

Attachment: A connection for life

Attachment is the deep emotional bond between a baby and the person who provides most of his care. Just as most parents feel a strong connection with their newborn after birth, babies also become attached to their parents. Attachment takes place throughout a child's development, but this document focuses on babies.

Attachment develops as you respond to your baby's needs in warm, sensitive and consistent ways. This is especially important when your baby is sick, upset or distressed. Attachment also builds as you go about your daily routines with your baby, caring for her and interacting with her.

A baby's first attachment usually happens quite naturally. Your baby cries, and you try to give him what he needs: a feeding, a cuddle, a diaper change, or just holding him. When you respond, your baby learns that he can trust you, and depend on you for comfort and to feel safe. As you get better at knowing what your baby is telling you and meeting his needs, your baby feels less stress.

Responding quickly to a baby's cries is the best way to show her that she is safe and loved. It should not be confused with "spoiling". Babies cannot be spoiled. When they're sick, upset or distressed, they need to know that you are there for them.

Attachment involves two people interacting, sharing, and connecting. So as you respond to your baby's needs, your baby will respond to you. You'll notice that it becomes easier to soothe her, that she wants to be near you, and that she reacts to you even from a distance. Holding, rocking or talking softly to your baby all promote attachment.

While a baby's first attachment is usually with her mother, the bonds that babies form with their fathers are just as important. Though babies form attachment relationships with other adults who care for them, the bonds with their parents are the most important ones.

Why is attachment important?

Secure or healthy attachment is the foundation that lets your child explore the world and have a safe place to come back to. Attachment is the first way that babies learn to organize their feelings and their actions, by looking to the person who provides them with care and comfort. Attachment is essential to long-term emotional health.

Healthy attachment will help your child handle situations as she grows older, such as separating from you (starting child care or school), cooperating with other children, and developing self-control. Attachment also helps your child learn how to trust other people, so it's an important part of developing healthy relationships later in life.

How do I know my baby is developing a secure attachment?

The early signs that a secure attachment is forming are some of a parent's greatest rewards:

- **By 4 weeks**, your baby will respond to your smile, perhaps with a facial expression or a movement.
- **By 3 months**, she'll smile right back at you.
- **By 4 to 6 months**, she will turn to you and expect you to respond when she's upset.
- **By 7 or 8 months**, she'll have a special response just for you when her visual memory shows marked development (she may also be upset by strangers). Your baby may also start to respond to your stress, anger or sadness.

If your baby doesn't respond to you, show interest in people or make eye contact, **make an appointment with her doctor**.

My child is in daycare. Does that mean she won't be “attached” to me?

Babies can develop secure attachment with more than one important adult in their lives, including a child care provider. This doesn't affect the special relationship babies have with their parents.

Sometimes I have trouble meeting my baby's needs. What should I do?

“My baby won't stop crying!”

There are times when even the most caring parent can't soothe a baby's cries. Remember that in the first three months, all babies go through a period when they cry more than at any other time. This is common to babies all over the world.

Keep responding to your baby in a warm and sensitive way. But if the crying becomes too much, and nothing you do helps, it's OK to walk away for a moment. Just be sure your baby is safe in her crib, or with another caring adult. Read our piece on colic and crying for more information. If you are worried or stressed by your baby's crying, get help.

“Our family is going through some rough times.”

Sometimes there other problems that make it hard for parents to care for their baby. Illness in a family—whether it's the mother herself, a sibling, or another family member—can make it difficult to care for a new baby. Being separated for long periods of time can also cause stress.

“I can't tell what my baby needs.”

Sometimes babies have issues that make attachment difficult. Some babies have trouble making their needs understood. They may have health problems, be irritable, or hard to read. If this is the case, speak to your doctor about what you can do.

“I think I may be depressed.”

Mothers who are depressed may have trouble being loving and caring all the time. If depression is not treated, it can affect how attachment develops. Babies who don't develop a healthy attachment may have behaviour or development problems later in childhood.

If you think you are depressed, or feel that you cannot take care of your baby, it's important to tell someone. If you're the partner of a mother who seems depressed, or is having trouble taking care of her baby, it's also important to reach out. Talk to your doctor, nurse, midwife, or contact your local public health office for a listing of services in your area.

Sources:

- Well Beings: A Guide to Health in Child Care
- Guide to Caring for Your Child from Birth to Age 5

More information from the CPS:

- Your child's development
- Colic & crying
- Your baby's brain: How parents can support healthy development

Additional resources:

- Attachment: From the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development
- Healthy baby, Healthy brain: Best Start
- Period of Purple Crying
- Postpartum depression, with links to local resources
- Circle of Security: Building a Secure Attachment for Your Baby

Reviewed by the following CPS committees:

- Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committee
- Public Education Advisory Committee

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The information on Caring for Kids should not be used as a substitute for medical care and advice. If you have specific concerns about your child's health, please see your child's paediatrician, family physician, or another health care provider.