



Information for **parents**
from Canada's **paediatricians**

Attachment: A connection for life

Attachment is the deep emotional bond between a baby and the person who provides most of their 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 them and interacting with them.

A baby's first attachment usually happens quite naturally. Your baby cries, and you try to give them what they need: a feeding, a cuddle, or a diaper change. When you respond, your baby learns that they 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 their needs, your baby feels less stress.

Responding quickly to a baby's cries is the best way to show them that they are 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 2 people interacting, sharing, and connecting. As you respond to your baby's needs, your baby will respond to you. You'll notice that it becomes easier to soothe them, that they want to be near you, and that they react to you even from a distance. Holding, rocking or talking softly to your baby all promote attachment.

While a baby's first attachment is often with their 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 they grow 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**, they will smile back at you.
- **By 4 to 6 months**, they will turn to you and expect you to respond when upset.
- **By 7 or 8 months**, they will have a special response just for you (they 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 a health care provider.

My child is in child care. Does that mean they 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 or primary caregiver.

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 3 months, all babies go through a period when they cry more than at any other time. 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 their crib, or with another caring adult. If you are worried or stressed by your baby’s crying, ask for help.

“Our family is going through some rough times.”

Sometimes there are 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 behavioural or developmental 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.

Additional resources

- Attachment: From the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/parents-child-attachment/how->

important-is-it.html)

- Healthy baby, Healthy brain: Best Start
(<https://www.healthybabyhealthybrain.ca/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

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

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