

## Bonding with Your Babies

by Alice S. Honig, PhD

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An infant/toddler caregiver has a great many practical tasks to master. Scrupulous health care practices, diapering, preparing formula or baby food for each individual infant — such expertise forms the core of caregiver competence. But beyond such fundamental physical lore lies the emotional wisdom needed to bond with and relate to each unique little person.

Babies flourish with loving caregivers. So the first and foremost emotional neediness of a baby is for YOU to become intimately engaged with the baby. Sure you will hold and cuddle. Sure you will respond to infant distress. But the essence of quality infant caregiving lies in the **emotional** bond you forge with each infant.

Unlike adults, babies happily cope if they have more than one love partner in the duet of caring! Not only parents and grandparents but child care personnel can serve as intimate partners in babies' lives. Finding your way to create a love affair with each infant will take emotional skillfulness and a willingness to become a pleasuring and pleased partner.

Research has shown that early bonding facilitates babies' development of **secure attachment**. Toddlers who are securely attached as babies later show more flexibility and resourcefulness, more confidence in play mastery, and more cooperativeness with caregivers in difficult tool-using situations (Matas, Arend, and Sroufe, 1978).

### Practice Tuned-In, Tender Partnering

- **Babies thrive on body loving, with lots of holding, draping, and lap time.** Every baby needs an adult

partner committed to a special bodily-intimate relationship.

- **Tune in to and respond promptly to baby signals of neediness or distress.** An upset baby is using a strong signal to tell adults: I NEED YOU TO HELP ME FEEL BETTER. Babies don't cry to bother adults. They cry when they feel bad. When you soothe what hurts them, whether a urine-irritated bottom, a hungry tummy, or a lonely feeling that needs a cuddle, they learn to trust you. Then the world feels like a good place to grow up, and it seems worth the effort to cooperate with caregivers and to learn what grown-ups want babies to learn.

- **Respect rhythms and tempos.** As adults, we need to understand and respect the rhythms and tempos of our babies so that we can have more tolerance for the normal ups and downs of their behaviors. Some new babies wake up several times a night for nursing and some seem to cry for longer periods each day (or evening!). The developmental dance of growth is not in a straight line, but a wave-like pattern. Some times are easy for babies; sometimes babies are frustrated by what they want to be able to do but still cannot accomplish. Then they may become more disorganized until they have worked through this period of developmental disequilibrium.

### Understand Trying Behaviors

Be FOR your little ones. Your emotional bonding is a powerful force not only for promoting early secure

attachment of tiny infants in your care but also for sustaining trusting relationships during the *Terrible Two's*. Toddlers may show wild mood swings and seem not to need as much cuddling and body draping as younger babies. They often run-run away mischievously when called. But when frustrated or tired they will passionately demand to be held or will fling themselves into your lap.

If you have bonded well with each baby, then their deep confidence in your cherishing will tide them over. You can accept toddler mood swings and willfulness calmly and offer body loving when it is needed. You keep their self-esteem intact even as they go through crabby or absurdly see-sawing contradictions. Offer toddlers choices to avoid conflicts. ("Would you like juice OR milk?")

Toddlers will need you to remember that their rhythms and styles may not fit with group requirements. Toilet learning and neat eating take longer to achieve for some toddlers than others. But if you trust a toddler's signals, you will be comfortable about deciding when to encourage more mature learnings or when to accept a more leisurely pace for a toddler to practice, struggle with, and master new and difficult life skills. Keeping the trusting relationship intact provides babies with life energy and good will to master positive peer relations, relate cooperatively later to other teachers, and to strive for mastery in play.

## Become a Skilled Play Planner

- Babies need safe play spaces to creep and crawl and cruise holding on to furniture.
- The most fascinating toys require a baby's **actions** in order to work or produce interesting results that will stretch baby's attention span and persistence. Make life interesting for babies.
- Learning games to play with YOU as partner especially entrance a baby.

## Relish and Share Language Treasures

Aside from cuddling and gentle handling, your language interactions will eloquently reveal the quality of the relationship you have developed with each infant. A tuned-in talking partner jabbars with babies during daily routines.

- **Converse with your baby.** Respond to baby sounds. Make baby's early sounds and coos important. Show your genuine delight at early jargon babbling and at toddler attempts to create one and two word sentences. Embed turn-taking talk into every routine daily activity, especially diapering and meal times.

- **Hook your baby on picture books.** Read on the floor; read cuddled on a couch. Especially at the ends of days, when babies begin to wilt as the hours before pick-up time grow long, a loving snuggle with you and a familiar book can confirm for a baby your genuine sensitivity.

- **Read, label, and talk** about body parts, clothing, foods, and ongoing activities.

- **Sing and use chants** to explain to baby what is going on at the moment and what will come next during daily routines.

- **Talk about and model prosocial interactions** — sharing, kindness, empathy, and patience. Read to toddlers about nurturing creatures. Help your little ones feel that being friends and caring about each other is deeply important in the child care world.

## Confirm Loveliness; Confirm Joy

- **Bring beauty and loveliness into babies' lives** — with pictures, mobiles, colorful scarves and wall hangings, soft classical music, fragrant flowering bulbs, and slow waltzing times with babes in arms. Include **aesthetics** in your infant/toddler curriculum.

- **Bring laughter into your own and your babies' lives.** Giggling and grinning come early and easily to babies. Enjoy this brand new world with the babies you serve. Get in touch with the deep core of your own long-ago joy as a tenderly cherished baby as you renew your awe at simple daily experiences that capture the delight of babies.

## Learn a Wide Variety of Techniques

Perceptive cherishing will not alone boost the learning careers of your babies. Techniques for enhancing early learning will be easier to master if you have gotten to know and appreciate the personhood of each infant in your care.

- **Dance up and down the developmental ladders of learning.** Each developmental task may be more or

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less difficult for a baby. Each learning domain may be harder or easier depending on a baby's skills, learning style, attention span, and persistence. So many tasks have to be mastered.

- **Hone your noticing skills.** Notice how hard or easy each different task is for your baby. If necessary, give a special boost to revive baby's interest. Arrange quiet spaces where the baby can keep on working and moving ahead with learning tasks.

- **Give barely noticeable help** sometimes so your toddler can succeed at the task.

- **Be available but not intrusive.** Don't interrupt your baby's own efforts to explore, learn, sample, and experiment. You may want a toddler to put rings on the ring stack toy in order of increasing width. Right now, she may just want to experiment with getting them all on regardless of size. Give babies freedom to adventure with toys their own ways. Lengthened attention span and task persistence, not perfect ring stacking, is your goal.

- **Use admiring glances and positive talk to lure your baby** into new tries and persistent work at a learning activity.

- **Help babies master certain prerequisite skills,** such as staying dry for hours and saying toileting words, **before you demand that they go on to the next stage,** toilet learning. At feeding times, babies can only learn to eat neatly when they have good wrist control plus firm fist control of the spoon.

## Undertake Some Self-Searching

Sometimes freeing ourselves to bond well with babies means first freeing ourselves from old prohibitions and feelings of shame. Accepting the bodily needs of babies who drool, wet diapers, suck thumbs, and pat their genitals may require that we reexamine and rework old, anxious scripts from our past. We also need to reframe some of our attitudes toward misbehavior. What look like "naughty" actions of babies may really be learning experiences. Give babies safe ways to experiment.

- **Provide arms and a lap** (the perfect refueling station) generously if a discouraged baby needs a boost to self-esteem.

- **Find personal supports or pleasures to help you keep calm.** When adults are contented and proud of their nurturing work, then babies will thrive in that aura of contentment.

- **Take deep personal pleasure in your ability to read signals and to tune in responsively to babies' needs.** Your trustworthiness in cherishing builds confidence, secure attachment, a sense of self-control, self-esteem, and good will in babies. Intimate bonding with your babies reflects your courageous commitment to quality infant/toddler care!

## Reference

Matas, L., R. A. Arend, and L. A. Sroufe. "Continuity of Adaptation in the Second Year: The Relationship Between Quality of Attachment and Later Competence," *Child Development*, 1978, 49, pp. 547-556.

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