

Strengthening the bond between you and your child

Some children, for whatever reason, have not been able to have the best experiences in their first months of life, and may need help learning to trust adults and develop good relationships with them.

These children may also need extra support to become effective communicators. This resource is for parents or caregivers of children under-three* who want to develop or enhance a bond with their child, as well as support their child's social and communication skills.

Bonding

'Bonding' is the term commonly used to describe the deep and powerful attachment between a baby and important people in the baby's life. It is now widely accepted that a child needs to bond with at least one adult in the early years in order to trust others, build lasting relationships and feel good about themselves. But observation has shown that children who are not able to bond with a parent or caregiver in their early years, due to trauma or illness for example, or who are separated from a parent through adoption or fostering, can still establish a bond with an adult later on. And this bond can help children recover from previous experiences.



Activities

The ideas listed below will not create an instant bond between you and your child, but will help start the process of bonding. They will also support your child's social and communication skills, with tips on how to encourage eye contact, improve listening and get your child talking. Remember any activity which is enjoyable for both parent and child such as water games, wrestling, dressing-up or cooking together, will help the two of you to bond.

Please note that a child's ability to bond with an important adult depends on various factors, particularly if the child has been adopted or fostered. In this case, the child's age,

* Many of the activities can be adapted and used with children older than three.

background, culture, mental and physical health, as well as the parents' capability and willingness to allow attachments to form, all play a role. When trying these activities, please bear in mind your child's age, background, and comfort levels.

Play games to encourage eye contact

Eye contact is a crucial part of making a connection with your child. It is common for children who have not formed good attachments to avoid eye contact with others. Try playing a game of peek-a-boo with Smarties or Jelly-beans. Every time your child makes eye contact, pop a sweet into their mouth, so the sweetness is associated with you. Make sure the sweet passes directly from your hand to your child's mouth.** For older children try a staring contest, where the first person to look away, blink or laugh loses. Be sure your child does not interpret this activity as threatening or intimidating and understands that it is a game.

Read together

Sharing a book provides an ideal opportunity to sit close, or share a cuddle. Talk about the pictures as well as reading the story. If there's a picture of a dog, talk about a dog that your child knows, and then wait for your child's response. Remember young children get bored easily, so don't read for too long. A good ten minutes is better than a difficult half an hour.

Sing songs

Songs and rhymes really appeal to young children, especially babies, and can easily fit into a regular routine, such as when you're tucking your child into bed. Try singing favourites like 'Old McDonald' and 'London Bridge'. If your adoptive or fostered child is fearful of touch due to past abuse, try songs like 'This Little Piggy', which involve safe, appropriate touching.

Talk and listen

Seize every opportunity to communicate with your child. Talk at the supermarket when your toddler is sitting in the trolley facing you. Talk during bath time when your child has your undivided attention. For older children, watch TV programmes together so you can talk about what happens. Always listen carefully and respond when your child says something, even if your child is still babbling. This shows your child that you love and value them.

Make skin contact

Touch is an important means of communication for babies, and plays a significant role in building parent child relationships. Massaging your baby may help to develop the bond between you. Visit your local library to find out whether there's a baby massage group near you. Babies also benefit from daily naps resting skin to skin on Mum or Dad's chest. For older children, try applying lotion to their hands and feet at a set time

** Normally food should not be used as a reward, however in the special circumstances discussed it can be effective

every day, such as bedtime. If your child is adoptive or fostered, consider their background before you try this activity.

Carry your baby

When you're out and about, carry your baby, if small enough, in a snugli or fabric carrier on your front. For older children try to purchase a buggy that faces you, so you can make eye contact and communicate with your child as you go about your daily rounds. If you've adopted your baby, think about buying a front pack which your child can sleep in during the day. This will help your baby attune to the rhythms, smells and sounds of their new parent.

Give lots of cuddles

Newly adopted children sometimes resist physical contact from their new parents. Even babies may stiffen and pull away, suggesting that they are more comfortable when their new parents keep their distance. But it is very important that your child learns to accept and welcome nurturing from you, so be persistent. You might like to establish a 'cuddle time' – a set time every day such as bedtime when you hold your child close. Ending the day safe in your arms will help your child learn to trust you.

Have time out

It is common for adoptive parents to become overly anxious about whether an attachment is forming, especially within the first few months after their child comes home. Be careful not to over-stimulate your child in an attempt to 'catch-up' in terms of bonding. Babies and children need time-out too. Try not to misinterpret your baby's need for rest as rejection.

Are we on track?

At any age, if your child is beginning to make eye contact and accept your touch and cuddles, it's a good sign that your relationship is developing in a positive way. If after six to 12 months your adoptive child still isn't coming to you and allowing you to care for them, you may wish to seek professional advice. The organisations and websites listed below and on the following page may help you.

For more ideas on how to help your child's language, communication and social skills visit www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk If you have any concerns about your child's language and social development, visit www.talkingpoint.org.uk



Talk To Your Baby

Strengthening the bond may be photocopied
For more information visit www.talktoyourbaby.org.uk
Talk To Your Baby is an initiative of the National Literacy Trust.

Useful contacts

British Association for Adoption & Fostering

Skyline House, 200 Union Street, London SE1 0LX

Tel: 020 7593 2000; Email: mail@baaf.org.uk; Website: www.baaf.org.uk

The Fostering Network

87 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA

Tel: 020 7620 6400; Website: www.fostering.net

Useful websites

www.attachmentdisorder.net

A wide variety of information on attachment issues, including links to suggested nurturing activities.

www.nancythomasparenting.com

Nancy Thomas is an expert on attachment issues. Site includes many useful articles for parents.

www.deborahhage.com

Canadian Deborah Hage lectures on bonding and attachment.

References

Carrie Craft, "Top 10 Five Minute Bonding Activities" http://adoption.about.com/od/parenting/tp/fiveminutebond_p.thm

Deborah Hage, "Foundations of Attachment"
<http://www.fosterparents.com/articles/DHage3.html>

Deborah Hage, "Carry the Baby, not the Baby's Carrier"
<http://www.deborahhage.com/infants.htm>

Scottish Executive (2005) *Birth to Three: supporting our youngest children*. Learning and Teaching Scotland

John Simmonds, "Practice guide to fostering: Attachment"
<http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/practiceguides/fostering/needs/complex/simmonds.asp>

Nancy Thomas, "Taming the Tiger While it's a Kitten"
<http://www.nancythomasparenting.com/Tame.htm>

Rebecca M. Thomas, "Children of the Heart: Attachment and bonding in adoption"
<http://www.adoptachild.us/Adoption%20Article%20Pages/Attaching%20and%20Bonding%20in%20Adoption.htm>

Peter Walker (1995) *Baby Massage: A practical guide to massage and movement for babies and infants*. London: Judy Piatkus Ltd