

The Journey of Bonding

While there are a few things babies have in common with ducklings (they're both cute, they both enter this world just a little fluffy), there is a major difference in the way they form attachments. Ducklings imprint themselves on the first large moving object they see, while for babies the process of bonding is more of a journey.

Just about every parenting book has a section devoted to the importance of bonding within the first hours and days after birth. Ideally, the mother places the newborn baby onto her chest and soon after onto the breast. They continue to stay in contact and get to know each other over the next days and weeks.

But what if your experience was not ideal? What if you were separated out of medical necessity? What if looking at your baby made you unsure of your future, or brought back bad memories of your past? What if you were just too tired?

The good news is that since bonding is a journey, all you need to do is to hop on board, from wherever you happen to start. You can stop wasting time worrying about the missed opportunities of the past.

Top tips to build that bond

So you've decided to make a conscious effort to improve the bond with your baby. What should you do?

Have lots of skin-to-skin contact

Touch is the first sense to develop and the most mature sense at birth. Touching your baby releases the "mothering" hormone, oxytocin, in you, and reduces the stress level in

your baby. Baby massage is an ideal form of nurturing touch.

Look into each other's eyes

Your newborn sees best at about 18-30cm, or "breastfeeding distance", and is programmed to find your face very appealing and stimulating.

Have a good chat

Your voice is very familiar to your baby. After all, they have been listening to it since before they were born. Let your baby get some "words" in, too, and have a real conversation. They love being imitated; it shows you're listening!

Make the most of that baby smell

Baby-smell is almost addictive, but did you know that your natural smell is attractive to your baby, too? After touch, smell is the next most mature sense at birth, so go easy on the perfumes and deodorant for at least the first few months. Also, use unscented oil when massaging.

Be responsive

Responding to your baby teaches them that they are valued. It increases their confidence and independence because they learn that your support will always be there if they need it.

Get to know your baby's cues

Babies communicate through body language as well as verbally (crying, laughing, etc.). Getting to know what your baby is telling you allows you to respond appropriately. Each baby is different, so quality interaction and patience is what's required to learn your baby's individual cues.

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These principles continue throughout your child's life, as the bond with them grows. But remember that everyone has good and bad days, and sometimes you simply can't do everything. At these times, it's useful to keep in mind that it is the responses that your child generally receives in daily life, which are important for bonding, rather than one-off events.

So there's no need to beat yourself up over your first night in hospital, or the last time you ran out of patience. Just get back on with your journey.