

Father Love

Tender bonding time is just as special for Dad

By John Hoffman

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When the phone rang Ian Watson was holding his nine-day-old son, Trent. I had called to talk about father-baby bonding and, in a bit of fortuitous timing stumbled into one of those fragments of time you'd love to be able to put in a bottle and keep forever.

"He's right here on my chest, sucking on my baby finger. It's such a nice moment..." The words continued to spill out as Watson tried to share the experience with this stranger who had interrupted his idyllic little scene. But words in print can't capture the tone of voice, the obvious depth of emotion conveyed. I could almost see him melting into the couch, blissed-out smile and all.

Watson was discovering something that women have always known: becoming attached to your baby is a kind of falling in love. And it can feel just as good (in its own way) as the romantic type. Of course, the path to parent-infant attachment is a little more straightforward for mothers and, really, it's only been in the past 20 years or so that anybody has even thought much about fathers bonding with their babies. But they can, and do, if given the chance.

The process can even take root during pregnancy, the first time a man hears his unborn child's heartbeat or feels the baby move. For many men, it gets a big kickstart at the moment of birth. Steve Milligan remembers, "The nurse hands you this thing and you get this big rush... like, wow! He's my kid!"

Not all fathers get an immediate feeling of true connection. Even when it happens, it can be a bit overshadowed by a mix of other feelings: wonder at the miracle of birth, relief that everything's okay, sheer exhaustion. In Ian Hobbes' case, 30 hours of labour ending in a C-section were part of the story. "It wasn't exactly love at first sight," he recalls. "The nurse handed me the baby and I remember thinking, 'Whoa! What's this?'"

"This" is, in truth, a little stranger. You knew he was coming, and you knew he was going to be part of your life, but he's still a new person, someone you don't really know yet. Let's demystify the idea of bonding or attachment. It's simply a process of getting to know (and becoming comfortable with) a little person that you are already predisposed to like. How does it happen?

Everybody assumes that mothers bond with their newborns, and in fact most do. So think about what a mother does. She nurses the baby, she changes diapers, she gives baths, she carries the baby around with her, she rocks or walks the baby, she often sleeps next to him. What do all those actions have in common? They involve touching.

Physical contact is the key for fathers as well. Getting connected with a baby involves the senses more than the mind. A father needs to find out how the baby feels in his arms, how she smells, how she likes to be held, how she responds to the world around

her. He can "discover" his baby in this way by doing all those things that mothers do (with the sole exception of breastfeeding).

Since his baby was born seven days ago, Ian Hobbes has been doing as much baby-caretaking as he can, and feeling increasingly comfortable with his child as time goes on. "I burp him and change him, sometimes I walk around the room and sort of show him things," says Hobbes. "The more I hang out with Ben, the more I get a sense that he's his own unique entity. He's starting to feel more like he's my baby now."

Moments like the one Ian Watson experienced, when you and your baby seem "at one with the universe," are pretty inspiring, all right. But it's the practical, meat-and-potatoes kind of everyday care that brings you into each other's world and creates the opportunity for that sense of closeness. Take changing diapers.

"I love changing diapers," says a slightly incredulous Steve Milligan, father of another Benjamin, 3 1/2 months old. "I know it sounds like a weird thing to say. How could anybody who's never changed a diaper ever understand that?" He tries to explain: "Well, it's just him and me and he looks up at me and he smiles and kicks his feet. I mean, I can't feed him right now, that's a biological thing, but when we're finished that little function, he's happier, I feel good and, you know, we've done this thing together."

Doing it together. It's as simple as that really. Look after your baby, spend a lot of time with him and you will become attached, you will feel good together, you will know him.