

# What is Secure Attachment and Bonding?

**While it's easiest to form a secure attachment bond with an infant, it can be formed at any age—and can ensure your child has the best possible start in life.**



## What is the attachment bond and why is it so important?

The attachment bond is the emotional connection formed by wordless communication between an infant and you, their parent or primary caretaker. A landmark report, published in 2000 by The Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, identified how crucial the attachment bond is to a child's development. This form of communication affects the way your child develops mentally, physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. In fact, the strength of this relationship is the main predictor of

how well your child will do both in school and in life.

The attachment bond is not founded on the quality of your care or parental love, but on the nonverbal emotional communication you develop with your child. While attachment occurs naturally as you, the parent or caretaker, care for your baby's needs, the quality of the attachment bond varies.

- A *secure* attachment bond ensures that your child will *feel* secure, understood, and calm enough to experience optimal development of his or her nervous system. Your child's developing brain organizes itself to provide your child with the best foundation for life: a feeling of safety that results in eagerness to learn, healthy self-awareness, trust, and empathy.
- An *insecure* attachment bond fails to meet your child's need for security, understanding, and calm, preventing the child's developing brain from organizing itself in the best ways. This can inhibit emotional, mental, and even physical development, leading to difficulties in learning and [forming relationships in later life](#).

## How secure attachment is created

[Developing a secure attachment bond](#) between you and your child, and giving your child the best start in life, does not require you to be a perfect parent. In fact, the 2000 study found that the critical aspect of the child-primary caretaker relationship is NOT based on quality of care, educational input, or even the bond of love that develops between parent and infant. Rather, it is based on the quality of the nonverbal communication that takes place between you and your child.

While it's easiest to form a secure attachment bond when your child is still an infant—and reliant upon nonverbal means of communicating—you can begin to make your child feel understood and secure at any age. Children's brains continue maturing well into adulthood (until their mid-20s). Moreover, because the brain continues to change throughout life, it's never too late to start engaging in a nonverbal emotional exchange with your child. In fact, developing your [nonverbal communication skills](#) can help improve and deepen your relationships with other people of any age.

## The attachment bond differs from the bond of love

As a parent or primary caretaker for your infant, you can follow all the traditional parenting guidelines, provide doting, around-the-clock care for your baby, and yet still not achieve a secure attachment bond. You can tend to your child's every physical need, provide the most

comfortable home, the highest quality nourishment, the best education, and all the material goods a child could wish for. You can hold, cuddle, and adore your child without creating the kind of attachment that fosters the best development for your child. How is this possible? Importantly, creating a secure attachment bond differs from creating a bond of love.

Children need something more than love and caregiving in order for their brains and nervous systems to develop in the best way possible. Children need to be able to engage in a nonverbal emotional exchange with their primary caretaker in a way that communicates their needs and makes them feel understood, secure, and balanced. Children who feel emotionally disconnected from their primary caregiver are likely to feel confused, misunderstood, and insecure, no matter how much they're loved.

## The Difference Between Bonding and a Secure Attachment Bond

### Bonding...

Refers to your feelings for and sense of connection to your child that begins before birth and usually develops very quickly in the first weeks after the baby is born.

Is task-oriented. You attend to your child's needs, whether it's changing diapers and feeding, or taking to soccer practice and the movies.

You maintain your regular adult pace while attending to your child. For example, you hurry to feed your child dinner so you have time to watch your favorite TV show, or you cut short playing a game with your child to answer a text.

### Secure Attachment Bond...

Refers to your child's emotional connection with you (their primary caregiver) that begins at birth, develops rapidly in the next two years and continues developing throughout life.

Requires you to focus on what is happening in the moment between you and your child. Your child's nonverbal cues tell you that they feel unhappy, for example, and you respond wordlessly by mirroring your child's expression to show you understand, and then giving your child a hug.

You follow your child's slower pace and take the time to decipher and respond to your child's nonverbal cues that communicate, for example, "I'm in no hurry, I'm having fun just hanging out with you."

## The Difference Between Bonding and a Secure Attachment Bond

You as the parent initiate interaction with your child. For example, you want to get a cute photo of your baby laughing so you initiate play time, or you make your teen his favorite meal so he'll tell you how things are going at school.

You focus on future goals by, for example, trying to do everything you can to have the smartest, healthiest child.

Your child initiates and ends the interaction between you. You pick up on your baby's nonverbal cues that they need to rest, so you postpone taking a cute photo. Or you pick up on your teen's cues that now is not a good time to talk and postpone your questions to another time.

You focus solely on the moment-to-moment experience, just enjoying connecting with your child. You listen, talk, or play with your child, giving your full, focused attention in ways that feel comfortable to them, without distractions, so you can just live "in the moment."

## Why there is so much confusion about bonding and the secure attachment bond?

The words *bond* or *bonding* are commonly used to describe both caretaking and the emotional exchange that forms the attachment process, even though they are very different ways of connecting with your child.

- One is a connection based on the care a parent provides for their infant child, while the other is based on the quality of nonverbal emotional communication that occurs between parent and child.
- Both types of parent-child interaction can occur simultaneously. While feeding, bathing, or otherwise caring for your child, you can also build the emotional connection by recognizing and responding to your child's nonverbal cues.
- Before experts understood the radical changes going on in the infant brain during the first months and years of life, both the caretaking process and the attachment process looked very similar. Now, though, they are able to recognize and painstakingly record an infant's nonverbal responses to highlight the process of attachment in infants.

## Developmental milestones related to secure attachment

By understanding the developmental milestones related to secure attachment, you can spot [symptoms of insecure attachment](#) and take steps to immediately repair them. If your child misses repeated milestones, it's crucial to consult with your pediatrician or child

development specialist.

## **Between birth and 3 months, does your baby...**

- Follow and react to bright colors, movement, and objects?
- Turn toward sounds?
- Show interest in watching people's faces?
- Smile back when you smile?

## **Between 3 and 6 months, does your baby...**

- Show joy when interacting with you?
- Make sounds, like cooing, babbling or crying, if happy or unhappy?
- Smile a lot during playtime?

## **Between 4 and 10 months, does your baby...**

- Use facial expressions and sounds when interacting, like smiling, giggling, or babbling?
- Have playful exchanges with you?
- Alternate back and forth with gestures (giving and taking), sounds, and smiles?

## **Between 10-18 months, does your baby...**

- Play games with you, like peek-a-boo or patty cake?
- Use sounds like ma, ba, na, da, and ga?
- Use different gestures (sometimes one after another) to show needs like giving, pointing, or waving?
- Recognize his or her name when called?

## **Between 18 and 20 months, does your baby...**

- Know and understand at least 10 words?
- Use at least four consonants in words or babbling, like b, d, m, n, p, t?
- Use words, gestures and signals to communicate needs, like pointing at something, leading you to something?
- Enjoy simple pretend play, like hugging or feeding a doll or stuffed animal?
- Demonstrate familiarity with people or body parts by pointing or looking at them when named?

## **At 24 Months, does your baby...**

- Know and understand at least 50 words?
- Use two or more words together to say something, like “want milk,” or “more crackers?”
- Show more complex pretend play, like feeding the stuffed animal and then putting the animal in the stroller?
- Show interest in playing with other children by giving objects or toys to others?
- Respond to questions about familiar people or objects not present by looking for them?

## **At 36 Months, does your baby...**

- Put thoughts and actions together, like “sleepy, want blanket,” or “hungry for yogurt and going to the refrigerator?”
- Enjoy playing with children and talking with other children?
- Talk about feelings, emotions and interests, and show knowledge about time (past and future)?
- Answer “who,” “what,” “when,” and “where” questions without too much trouble?
- Pretend to play different characters—either by dressing up and acting or with toy figures or dolls?

## **Obstacles to creating a secure attachment bond**

Obstacles to creating a secure attachment may first appear when your child is an infant. You may deeply love your baby, yet be ill-equipped to meet the needs of your infant’s immature nervous system. Since infants cannot calm and soothe themselves, they rely on you to do so for them. However, if you’re unable to manage your own stress, to quickly regain your calm and focus in the face of life’s daily stressors, you’ll be unable to calm and soothe your baby.

Even an older child will look to you, the parent, as a source of safety and connection and, ultimately, secure attachment. If, however, you are frequently depressed, anxious, angry, grieving, pre-occupied, or otherwise unable to be calm and present for your child, their physical, emotional, and/or intellectual development may suffer.

The new field of infant mental health, with its emphasis on brain research and the developmental role of parents, provides a clearer understanding of factors that may compromise the secure attachment bond. If either the primary caretaker or the child has a health problem, nonverbal communication between the two may be affected, which in turn can affect the secure attachment bond.

## **How an infant's well-being can affect the secure attachment bond**

Experience shapes the brain and this is especially true for newborns whose nervous systems are largely undeveloped.

- When a baby experiences difficulty in the womb or in the birth process—during a cesarean birth, for example—their nervous system may be compromised.
- Adopted babies or those who spend time in hospital neonatal units away from a parent may have early life experiences that leave them feeling stressed, confused, and unsafe.
- Infants who never seem to stop crying—whose eyes are always tightly closed, fists clenched, and bodies rigid—may have difficulty experiencing the soothing cues of even a highly attuned caretaker.

Fortunately, as the infant brain is so undeveloped and influenced by experience, a child can overcome any difficulties at birth. It may take a few months, but if the primary caretaker remains calm, focused, understanding, and persistent, a baby will eventually relax enough for the secure attachment process to occur.

## **How an older child's well-being can affect the secure attachment bond**

A child's experience and environment can affect their ability to form a secure attachment bond. Sometimes the circumstances that affect the secure attachment bond are unavoidable, but the child is too young to understand what has happened and why. To a child, it just feels like no one cares and they lose trust in others and the world becomes an unsafe place.

- A child gets attention only by acting out or displaying other extreme behaviors.
- Sometimes the child's needs are met and sometimes they aren't. The child never knows what to expect.
- A child is hospitalized or separated from his or her parents.
- A child is moved from one caregiver to another (can be the result of adoption, foster care, or the loss of a parent).
- A child is mistreated or abused.

## **How a caretaker's well-being can affect the secure attachment bond**

The feelings you experience as a primary caretaker can shape the developmental process occurring in your child's brain. If you are overly stressed, depressed, traumatized, or unavailable for whatever reason, you may not have the awareness or sensitivity to provide



the positive emotional mirroring your child needs for secure attachment.

Sometimes even a healthy, caring, and responsible caretaker may have trouble understanding and initiating a secure attachment bond with their child. If, as a child, you didn't experience a secure attachment bond with your own primary caregiver, you may be unaware of what secure attachment looks or feels like. But adults can change for the better, too. Just as you can strengthen yourself with exercise and a healthy diet, you can also learn to manage overwhelming stress and [deal with emotions](#) that may interfere with your ability to create a secure attachment bond.

## **Distractions of daily life**

[Cell phones](#), computers, TV, and countless other distractions of daily life can prevent you from giving your full attention to your child. Responding to an urgent email during meal time, texting a friend during play time, or just zoning out in front of the TV with your child are all ways parents miss out on opportunities to make eye contact with their child and engage in the secure attachment process. Without eye contact and your full attention, you'll miss your child's nonverbal cues.

## **Repair of the secure attachment bond is always possible**

You don't have to be a perfect parent to build a secure attachment bond with your infant—no one is able to be fully present and attentive to a child 24 hours a day. Because the brain is capable of changing, repair is always possible and may even strengthen the secure attachment bond.

If you notice there's a disconnect between you, when you've missed or misinterpreted your child's cues, and attempt to repair it by continuing to figure out what your child needs, the secure attachment process will stay on track. The effort involved in repair can even deepen trust, increase resiliency, and build a stronger relationship.

## **Nonverbal communication tips for secure attachment**

Nonverbal cues are sensory signals communicated by a certain tone of voice, touch, or facial expression. A child's primary caretaker brings all of these unique qualities together to create a sense of recognition, safety, and comfort for a child. Even when a child is old enough to talk, [nonverbal communication](#) remains key to building and maintaining a secure



attachment.

## Using Nonverbal Communication to Create a Secure Attachment Bond

**Eye contact** - You look at your child affectionately and they pick up on the positive emotion conveyed by this nonverbal signal and feel safe, relaxed, and happy. If you're depressed, stressed, or distracted, you may not look directly into your child's eyes at all. Maintaining eye contact also plays an important role in sustaining the flow of conversation between you and your child.

**Facial expression** - Your face is able to express countless emotions without you saying a word. If your expression is calm and attentive when you communicate with your child, they will feel secure. But if your face looks distressed, angry, worried, sad, fearful, or distracted, your child will pick up on these negative emotions and feel stressed, unsafe, and unsure.

**Tone of voice** - Even if your child is too young to understand the words that you use, they can understand the difference between a tone that is harsh, indifferent or preoccupied, and a tone that conveys tenderness, interest, concern, and understanding. When talking to older children, make sure that the tone you use matches what you're saying.

**Touch** - The way you touch your child conveys your emotional state—whether you're attentive, calm, tender, relaxed, or disinterested, upset, and unavailable. The way you wash, lift, or carry your baby or the way you give your older child a warm hug, a gentle touch on the arm, or a reassuring pat on the back can convey so much emotion to your child.

**Body language** - The way you sit, move, and carry yourself communicates a wealth of information to your child. Talk to your child with your arms crossed and your head back and they will see you as defensive and uninterested. But sit with a relaxed, open posture, leaning towards your child and they will feel what they're saying matters to you.

**Pacing, timing, and intensity** - The pacing, timing, and intensity of your speech, movements, and facial expressions can reflect your state of mind. If you maintain an adult pace, or are stressed or otherwise inattentive, your nonverbal actions will do little to calm, soothe, or reassure your child. You need to be aware of your child's preferences for pacing and intensity, which are often slower and less forceful than your own.

## Creating a secure attachment bond

As there are many reasons why a loving, conscientious parent may not be successful at creating a secure attachment bond, HelpGuide has created two unique resources to help the process:

### 1. Understand what the attachment bond looks like

Informed by leaders in the new field of infant mental health, this HelpGuide video demonstrates what a secure attachment bond looks like from the perspective of the infant as well as the parent.

Additionally, the video explains why a loving parent may not be able to create a secure attachment bond or why an infant may not be able to participate in the two-way emotional exchange that creates this bond.

### 2. Learn how to build a strong attachment relationship

[Secure attachment](#) is an ongoing partnership between you and your baby, but it doesn't mean you have to be the perfect parent. Building a Secure Attachment Bond with Your Baby can help you understand your baby's cries, interpret their signals, and respond to your baby's needs for food, rest, love, and comfort.



#### Get more help

[Bonding with your Baby](#) - Why bonding is important, how your baby interacts, and ways to get support. (KidsHealth)

[Attachment: The First Core Strength](#) - What you can do to promote secure attachment. (Scholastic.com)

[Bonding with Your Baby](#) - One sheet about bonding and attachment with a good list of suggestions for new mothers. (Child Welfare Department)

[Developmental Milestones](#) - A detailed list about developmental milestones that relate to bonding. (CDC)

[Communication and your newborn](#) - Learn how newborns communicate and what to do if you suspect a problem. (KidsHealth)

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