

How to Bond with Your Baby: Advice for Dads

Bonding may come easier for mothers – but never fear, fathers!
Here are some tips for daddy-baby bonding.

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Fatherhood presents new anxieties and pressures – how does anyone get a screaming kid into a car seat, anyway? – but bonding with baby can come with its own set of challenges for dads.

Recent research found an increase in bonding between a father and child when the hormone oxytocin was administered. (<https://psychcentral.com/news/2017/02/19/new-study-shows-how-dads-bond-with-their-kids/116580.html>)



Oxytocin was found at higher levels in fathers versus in men without children, supporting the idea that the hormone might play a key role in promoting caregiving behavior in dads.

Carolyn Dayton, assistant professor of social work and associate director of the Infant Mental Health program at Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development (<http://mpsi.wayne.edu/>), says everyday activities necessary to care for an infant create bonds naturally, but sometimes dads get forgotten in the newborn shuffle.

“The seemingly simple tasks of holding, rocking, feeding and soothing their newborns are actually the building blocks of healthy parent-child relationships and of the baby’s healthy growth and development,” says Dayton. “The profoundly positive influence of these behaviors on the parent-infant relationship work the same for mothers and fathers. Fathers, however, sometimes feel left out of these critical early bonding moments.”

Bonding with baby: For dads who want to ensure daddy-baby bonding is underway, Dayton provides a few tips for fostering that relationship.

Connecting skin to skin: Dayton says skin to skin contact, sometimes called Kangaroo Care, is vital for babies to feel calm and connected. To do it, Dayton says to “Lay down or sit reclining in a chair with your shirt off and place baby in a prone position in a diaper on your chest.” Babies are unable to regulate their own body temperature and heart rate, so holding a baby in this position warms them to the father’s body temperature and lets them hear and feel their parent’s heartbeat. “Over time, baby will come to associate feeling warm, calm and cared for by the feel and smell of you,” Dayton says. She also recommends remaining alert to your baby’s breathing and to remember that putting the baby on his or her back when sleeping is still the safest sleeping method.

Find your special activity: Dayton says finding something that only you do with your baby is a good way to promote bonding, too. “There are so many possibilities here – and they will increase as baby grows,” she says. “Some examples are bath time, diaper changing, rocking to sleep, singing at bedtime ... the list goes on.” Dayton recommends doing the special activities as often as possible, since although the baby won’t remember these activities, it will be “another experience that connects you to each other and forms the foundation of a lifelong relationship.”

Sing to your newborn: “Babies are fundamentally rhythmic beings and they love to be sung to,” says Dayton. And don’t be discouraged if your singing isn’t up to par. Dayton says babies don’t care whether you actually sing well – what matters is singing to your baby in an active way. To do this, she says, hold your baby and look at your child as you sing. This can be done during one of your special activities, so use singing to have a “double bonding” moment.

Hold your baby: This is the simplest tip, but a surefire way to promote bonding. “The saying is that ‘you can’t spoil a baby,’” Dayton says. “This is especially true during the newborn period, [since] babies don’t have the cognitive capacity to manipulate you – when they cry it’s simply because they need something.” She says the more you carry your baby, the calmer your baby will be and the closer you’ll feel.

Is nothing working?

Tried it all and still not getting those warm, fuzzy feelings for your new baby? Dayton has a number of things new dads can do to seek help. Get support through family or friends and look up online support groups, she suggests. She also recommends making sure to take adequate care of yourself and to remember to take care of your own needs by doing things you enjoy and supporting your own physical and mental health.

Still feeling overwhelmed by the pressures to connect? Stay up on your own healthcare. “Men are less likely to get routine healthcare compared to women,” she says, “[and] given the demands of early infant care, now is a great time to break out of that pattern. Your healthcare provider can help you think about how you are psychologically.” Men go through periods of depression and anxiety just like mothers when a newborn enters the mix, so seeking professional help can work to alleviate those symptoms.