

love connection

Learn just how your baby wants you to relate to her at every age and stage to build a bond that will last a lifetime. By Andrea Bartz • Photographs by Shannon Greer



Ever notice how your baby's face—those chubby cheeks and sparkly eyes and that mischievous smile—is somehow more fascinating to watch than even the Oscar-winning-est blockbuster? That's no coincidence: The two of you are hardwired to thoroughly enjoy each other's company. And if you follow your instincts and develop a great rapport now, you could set him up for a lifetime of stellar relationships.

In a recent study, babies who were securely attached to their mothers at 12 months (they turned to her for

comfort when exploring an unfamiliar place) were more likely in their early 20s to come out of an argument still feeling connected to their partner. "The results of this research suggest that our ability to love, trust, and resolve conflict stems in part from how we're treated as infants," explains author Jeffry Simpson, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota.

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Loving your little one may also help safeguard her health. Research in *Psychological Science* suggests that attentive mothers buffer kids against chronic stress, which can cause sleep disorders, digestive problems, memory impairment, depression, and obesity.

Bonding with your sweetie is intuitive—and a joy. "Attachment isn't about acting the 'correct' way," says Daniel Messinger, Ph.D., a child psychology professor at the University of Miami. "It's really about watching her and responding sensitively." So if you're both having fun, you're doing it right! Need a few pointers? Read on to find out what your infant is looking for from you during her first year.

0 to 3 months Picking favorites

There's a reason the scent of your baby's skin triggers pangs of affection. When you smell, hold, or breastfeed your little one, your body releases oxytocin, the bonding hormone that prompts you to be more loving and protective of your baby—and also encourages her to cuddle right back.

Oxytocin isn't Mother Nature's only nudge to keep you and Baby all lovey-dovey. From birth, your cutie is programmed to connect with you. He can distinguish human faces and voices from other sights and sounds, and loves to watch your every move. He sees best at about 8 to 12 inches—exactly the distance between your face and his when he's cradled in your arms. He even recognizes Mommy

and Daddy's voices and will turn when he hears you. *Aww*-mazing!

Babies are also eager for face time with someone who's equally jazzed to be hanging out with them. As early as 2 months, an infant will notice if something's "off" in the way Mom's reacting to her cues. In one study, researchers hooked up cameras and TVs so that mothers could coo and smile at their infants from another room. When the team created a one-second delay in what the baby saw on screen—so Mom's reactions were lagging behind just a tiny bit—the infant looked away. "Babies want to feel like they're in control," explains study author Tricia Striano, Ph.D., a psychologist at Hunter College, in New York City. "When mothers tune in to their child's behavior, babies engage in ways that elicit a response."

If your cherub smiles in the first month or so, that grin doesn't mean much. Sorry! It's just a reflex. At around 6 weeks, though, babies start to respond to their environment, and at 2 to 3 months their brains are developed enough that they can look right at you when they smile, letting you know that you're the reason they're so happy, Dr. Messinger says.

● **Build your bond** Show your little one you care. "Get in tune with your baby," advises Meredith Small, Ph.D., an anthropologist at Cornell University and author of *Our Babies, Ourselves: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Parent*. "Hold her when you're able and pay attention when she's squirming or unusually

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quiet. This will help you figure out how she tells you she's hungry or content." Breastfeeding, cuddling, and giving her a massage are great ways to bond, and research shows that wearing your baby in a carrier when you're on the move also helps keep you connected.

During face time, interact using the expressions, coos, and cuddles that feel natural to you—but don't automatically plaster a grin on your face every time you turn your peanut's way. He knows you're faking! "If a mom is smiling, but it's not related to what the baby's doing, he'll eventually prefer to look somewhere else," Dr. Striano says.

4 to 8 months First friends

Your baby's blossoming intellect helps her to recognize that her interactions with you are different from those with strangers. "They learn, 'Unlike other adults, Mom comforts me, and when I cry, Dad usually feeds me,'" explains Dr. Messinger. "They expect certain things during an exchange."

If you've been consistent in your efforts to soothe, and your baby feels as if you're watching out for him, he'll begin to play (with toys, your keys, anything!) and explore the world, which is exactly what his developing brain needs right now. "An infant learns something unique when he picks an object up or puts it in his mouth, versus just looking at it," Dr. Striano says. "So it's important that your baby is encouraged to get hands-on with his environment." If Baby is feeling comfortable in his surroundings, your transition back to work won't be as scary for him. He'll be capable of playing and learning without you by his side. "This is the perfect time to start teaching your baby that strangers, like a nanny or day-care workers, will take good care of her," she adds. When you return home, she'll greet you with a big grin. If she turns away, it's because she's learning to regulate emotion and the joy of seeing you is just too intense.

● **Build your bond** To feed your cutie's hungry mind, keep her close as you go about your day. "A baby can tell when you're ignoring him—say, by planting him in front of the TV—and when you're just busy," Dr. Striano says. "He'll appreciate it if you make him part of the action." Talk to your tot whenever you're near her, and play peekaboo as you fold rompers. As she starts to play with blocks and toys, encourage her with lots of *yays*! And

HOW DADDY DOES IT ● Cuddling your infant feels totally natural to you. So why is your husband's default way of handling your son zooming him through the air like Superman? It's human nature, Dr. Meredith Small says: "In almost every culture, fathers do the rough-and-tumble play while mothers handle kids more gently." As long as the roughhousing is safe, don't sweat it. Says Dr. Tricia Striano, "The important thing is for your baby to feel like her parents are there for her."

don't take it personally if Baby's not in the mood. "Sometimes infants need to look away," Dr. Messinger says. Making googly eyes is exhausting!

9 to 12 months

Let's stay together

Your baby may start trying to cling to you when you leave her side. It's normal—and temporary! Separation anxiety appears around the 9-month mark, when Baby has the ability to remember you even when he can't see you. But he can also sense patterns and understand that you always come back. "If you give your baby consistent cues, and if you really do reappear 'in a minute,' he'll begin to trust that you will," Dr. Striano says. "The babies who struggle the most are often those who really can't predict whether their caregiver will come back or not."

Amid those teary goodbyes, you'll see another social stride: Your tot will begin to communicate using gestures, like waving or raising his arms to be picked up. "Babies will start to share their intentions. For example, he may stare at something fully expecting that you'll turn to look at it too," Dr. Messinger adds. They also "share" smiles, grinning at a toy and then turning their smile toward you. "That shift in gaze is purposeful," he says.

● **Build your bond** Continue sending clear, consistent signals that you love your baby and that you're doing your best to intuit what she's trying to tell you. That isn't a marching order. It's more like a permission slip to hit pause on your busy life and do exactly what your instincts are telling you to do. "In our culture, it's hard to put down the things we like to keep in order, like our finances or laundry, and just sit with our baby and see what she's doing," Dr. Small says. "Your baby does want to engage with you, so allow yourself to let the other stuff go sometimes and just enjoy her!" Ditching a sink full of dishes for a snugglefest? We'll hug to that! ●