Getting to Know Your Baby

After all the months of waiting and dreaming, it is exciting when your baby is finally born. But it takes time and effort for parents to get to know their newborn, and time for the newborn to adjust to the new world. Getting to know your new baby is part of a fascinating but relatively simple process called bonding, in which you essentially “fall in love” with each other. Although bonding is a natural process, it sometimes takes effort. Some ways to help make this process easier include rooming-in at the hospital with your baby and techniques such as infant massage.

Bonding: From the moment they learn they are expecting a baby, the process of bonding begins for many parents. This is an on-going process of intimacy, understanding, and nurturing that is all part of falling in love with their baby. It was once thought that bonding occurred as a distinct time frame immediately after birth, when the baby was held in the mother’s arms and eye contact was established. However, bonding has been identified more as a process, not an event. With more frequent use of ultrasound examinations, parents are actually seeing their babies earlier than ever before. This seems to enhance bonding during pregnancy. The kicks and movements of the baby during pregnancy are also ways that a mother and father bond with the baby. Bonding continues when the baby is born and the parents and baby spend time getting to know each other. As a process, bonding is not “missed out on” if a baby needs to leave the mother’s side for special care. Bonding may be different for mothers than for fathers. And, some mothers may react differently than other mothers. Some mothers feel an immediate deep emotional bond at first sight, while others find their feelings develop more slowly, as they spend time with the baby. Babies do not “forget” parents if separated from them at first. They show a unique preference for a mother’s smell and voice. There are several ways to help you and your baby continue the process of bonding and falling in love with each other. Breastfeeding is one of the best ways to bond with your baby. In addition to the nourishment it provides, breastfeeding gives mother and baby closeness and skin-to-skin contact on a constant basis. This helps both get to know each other more intimately. Carrying a baby in a sling is another method of continuing to bond. This is often a helpful technique for fussy or high-need babies. However, be sure to follow the manufacturer’s instructions, and always keep the baby’s mouth and nose clear to prevent suffocation. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends extreme caution when using a sling for a baby under 4 months of age. Keep the baby’s face visible, and frequently check on the baby while using the device.

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Rooming-in:  Many hospitals now encourage mothers to keep their babies with them throughout the hospital stay, which is called "rooming-in." This can be full-time/24 hours, or a partial rooming-in, when the baby is with you the majority of the time. Many mothers find that having their baby with them throughout the day and night allows them to learn the baby’s needs and how to respond to them.

Mother-baby nurses work with new mothers in their hospital rooms helping them learn to breastfeed and care for their babies. If you are rooming-in, it is a good idea to have someone stay with you at night. This is especially important after a cesarean delivery, when you may not be able to get up right away to care for your baby.

Infant Massage:  Parents have always loved touching and stroking their babies, and babies love to be soothed and cuddled. Part of a baby’s emotional and neurologic development comes from the interactions of touch and feelings of security it offers. Other cultures have long practiced infant massage—a technique of stroking and gently rubbing the baby’s limbs. Proponents of infant massage believe it:
- Relieves stress for parents and babies, which can help with sleep.
- Provides one-on-one time for bonding and communication.
- Increases parent confidence and sensitivity to a baby’s signals/cues.
- Stimulates growth and development.
- Helps with symptoms of colic.

Some evidence shows that massage of premature infants may increase weight-gain and help with neurological development. Certified infant massage therapists often offer classes to teach techniques in infant massage. However, many parents find that spending time with their baby helps them learn how to stroke and cuddle in ways that baby and parents both prefer.