

Building a Secure Attachment Bond with Your Baby

Parenting Tips for Creating a Strong Attachment Relationship with Your Newborn



Building a secure attachment bond depends on the quality of the nonverbal communication that takes place between your newborn and you, their primary caretaker. By understanding and responding to your baby's cues — their movements, gestures, and sounds — you enable your infant to feel secure enough to develop fully and impact how they will interact, communicate, and form relationships throughout their life. But building secure attachment doesn't mean that you have to be a perfect parent. By understanding how you can better participate in the attachment process, you can ensure that your child develops a secure attachment and has the best possible foundation for life.

What is secure attachment?

[Attachment or the attachment bond](#) is the unique emotional relationship between your baby and you, their primary caretaker. It is a key factor in the way your infant's brain organizes itself and how your child develops socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. The quality of the attachment bond varies.

- A *secure attachment* bond stems from the wordless emotional exchange that draws the two of you together, ensuring that your infant feels safe and calm enough to experience optimal development of their nervous system. Secure attachment provides your baby with the best foundation for life: an eagerness to learn, a healthy self-awareness, trust, and consideration for others.
- An *insecure attachment* bond, one that fails to meet your infant's need for safety and understanding, can lead to confusion about their own identity and difficulties with learning and relating to others in later life.

Myths and facts about secure attachment

Myth: “My baby is attached to me because I gave birth to them.”

Fact: Infants have independent nervous systems that may be different from yours. What makes you feel good may not be the same thing that makes your infant feel good. So unless you look and listen to your infant’s emotional cues, you won’t understand his or her individual needs.

Myth: “Secure attachment and love are the same thing.”

Fact: Bonding and attachment happen instinctively between mothers and babies, but, unfortunately, loving your baby doesn’t automatically result in secure attachment. Secure attachment develops from your ability to manage your stress, respond to your baby’s cues, and successfully soothe your infant.

Myth: “I am having a hard time reading my baby’s signs and I can’t *always* figure out what he or she wants, so my baby must not be securely attached.”

Fact: It is not possible or necessary to understand your baby’s emotional needs all the time in order to develop a secure attachment bond. As long as you recognize the disconnect and attempt a repair, the relationship will stay strong and may even grow stronger as a result of repairing the disconnect.

Myth: “Always responding to their needs makes babies spoiled.”**Fact:** On the contrary, the more responsive you are to an infant’s needs, the less “spoiled” the baby will become as they get older. Bonding creates trust, and children with secure attachments tend to be *more* independent, not less.

Myth: “Babies can have a secure attachment bond with more than one person.”

Fact: Babies form a secure attachment with only one person - the person who spends the most time caring for them. However, they can bond or connect in a loving way with all those people who take care of them.

Myth: “Secure attachment is a one-way process that focuses on accurately reading my baby’s cues.”

Fact: Attachment is a two-way, interactive process in which your baby reads your cues as you read theirs.

What is the secure attachment process?

The [attachment process](#) is interactive and dynamic. Both you and your baby participate in an exchange of nonverbal emotional cues that make your baby feel understood and safe. Even in the first days of life, your baby picks up on your emotional cues—your tone of voice, your gestures, and your emotions—and sends you signals by crying, cooing, mimicking facial expressions, and eventually smiling, laughing, pointing, and even yelling, too. In return, you watch and listen to your baby’s cries and sounds, and respond to their cues, at the same time as you tend to their need for food, warmth, and affection. Secure attachment grows out of the success of this nonverbal communication process between you and your baby.

Why is secure attachment so important?

A secure attachment bond teaches your baby to trust you, to communicate their feelings to you, and eventually to trust others as well. As you and your baby connect with one another, your baby learns *how* to have a healthy sense of self and how to be in a loving, empathetic relationship.

Secure attachment causes the parts of your baby's brain responsible for social and emotional development, communication, and relationships to grow and develop in the best way possible. This relationship becomes the foundation of your child's ability to connect with others in a healthy way. Qualities that you may take for granted in adult relationships—like empathy, understanding, love, and the ability to be responsive to others—are first learned in infancy.

When babies develop a secure attachment bond, they are better able to:

1. Develop fulfilling intimate relationships
2. Maintain emotional balance
3. Feel confident and good about themselves
4. Enjoy being with others
5. Rebound from disappointment and loss
6. Share their feelings and seek support

A secure attachment bond is good for you, too

Nature has programmed mothers as well as their infants to have a “falling in love” experience through secure attachment. The joy you experience as you connect with your infant goes a long way to relieve fatigue from lack of sleep and the stress of learning how to care for your baby. The bonding process releases endorphins in your body that motivate you, give you energy, and make you feel happy. Creating a secure attachment with your infant may take a little effort, but the rewards are huge for both of you.

Parenting tips for creating secure attachment

Secure attachment doesn't happen overnight. It is an ongoing partnership between you and your baby. As time goes on, it will become easier to understand the cries, interpret the signals, and respond to your baby's needs for food, rest, love, and comfort—try to stay patient with yourself and your baby as you learn about each other.

Secure attachment starts with taking care of yourself

Babies communicate most effectively when they are in a quiet and alert state, and so do you.

As hard as it may be, it is important to take care of yourself in order to build a secure attachment bond with your infant.

Try to get enough sleep. [Sleep deprivation](#) can make you cranky, listless, and irritable. Some parents have found it helpful to trade night duty (on for two nights, off for two nights), or to take at least one morning a week to sleep late.

Ask for support around the house. Especially in the newborn stages, get as much help as you can from your spouse, family, or friends.

Schedule some time away. Caring for a young infant is demanding, and taking some time away can help you parent more effectively. An hour in a coffee shop, a walk, a yoga class, or doing something *you* want to do can provide some perspective and renewed energy.

Finding ways to calm yourself in stressful times

Since babies can't communicate verbally, they are especially attuned to signs of anxiety or stress. Babies need outside help to calm down. But an anxious caregiver can actually add to the baby's stress, making them harder to soothe. When you are feeling stressed, try to find [ways to calm down](#) before you interact with your baby.

Take a deep breath. This may mean letting your baby cry a minute longer so that you can take a deep breath before picking your baby up and trying to soothe them.

Team up. Don't think you have to do it all yourself. Try to enlist the help of your spouse, friends, family members, or a babysitter to help hold or care for your baby during fussy times of the day.

Take a walk. Fresh air and a change of scenery can work wonders for you and your baby. During particularly stressful times, try making a change in environment and see if it helps you and your baby calm down.

Creating secure attachment tip 1: Learn to understand your baby's unique cues

As parents of multiple children know, there is no one simple formula for meeting a baby's needs. From birth, each baby has a unique personality and preferences. Each baby's nervous system is unique as well. Some babies might be soothed by noise and activity whereas others might prefer calm and quiet. The key is to learn your baby cues and respond to them accordingly.

Even though all of the sounds and cries may sound the same at first, your baby is

communicating with you in different ways, using sound and movement. An arched back, a scrunched-up face, eyes tightly closed, fists curled up, rubbing eyes, hyperactive or frenetic movement—all of these signs communicate something specific about your baby’s emotional and physical state. Your task is to become a “sensory detective” and find out what your baby is communicating and how best to respond.

- Watch your baby’s facial expressions and body movements for clues about their sensory needs. For example, your baby may adjust their body position or change their facial expression, or move their arms and legs in response to your voice, to indicate that they’re cold or need to be held and cuddled.
- Become familiar with the kinds of sounds your baby makes and what these sounds mean. For example, the “I’m hungry” sound may be a short, low-pitched cry, while the “I’m tired” sound may be a choppy wail.
- Note the kind of touch your baby enjoys and the amount of pressure that they experience as pleasurable. With almost every touch your newborn is learning about life. The more tender your touch, the more your baby will find the world a comforting place.
- Pay attention to the kinds of movements, sounds, and environments your baby enjoys. Some babies are comforted by motion, such as rocking or being walked back and forth, while others respond to sounds like soft music, or a change of environment such as being carried outside.

Sometimes babies will fuss no matter what you do, as when teething, sick, or undergoing a big developmental change. When this happens, keep up your efforts to communicate with and soothe your baby. Your patience, love, and care benefit your baby even if they continue to fuss.

Watch out for peer pressure from well-meaning family and friends. What worked for their baby may not work for yours. By learning what it takes to calm and soothe **your** baby, you initiate trust, and your baby begins the process of learning how to self soothe.

Tip 2: Eating, sleeping and opportunities for secure attachment

Many of your baby’s early signs and signals are about the need for food and proper rest. Increasing the frequency of feedings or adding in some extra time for rest where appropriate can make a big difference in your baby’s ability to engage and interact when awake.

Without proper rest, a baby cannot be calm and alert and ready to engage with you. Babies sleep a lot (often 16-18 hours a day in the first few months), and their sleep signals will come more often than you might expect. Often, babies who are overtired can act hyper-alert

and move frenetically. You might mistake this energy for an invitation to engage, but really, it is your baby's way of saying that naptime should have been 30 minutes ago.

Hunger will also be the cause of many early cues from your baby. Schedules are helpful, but growth spurts and developmental changes may cause your baby's needs to change every few weeks so it is helpful to pay close attention to their unique signs and signals.

Tip 3: Talk, laugh, and play with your infant

The importance of having fun, playing with, holding, and sharing happiness with your baby cannot be overstated. Smiles, laughter, touch, and interaction are as important to a baby's development as food or sleep. Your body language, tone of voice, and loving touch are all important ways of communicating with your baby.

When you see signs that your baby wants to play, try to relax and then enjoy exchanging smiles, funny faces, and happy coos with your baby. Toys, books, and music can provide a helpful starting point for play, but often all it takes is a game of peek-a-boo or a silly voice to invite your baby to interact. Infants with an undeveloped nervous system can become exhausted very quickly, so watch for signs that your infant needs to withdraw from play because they have become over stimulated. If you feel uncomfortable or unsure about how to play with your baby, keep trying. Any discomfort or embarrassment should go away when you experience the joys of interacting with your child.

Tip 4: Secure attachment doesn't require you to be the "perfect" parent

You don't have to be a perfect parent all of the time in order to bond with your baby. Just do your best, and don't worry if you don't always know what your baby wants. What makes attachment *secure*, rather than insecure, is the *quality* and *responsiveness* of the interaction with your baby and a willingness to notice and repair a missed signal.

You need to understand your baby's cues one third of the time, not every time

You don't have to be perfect to have a secure attachment with your infant. As long as you notice when you have missed your infant's cue and continue trying to figure out what your baby needs, the secure attachment process stays on track. In fact, the process of realizing there's a disconnect between you and attempting to repair it may even strengthen the relationship you have with your infant.

Parenting is frequently touted as the hardest job you will ever do. It is amazing how one tiny being can require so much work. But no one is able to be fully present and attentive to an infant 24 hours a day. Every parent needs help and support in order to stay relaxed, calm, and engaged.

Tip 5: Don't overlook dads in the process of secure attachment

In households where the mother is the breadwinner and dad stays at home, it is equally important for the father—as the infant's primary caretaker—to connect emotionally with his baby. The kind of multitasking required to care for a baby while simultaneously interconnecting emotionally with the infant can be harder for fathers (information travels more easily across the part of the brain known as the corpus callosum in women, making multitasking of this nature easier). However, with a little more effort, dads can still achieve the same results.

Dads, as the primary caretakers of their baby, can share activities that include:

- Bottle feeding. Dad can form a special bond with his infant when handling feedings and diaper changes by looking into his baby's eyes, smiling, and talking.
- Talking, reading, or singing to your baby. Even though your baby doesn't understand what you're saying, hearing dad's calm, reassuring voice conveys safety.
- Playing peek-a-boo and mirroring your baby's movements.
- Mimicking your baby's cooing and other vocalizations.
- Holding and touching your baby as much as possible. Fathers can keep baby close by using a front baby carrier, pouch, or sling during daily activities.
- Letting baby feel the different textures of dad's face.

Challenges to creating secure attachment with your baby

Ideally, a secure attachment bond develops without a hitch. But if either you or your baby is dealing with a problem that interferes with your ability to relax and focus on one another, a secure attachment bond can be delayed or interrupted.

Challenges in babies that can affect secure attachment

Most babies are born ready to connect to their caregivers, but sometimes babies have problems that get in the way of secure attachment. These include:

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- Babies with compromised nervous systems
- Babies who experienced problems in the womb or in delivery
- Babies with health problems at birth or at a very early age
- Premature babies who spent time in intensive care
- Babies who were separated from their primary caretakers at birth
- Babies who have experienced a series of caretakers

The sooner more challenging problems are identified, the easier they are to correct. For help, you can turn to your pediatrician, an infant mental health specialist, or someone trained in early intervention.

Challenges in parents that can affect secure attachment

Parents who themselves did not experience a secure attachment bond when they were infants may have trouble emotionally connecting with their babies. Other challenges that can get in the way of your ability to bond with your baby include:

- Depression, anxiety, or other emotional problems
- Drug or alcohol problems
- High levels of stress (from financial problems, lack of support, overwork, etc.)
- An abusive, neglected, or chaotic childhood history
- Living in an unsafe environment
- Mainly negative memories of your own childhood experiences

Recommended reading

[Bonding with your Baby](#) - Why bonding is important, how your baby interacts, and ways to get support. (KidsHealth)

[Attachment: The First Core Strength](#) - What you can do to promote secure attachment. (Scholastic.com)

[Developmental Milestones](#) - Detailed list about developmental milestones that relate to bonding. (CDC)

[Learning, Play and Your Newborn](#) - Play is the chief way that infants learn how to move, communicate, socialize, and understand their surroundings. (KidsHealth)

[Communication and your newborn](#) - Learn how newborns communicate and what to do if you suspect a problem. (Kids Health)

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Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: October 2018.