The contact between parents and their infants often is described as a dance. That is, a parent responds to his or her baby’s actions (behaviors) by making a face, sounds and movements. The baby, in turn, responds back to the parents. In healthy infants and parents this bonding is a close and constant dance, with each partner taking a step at a time.

**What can happen with bonding if a parent and/or child is ill or stressed?** For some premature babies and their parents, the baby’s early birth, along with being in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) may delay bonding — the process of parents and baby feeling connected with each other. This can be a common issue because there are many things that may disrupt the process in which parents and babies have time to be with and to learn about each other.

Issues that may affect bonding include:
- the baby’s fragile health
- the schedule of care in the NICU
- the parents’ fear and worry for their baby
- the premature baby’s tendency to be less alert than a full-term infant or respond less to the contact with his or her parents
- the mother’s need to regain her strength and health
- the parents’ need to cope with their feelings about the birth event and with the problems they and their baby may now face
- the baby’s need for special care (ways of holding, feeding, etc.) that parents have to learn
- the parents having to learn their baby’s **cues**
- the baby’s constant change in growth and health

Nearly all premature babies and their parents face some of these issues. When a baby is born prematurely, the problems with physical and/or health challenges he or she may face also may affect the infant’s and parents’ emotions. It is this area that we often may overlook.

**What does bonding do?** The bonding process affects our emotions and our bodies. Studies show that a premature baby’s bond with his or her parents affects the way the baby grows, functions, feels and behaves for many years.* Bonding can improve the baby’s and the parents’ emotions (feelings and mood) and the baby’s physical state (body function and growth).

---

**How bonding affects emotion:** Your baby’s contact with you is the way he or she learns about other people. For your baby, watching you is like looking in a mirror. Your baby’s actions create a response from you. You reflect feelings back to your baby, which helps complete your baby’s experience. That is, your baby reacts but has not yet had enough contact with people to know what kind of response his or her reaction will create.

Through this dance with you, your baby learns how you and others react to him or her. And this has some effect on how your baby feels about him or herself. All of this combined helps your baby learn how to balance his or her emotions — a process called *emotional self-regulation*. This is the degree to which a baby is able to self-comfort or self-console when he or she is upset. It is the way all humans learn to bring emotional and physical lows and highs back into balance.

Infants who cannot achieve this balance may have extreme emotional ups and downs. For instance, when the baby cries, he or she may get so caught up in the crying that he or she can’t stop. The baby then needs a great deal of outside help (rocking, cuddling) to calm down. As a baby learns how to self-calm (or to regulate), he or she is then able to have longer times of contact with the mother or father and, thus, can achieve more growth and change.

**How bonding affects a baby:** Every bit of contact with your baby affects his or her emotions and body at the same time. For instance, it helps keep your baby’s heart beat, breathing rate and body warmth balanced. It also adds to the cycle of growth and change in your baby’s network of nerves (the nervous system). As these nerves grow and connect with other parts of the body, your infant becomes better able to balance emotion. Since babies explore their world using ALL of their ▶️ *senses* (taste, smell, touch, sight, sound) the contact with you helps growth in all of these areas. Studies of NICU babies show that contact in response to each baby’s unique needs helps some babies sleep more deeply and may help reduce the need for pain medicines.*

"Our baby was so small when she was born. We weren’t sure how to hold her, what would feel good to her, or why she seemed so fussy. Things we did to comfort our healthy babies didn’t work for her. Once we learned more about her unique needs and how to respond to her, we were better able to bond with her.”  *Karl & Jen, parents*

---


---

B4 - Bonding with your baby
**Bonding with your baby is good for you too.**
Bonding with your baby helps stimulate the production of hormones, which may help parents feel content and less stressed. These hormones can signal a mother’s body to produce breast milk, which is healthy for the mother and the baby.

**Shouldn’t bonding be a natural process?** Even with healthy infants, parenting and bonding is not always a natural process or something you should know by instinct. There are often things you have to learn about your baby. It is known that simply taking care of an infant’s physical needs (feeding, clothing, bathing) does not mean the infant will thrive. Infants need the loving bond with another person in order to have the best physical and emotional growth.

**What can parents do?** There is no simple method for bonding with your baby. But knowing what can affect this process for premature babies can help you know what to do and may help improve your baby’s physical and emotional growth. Here are a few tips to help you and your baby keep up the bonding dance of care:

- **Keep your balance.** There may be times when contact with your baby creates discomfort for him or her. Keep in mind that premature babies tire easily and may be stressed easily. Your baby’s stress may simply be a sign for you and does not mean your baby is not bonding with you. It is common for parents to worry and want to focus on their baby. Keeping a balance between too much and too little focus can help both you and your baby.

- **Keep going.** Your baby is always growing and changing. Just when you get used to one set of cues and learn how to respond, expect these cues to change. You may have to learn new cues and respond in new ways.

- **Watch those cues!** Be aware of your baby’s cues — the signals that tell you how he or she is feeling and how much contact your baby can handle at that time. Keep in mind that these cues are a road map that can help improve your contact with your baby.
• **Communicate to your baby clearly.** Parents of premature babies need to give very clear cues in response to their baby. This response often must be more direct and more patient with your infant than would be needed with a full-term baby. For instance, your baby may need more time to switch from being a patient in the NICU to being a baby who is able to enjoy your input.

• **Seek help with bonding.** Being good at bonding is hard for all parents and can bring more challenges for parents of premature babies. Your NICU nurses and doctors can help you learn about your baby’s unique needs and how to respond to his or her cues.

---

**Notes**

---

**Ask Questions**

In an area that is new to you, asking these questions can be helpful:

- What is the main problem?
- What do we need to do?
- Why is it important to do this?

+ Source: Partnership for Clear Health Communication at the National Patient Safety Foundation™

www.npsf.org/askme3

---

**Take a closer look at these Pediatrix topics**

- **cues - B3** - Cues: “How does my baby feel?”
- **senses - B2** - How babies’ senses develop

---

This information is for educational purposes only and is not intended to substitute for professional medical advice. Always consult with a healthcare professional if you have any questions about the health of your baby.