

# Bonding and Attachment

**The urge to bond is one of the 7 emotional drives that each human being has. Connecting with other people helps us thrive - and for a baby, it's essential.**

While most parents feel a strong bond with their baby either in pregnancy or early after birth, many do not experience the 'bond' for days or weeks, and a minority do not experience it at all. There are a variety of possible reasons for this, including current adult relationships and life circumstances. Recent findings from neuroscience show that early experiences of bonding affect brain development, which in turn affects the way a parent is inclined to bond with their own children. We look at this closely in our courses, as well as ways to improve bonding if there are problems.

## The brain behind the bond

The human brain drives every person to connect with other people. In the limbic brain, specialised cells incline us to make eye contact, allow us to read other people's emotional states by their body language, and drive us to mirror one another. Your baby is compelled to attach to you, and you are driven to bond with her.

## Quality of bonding

Your baby needs to attach to you, or to another carer in order to survive. She needs an adult to provide food, warmth, touch, and she needs to be in relationship so that her limbic brain can develop as it should; without this, other aspects of the brain may not develop optimally. Your baby is driven by basic brain and body systems to invite you to stay with her, to play, to get in tune, to bond.

Every parent has the neural mechanisms and the body systems that incline him or her to bond to their baby. Inside your brain, the specialised cells and the networks that drove you to bond with your mother as a baby responded to your experience then. Today, the way these brain networks function affects the bond you feel with other people - including your baby.

Adults who bonded closely with their mothers tend to find it easy to bond with their own babies. Adults whose bond with their mums was ambivalent (sometimes felt good and safe, and sometimes didn't), or was avoidant, or involved fear often find that with their own baby, despite all their 'rational' expectations, the bond may be similarly strained or confused. This is because neural

networks formed in infancy persist: the bonding patterns learnt as a baby are activated again when you become a parent.

If your bond with your mum (or dad) was awkward, painful or difficult, it may be encouraging that it is never too late to 'make repair' so that you can enjoy a close and loving bond now with your baby. One of the wonderful things about the human brain is that, while it's very good at learning, and repeating known patterns, it can also change these patterns: this ability is called 'plasticity'.

### Boosting the bond

The way you bond with your baby depends on so many things. Your baby's personality, and her health and strength as a newborn will affect the way you communicate. So will your own experience as a baby.

There are many things you can do that are known to support bonding. In scientific terms, these things actively stimulate the brain to create a feeling of safety and trust; increase the flow of hormones and neuropeptides that encourage bonding; and stimulate genes that encourage the firing and networking of cells in the brain responsible for bonding behaviour. These include:

Time together

Brief and frequent eye contact

Breastfeeding

Skin-to-skin touch

Sleeping together

Play

Talking and listening - at the slow pace of your baby

On a babiesknow course you'll get lots of tips on promoting bonding, in pregnancy and from birth, and beyond (many parents feel the bond finally feels right when their child is a toddler). The most crucial element for your baby is that she feels safe and loved. Her limbic brain senses your feelings, and knows if you are distracted, or really present; it senses the truth that is communicated with your eyes and your facial expressions, and tone of voice, rather than your words. Listening to and accepting your own feelings is a skill that will help you stay present for your baby; that's why our courses don't only focus on the baby: they're also about you.