



Topic:

What can parents do to create close relationships with their young children?

Research tells us:

Research findings show that parents who build positive parent-child bonds and achieve strong relationships with their children interact in ways that:

- are positive for both parent and child;
- include activities that involve taking turns, such as playing games like pat-a-cake or peek-a-boo;
- are warm and affectionate, with plenty of smiling and cuddling; and
- encourage and support the child in ways that remind him/her that the parent is there to help.



Pathways to Parent-Child Closeness

Research findings show the best kinds of interactions for strengthening parent-child relationships

Researchers at the Research and Training Center on Early Childhood Development have identified those aspects of parental sensitivity that are related to secure parent-infant bonding. Danielle Z. Kassow, Ph.D., and Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., analyzed findings from 66 research studies involving more than 4,000 parent/child pairs, and showed that sensitive parental behavior includes timely and appropriate responding to baby's efforts to interact, participating in activities and games that involve taking turns with the baby, and interacting in ways that are equally rewarding for both parent and child. They also found that the most effective parental behaviors are ones that help, guide, and reassure the young child.

The good news for moms and dads—and their little ones—is that building important parent-child bonds can be lots of fun. Simple, enjoyable parent-child play is an excellent way for parents to develop a sensitive interaction style and achieve desirable bonding with their baby. This kind of play can include a variety of time-honored games—like *peek-a-boo*, *pat-a-cake*, and *I'm gonna get you!*—in which the parent and child take turns being “leader” and “follower.” It can also include activities as simple as rolling a ball back and forth to one another. Such parent-child play offers plenty of opportunities for silliness, cuddling, funny faces, and laughter. Sharing the warm and happy exchanges that are characteristic of such games and play activities is emotionally rewarding for both adults and young children

Acting on the evidence:

Parents can use the following three strategies to develop strong bonds with their young children:

1. Play “your turn/my turn” games like peek-a-boo and I'm gonna get you!
2. While playing “your turn/my turn” games, give the kind of help that supports and encourages your baby's efforts to interact. An example would be to move the baby's hands to cover and uncover his/her eyes during peek-a-boo, in this way helping the baby understand and participate actively in the game.
3. Let your interactions with your baby be affectionate and warm, with plenty of smiles, gentle words, and cuddling.



It's hard to wait for your turn when the activity is delightfully silly. "Can you grab a handful of water, too?"



Make bonding with twins twice the fun. "A kiss for you, then a kiss for you...and TWO kisses for ME!"

Dad and baby grow closer during summertime trips to a swimming pool

First-time dad Dave Marsh and seven-month-old Nate have discovered their apartment complex's swimming pool is a fun place to spend steamy August evenings together. Besides providing a welcome break for Nate's stay-at-home mom, Janet, and a pleasant way to cool off, their regular "dips" have become a perfect time for bonding play between father and son.

As soon as Dave arrives home from work, Nate chirps and bounces with excitement. "It's pool time," Dave announces with a grin as he scoops up the delighted baby and makes quick work of changing him into a waterproof swim diaper. Then Dad pulls on his own trunks and they head for the pool.

"Okay, little man," Dave says as the two ease into the water. For the next 30 to 45 minutes, they play a

series of back-and-forth games they've invented. "We mostly play a sort of monkey-see/monkey-do game," Dave explains. "I'll start off doing something that catches Nate's fancy, and he'll repeat it. In Nate's eyes, the goofier it is, the better. Or sometimes I'll mimic what he does, and it totally cracks him up!" The two take turns kicking, blowing bubbles, wagging their heads, splashing water on each other, and more.

"I'm surprised by how much fun this is for both of us," Dave comments. "And Nate's response is super

rewarding for me. Even though he's too young to talk yet, it feels like we're really communicating! We've used fun times to build a nice relationship. I can tell Nate enjoys me and feels a closeness to me. It's special...he knows I'm his dad!"



Back and forth and both have fun: Dad takes a turn at bubble blowing in "Monkey see, monkey do!"

Take another look:

The complete research synthesis is available to read or download as *Bridges, Volume 3, Number 4* on the products page of the RTC website, www.researchtopractice.info:
Kassow, D. Z., and Dunst, C. J. (2005). Characteristics of parental sensitivity related to secure infant attachment. *Bridges*, 3(2).

Exciting print, web-based and multimedia materials of interest to parents and early childhood practitioners are available from the Center for Evidence-Based Practices. To order by telephone, please call 800-824-1174. Visit the CEBP site to learn about all of our projects: www.evidencebasedpractices.org.