These responsibilities can become special "dad-baby" times to which the infant will look forward. Fathers can take time to talk and play with their babies at many other times of the day and night, too. Dads enjoy having alone time with their baby with no one looking over their shoulder, judging their skills. New mothers can encourage this time and also allow their partners to find their own style of interaction and caring for their baby. This inspires confidence in new dads, and that confidence helps them to feel better about their newborns.

Frequent holding is another important aspect of bonding. Babies who are held frequently or carried in front packs and slings cry less than babies who are not. They simply receive the contact they need and are more content. Parents can carry their newborn around as they walk and work around the house. Falling asleep in Mom or Dad's arms elicits feelings of deep contentment and trust.

A baby never cries without reason, and parents should respond quickly. Again, this helps infants develop a sense of trust that their needs will be met, and this trust has far-reaching effects. Babies who learn to trust will become adults who feel trusting in their intimate relationships.

A wonderful love affair can happen in the first year of life. It is a year like no other, and the attachment and bonds created at this time will serve parents well in the many challenges that lie ahead.

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