

Attachment Parenting

Ways to Build Self-Esteem, Independence, and Connectedness

BY NANCY A. BLUM, PH.D.

Attachment parenting is said to promote self-esteem, independence, bonding skills, nurturing qualities, and respect for authority. This common-sense, instinctual approach to parenting emphasizes physical and emotional closeness between parent and child and encourages parents to be attuned and responsive to their children's needs, creating a harmonious bond.

Excellent resources include books by its chief proponent, noted pediatrician William Sears, and Web sites www.askdrsears.com and www.attachmentparenting.org. Sears describes five practices that help build a strong bond between the parent and child.

1. Babywearing

Babies worn in a baby carrier have a more secure attachment to their mothers. Babywearing also maintains the baby in a calm and content state. In other cultures across the world, where babies are worn throughout the day, they spend far less time crying than do babies in this country.

In one study, babies who were worn throughout the day cried and fussed 43 percent less than babies who were not worn. Because babies who are worn by their parents cry much less, they spend extra time in a state of quiet alertness that enables them to interact with the environment and learn. These babies may display enhanced cognitive, speech, and motor development. Excellent baby carriers can be found at www.theultimatebabywrap.com and www.parentsafely.com.

2. Responding to Baby's Cries

Letting a baby "cry it out" can be very destructive to the physical and emotional well-being of the baby. One study found "increased heart rate and blood pressure, reduced oxygen level, elevated cerebral blood pressure, initiation of the stress response, (and) depleted energy reserves and oxygen interaction." Regularly failing to respond to a baby's cries can create a state of chronic stress, which may result in permanent damage to the baby's hippocampus, a brain structure that helps turn off the stress response, resulting in disruption in learning and memory. Chronic secretion of cortisol, secreted when one is crying or other-

wise stressed, also may lower our resistance to infectious disease and predispose us to problems with depression and anxiety, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

3. Breastfeeding

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) notes "extensive research...documents diverse and compelling advantages to infants, mothers, families, and society from breastfeeding...These include health, nutritional, immunologic, developmental, psychological, social, economic, and environmental benefits." The AAP recommends that babies be breastfed for at least the first 12 months, and as long as is mutually desirable after that. Breastfeeding is associated with a lowered risk to the child of many conditions including asthma, diabetes, ear and other infections, dental problems, speech delay, obesity, digestive problems, cancer, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Studies have shown a significant positive relationship between the duration of breastfeeding and children's scores on intelligence tests. Hormones released during breastfeeding trigger nurturing behavior and relaxation in the mother.

Other benefits for the mother include weight loss and a lowered risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and osteoporosis. One resource is La Leche League (www.la lecheleague.org).

4. Sharing Sleep

Prominent psychologists David Barlow and V. Mark Durand write: "In the predominant culture in the United States, infants are expected to sleep on their own, in a separate bed, and, if possible, in a separate room. However, in many other cultures as diverse as rural Guatemala and Korea and urban Japan, the child spends the first few years of life in the same room and sometimes in the same bed as the mother. In many cultures, mothers report that they do not ignore the cries of their children, in stark contrast to the United States, where most pediatricians recommend that parents ignore the cries of their infants at night. One conclusion from this research is that sleep can be negatively impacted by cultural norms, as in the United States. Unmet demands can result in stress that negatively affects the ultimate sleep outcome for children."

According to Sears, most babies and parents sleep best with the baby in the parents' room, and perhaps in the parents' bed. In "the crib-and-nursery scene, the separate sleeper awakens—alone and behind bars. He is out of touch...." Sears explains. "Separation anxiety sets in, baby becomes scared, and the cry escalates into an all-

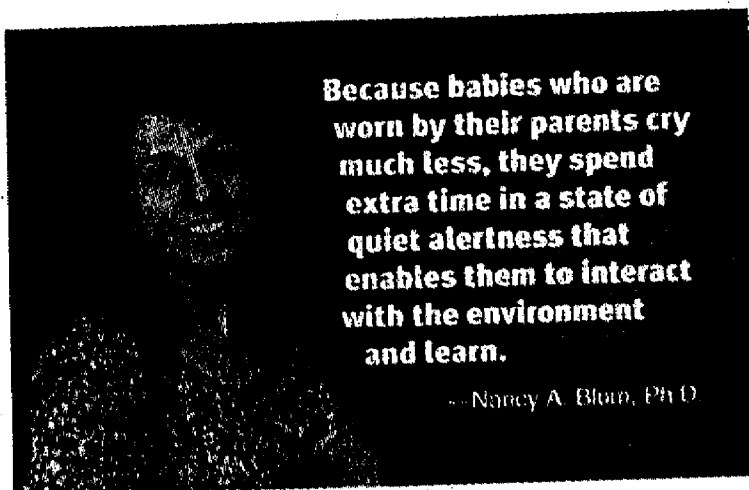
Studies suggesting that sleepsharing is dangerous have been criticized for their poor methodologies. When used in conjunction with breastfeeding in nonsmoking households, sleepsharing reduces the chances of SIDS. In Japan, which exhibits the lowest SIDS rates in the world, mother-infant sleepsharing is the norm. Safety guidelines include avoiding sleepsharing when a parent smokes, drinks, or takes drugs; or where there is a waterbed, very soft mattress, or much fluffy bedding.

5. Gentle Discipline

The psychological literature clearly concludes that spanking is not effective in improving behavior in the long term. Furthermore, the use of harsh discipline has many disadvantages, including providing a model for a violent approach to conflict situations, increasing aggression in the child, failing to teach problem-solving, and training the child to fear, rather than respect and trust, those in authority. The AAP discourages the use of spanking.

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out wall. By the time mother reaches the baby, baby is wide awake and upset, mother is wide awake and upset. If, however, the baby is sleeping next to mother and they have their sleep cycles in sync, most mothers and babies can quickly resettle without either member of the sleepsharing pair fully awakening."

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