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Parent-Infant Bond

Given the opportunity, parents and babies naturally form a strong relationship with each other. This relationship is often called the parent-infant bond. For the parent, this bond is woven of love and responsibility. For the infant, it is his first-and perhaps most important-relationship.



Psychoanalysts have theorized that a first love relationship a baby experiences with a parent sets the stage for all later interpersonal relationships. They contend that if you don't have this necessary relationship in your formative years, you won't be able to love as an adult. A number of psychologists and psychiatrists have found support for this view. For example, John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, studied children growing up without parents in the first years of life; these children often had problems relating with others and forming bonds later in life. From such studies, psychologists have recognized what parents knew all along-how important sensitive, responsive, and consistent parenting is to the healthy development of a child.

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However, it is also important to point out that babies may not have to be with their parents all the time, despite the current emphasis in Lamaze classes and parents magazines on the position that there is a "critical period" for parents to bond to their babies. Supporters of this position state that parents who are separated from their newborns after birth will have difficulty forming that essential parent-infant bond. Citing studies conducted with animals, they point out that mother mice will often refuse to care for their

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Separation anxiety usually begins at 9 to 10 months, peaks between 12 and 15 months, and can last until somewhere between 24 and 36 months. Separation anxiety emerges from the infant's growing awareness of separateness from her parent. It is yet further testimony to the strength of the infant's attachment.

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young if they are separated right after birth. Fortunately, humans are not mice, and more recent research suggests that human mothers generally quite able to go on to be good mothers even if they have to be separated from their babies as a result of prematurity, illness, or other reasons.

Nonetheless, positive changes have occurred because of recent recognition of the process of bonding. Many hospitals have dramatically humanized the way in which parents and babies are treated... Parents are allowed greater contact with babies, particularly in intensive care nurseries. There, parents can now often participate in the feeding, handling, and general care of their babies right away, instead of waiting until their infants are released from the hospital.