

Bonding and Attachment: How Does Adoption Affect a Newborn?

by Gail Steinberg & Beth Hall

The first night our baby came to us, I dreamed she pulled a silk scarf over her face. I woke startled, but the baby was asleep in the bassinet beside our bed. My husband said, "Honey, go back to sleep; the baby's fine."

I didn't fall in love with our baby at first sight. She cried and cried. I couldn't comfort her. For the first 100 hours we were together, she cried or slept, exhausted. I felt I was too much for her. She startled or blinked at sound, withdrew from touch. I didn't know her. I felt ashamed.

When I dreamed again, it was exactly the same. Our tiny newborn pulled a sea-blue scarf over her face. "Honey," my husband said, "you're not dreaming of our daughter. The baby you're dreaming of hasn't been born."

In the rocker, holding her, I thought, "He's right." The baby in my dream was the child infertility kept from us. Our new baby was someone else.... I'd prayed so long to be able to adopt. Why be depressed now? Dare I tell? What if we couldn't bond?

In my arms in the quiet of that night, she looked like a Buddha. She lay calm and alert in a new way. She gazed at my face. I felt drawn into her eyes. She wanted a bottle. For the first time, she sucked eagerly! I had understood her cue. Maybe I really was her mom. Were we going to be all right?

Post adoption depression: What is it? Could it happen to you?

Mothers frequently feel a loss when baby is born. Postpartum depression is common. Post-adoption depression is equally common, though hardly ever mentioned. Why feel down just when a monumental dream has come true? But after the high of waiting for baby to arrive, a let-down may be inevitable for emotional balance. Relating to an actual baby may also trigger a more-concrete sense of the loss of your fantasy child. Fear that you might lose your new baby if anyone found out how you feel may also cause you to hide your stress, enhancing a sense of isolation.

But moods change. The way you feel in moments of high stress is not how you will feel forever. Looking beyond dark feelings to what your baby needs and feels becomes the agenda of attachment. The best way to get a notion of what this time may mean for your child is to think about what the parallel time meant when you were born. How do you wish your parents had acted? What were your family's patterns? Looking at our own life events is a way to reach deeper understanding of where we are coming from. These insights can help shape where we are going as parents.

What if you and your baby don't fall in love right away?

Newborns and parents don't always fall in love at first sight. And you know what? You have a lifetime to work on it. It's not a race. What matters is your commitment to attach no matter how long it takes. If it takes time to feel that this child is your child, build on

signs of progress. If it takes time for the baby to act as if you matter more than anyone else, enjoy interacting as connections grow. The best signals for knowing if you're on track will come from the baby. Gather strength from simple pleasures; smiles and developmental milestones are proud signs of growth. Baby may take more or less time to attach than you do. Your partner may take more or less time. It may take days, weeks, months or a year. Don't feel like a failure if attachment takes longer than you imagined. Most important is building a family together, no matter how long it takes.

Bonding versus attachment: What's the difference? By strict definition, adoptive parents can't bond with their children. Bonding is a one-way process that begins in the birth mother during pregnancy and continues through the first few days of life. It is her instinctive desire to protect her baby. Society tends to talk about bonding, professionals about attachment. We need to be competent with language and talk about attachment. Attachment is a two-way reciprocal process between parents and their children. In any family, attachment must be achieved in order for the child to flourish. Time and interaction are needed. It starts with a promise, a promise from parents to child that says, "you count, and you can always rely on me." From this promise will come the baby's sense that the parents matter more than anyone else, leading to the baby's reliance on them. Parents then begin enjoying their ability to nurture with competence. Richly rewarding feelings grow back and forth as each comes to believe: we belong together.

How does adoption affect a newborn? Is it harder to form

attachments? Throughout pregnancy, a baby experiences and is shaped by what happens to its mother. At eight weeks in utero, the baby moves in response to touch, sound, and light. After 28 weeks, she can hear. By the third trimester, he responds to sound and rhythm. The strongest prenatal communication between baby and mother is hormonal. A mother's stress causes her baby to react. Research shows the baby may even play a major role in controlling the beginning of labor. Hormones from the baby may stimulate the uterus to contract. In the first few minutes after birth, a newborn can recognize its mother's voice, resonate to her heartbeat and find food. Can he also discern differences between her and his waiting adoptive parents? The answer must be yes.

After birth, an infant must reach a new physiological balance as a result of being outside rather than inside the body he shared for nine months. In adoption, he must also make an instant change to a new set of parents. Birth in itself is exhausting. Learning how to adapt to the world without the comfort of familiarity takes longer. No matter how warm the reception by new parents, extra stress on baby must be anticipated. Although the baby doesn't understand these changes, he senses changes in sounds, smells, stress, and rhythms. His world is upset. He experiences a loss and reacts. Responses may include crying, difficulty sucking, bowel or bladder disturbances, or withdrawal. Usually such changes are temporary and reverse as he adjusts. Humans have an enormous capacity to recover.

Children handle stress in different ways. Some thrive no matter what; others are vulnerable. Resiliency studies on primates show that attentive care from foster mothers results in bold and outgoing offspring, adept at picking up coping styles. This makes them stronger. They become leaders. Surely adopted children can do the same.

How does adoption affect adoptive parents? Is it harder to form

attachments? Adoptive parents yearn to build a family while feeling terrified something will go wrong. They may need to work through extra emotional issues before feeling able to form attachments. Researchers in neonatal studies have defined six stages in attachment for parents of infants born prematurely. Adoptive parents should understand them. They are powerfully related to our issues.

1. Working through a grief reaction. Feeling guilty for any anxiety about fully accepting. Not trusting themselves and worrying they might harm baby.
2. Basing responses solely on information about physical characteristics.
3. Observing and taking courage from the baby's reflex behavior: he can move; he is normal.
4. Beginning to see the baby as a person. Observing and taking courage from the baby's responses: turning to a voice or grasping a finger.
5. Daring to try to produce responses: when the parents touch her, she moves toward them or away. Seeing themselves as responsible for her responses. Beginning to see themselves as parents of this baby.
6. Readiness to let the baby rely fully on them. Daring to hold, rock, feed him. Loss of primary fear that he will break, or being unable to comfort him.

Don't worry about doing everything right. Your security about being a good-enough parent will eventually help baby feel secure. Take time to get to know each other. There's no rush. Take time to watch, touch, laugh, play, and have fun together. You and your child have a lifetime to continue deepening attachments.

Practical Suggestions to Strengthen Attachment with an Infant

Feeding: Follow a schedule based on your baby's cues. Put her needs—before she is even fully aware of them—before your own. Feeding on your schedule or removing bottles before the baby finishes nursing teaches her not to depend on you. Mary Ainsworth, a noted researcher in attachment theory, found parents of securely-attached infants to be more responsive to their baby's feeding signals than other parents. Fit feedings to times when baby is open. Don't feed at cross-purposes to her cues.

Eye contact: looking into your baby's eyes leads to touching his cheek or picking him up. When you put him down, it's likely he will follow you with his eyes. You will feel good. An exchange of smiles may follow. If eye-to-eye contact is threatening, a baby may turn pale or withdraw. Let him look at you at a distance rather than face to face. Allow him more time to develop comfort with closeness.

Holding: Holding, touching, cuddling, stroking, and kissing send positive messages back and forth. Show affection even though the baby may stiffen or arch, but don't force her. Always pick her up from the front and hold her face to face with you. And pick her up when she cries! Behavioral theory says this reinforces crying, and if you do it enough you'll have a crybaby. Attachment research has disproved this. Respond to her cues!

Sound: sing, recite poems or nursery rhymes. Encourage him to respond to your rhythms. Sensitive babies may need the volume level in your household lowered. Experiment until you find his comfort zone.

Playing: enjoy play times. As the baby reacts positively to you, you are getting feedback on successful nurturing techniques. When something doesn't work, try new ways. Give yourself permission to take time to learn preferences. You will feel more competent as a parent.

Enjoying a baby's beauty. Take time looking. By brilliant design, infants have big wobbly heads, enormous wide-spaced eyes, and tiny soft-skinned bodies. Adults may be programmed with instinctive nurturing responses triggered by the immature features of babies. Gaze at your beautiful child. It softens and opens your heart.

Timing: Vera Fahlberg reports a child is most open to attachment after a period of high arousal brought on by physical or psychological need. Satisfying a need creates relaxation. A baby is most open just then. Though at such moments you may feel like resting, cuddle up.

Hypersensitivity: Understand that he may be following a normal course of slowed adjustment after stress. Be especially gentle. Consider swaddling. He may be able to afford only one stimulus at a time, either sound or touch or vision.