

Mother/Baby Bonding



A professional postpartum doula is not in the business of baby snuggles, though it can be an occasional job perk. A professional doula is in the business of supporting families. As postpartum doulas we provide unique professional support to new families as we actively encourage and facilitate healthy bonding. Unlike baby nurses, nannies, or other household support, we care for families with a goal of facilitating bonding, confidence, and overall family wellness.

As a professional it is important that our interactions with a family do not interfere with the bonding process. Many things come into play with bonding such as the birth experience, infant feeding, infant care styles, mental health and wellness, medical conditions, and more. Unlike infant care providers, our sole responsibility is not in caring for the baby in place of their parents, but rather caring for parents so they can care for their babies. . Sometimes caring for a new mother means providing infant care while she rests, but this is done for shorter periods of time and in a way that does not interfere with bonding.

Normal physiological birth and breastfeeding aid in the bonding experience due to the complex hormones involved, but we also know that bonding can occur even in the absence of these things. Following S.U.P.P.O.R.T., it is important to educate families about those benefits while also respecting their decisions and offering understanding for their circumstances.

Things that can support the mother while facilitating bonding:

- Do not ask to hold the baby simply for enjoyment. As doulas we hold and provide infant care

only when it supports the mother to rest, eat, practice self-care, etc. It is important that baby be with his mother or another parent as often as possible and desired.

- Support the breastfeeding relationship.
- Encourage skin-to-skin contact of mother and baby and with his father.
- Provide education about safe co-sleeping, babywearing and other parenting options that can aid in bonding.
- Provide household organization so the mother feels she can sit and be with her baby. Help the mother in developing a care or support plan for the home in between visits.
- Encourage parents to respond to their baby's cues, cries, and needs as this helps her to feel more secure and aids in bonding
- Remind the mother and her partner that it is okay to limit visitors and refrain from passing their baby to many guests. This is beneficial for protecting newborns from illness but also facilitates more time for bonding with the baby's parents.
- Hold a safe space for the mother to talk with you. It is not unusual for it to take time for parents to bond with their infants. Some feel an instant connection while others need time to foster a relationship. Neither are right or wrong; they are simply different. If the mother expresses concerns, reassure her that just like a relationship with an older child or adult, the relationship with a new baby can take time and investment. Encourage her to spend time relaxing and enjoying her baby.
- If the mother has a high needs infant, encourage her to seek extra support and spend time practicing self-care. It can be difficult to bond with a baby that requires a lot of care. Reassure her that she is a great parent and that her baby is simply adjusting to life outside the womb. Remind her that her baby is not crying in response to her or a lack of bond, but because crying is a baby's only form of communication.

More information about bonding:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2379718/?page=1>

http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/medicalcenter/healthtips/20100114_infant-bonding.html

<http://www.attachmentparenting.org/support/articles/bonding>

Obstacles to Bonding

Unfortunately, for some mother baby pairs, circumstances can create obstacles to bonding. Certainly obstacles can be overcome, but in these situations support is crucial. Relationships, including the maternal infant one, can grow and improve, but the sooner these obstacles are overcome the better it is for the pair. Support during these obstacles can have positive lifelong impacts.

NICU

Support during and after a NICU stay is vital to mental wellness and bonding. As professional doulas, we can come along side families during this difficult time to provide extra support to help facilitate healing, and processing the experience and bonding. While it might seem unusual for NICU support to be in the bonding section, bonding is easily impacted by a NICU stay. General support of for the mother helps establish bonding during a difficult time.

We are biologically wired to desire closeness with our infants. Being separated is extremely difficult for new mothers. The added worry of the baby's health can be extremely taxing on a new mother. Each mother will have unique needs and as you become acquainted with her, she will feel safe to communicate those needs to you. Here is a brief list of ways a NICU mother may feel supported:

- Provide practical support such as errands and light household organization so the mother can focus on her baby.
- If the mother desires, visit with her at the NICU and provide support and education there.
- Provide tips and assistance with pumping.
- Be a good listener, allow her to chat about her worries and concerns, birth experience, and NICU experience.
- Educate about the benefits of mother-baby skin-to-skin contact.
- Remind her that she is her baby's advocate and that she can feel safe to express any concerns she has to you. Remind her that she and the NICU staff have the same goal, that of a healthy baby.
- Let her know she still plays an important role in her infants care despite how much the NICU staff cares for the baby. Whether it is pumping, visiting, skin-to-skin, or providing basic care for her baby, everything she does is extremely important.
- Suggest that she be in contact with the hospital's social workers as they can assist her in many ways.
- Show genuine interest in the well-being of her baby and excitement over such things as weight gain and milestones reached. Provide reassurance during times of set-backs. Often the NICU stay is two-steps forward and one-step back in regards to discharge depending on the baby's health.
- Engage with the father and encourage him to visit and bond with his baby. A supportive father is a long-term support to his wife/partner.

Mother Baby Skin-to-Skin contact

A woman and her baby have been one biological unit during the entire time of gestation. During that time the baby grows in a warm environment, surrounded by sounds of her mother's voice and also the sounds of her mother's heartbeat and blood pumping through blood vessels. These sounds are very comforting to the baby. In addition the baby is receiving nourishment through the umbilical cords.

At the moment of birth, the baby emerges into a different world. He must now breathe on his own and breast or bottle feed. There are now sounds from a new environment. He can see the outside world about twelve inches at birth and over the months his vision becomes clearer at greater distances.

Making the transition from the inside world of the womb to the outside world, needs to be as soothing as possible. When the baby is held skin-to-skin, she hears her mother's heartbeat, a familiar sound from inside the womb. The feeling of having skin-to-skin contact is soothing to the developing brain, and especially the limbic or emotional brain, and the baby can feel safe and secure.

As a postpartum doula, it is important to encourage skin-to-skin contact as much as possible. The baby is likely to cry less, feed better, and sleep more. This increases the bonding experience with his mother and she in turn feels delight and love.

Remember that much is happening that cannot be seen in terms of the hormones within that create our moods which impact our experiences. When very young babies feel constant skin-to-skin contact they feel less stress and are more open to experiencing the new world around them.

Preparing for a Premie to Come Home

Bringing a new baby home can be exciting and also nerve racking, but adding prematurity to the mix can take those feelings to a whole new level. Some parents feel under qualified to care for their baby after watching well trained NICU staff provide the majority of care. Providing practical and emotional support during this time can be crucial in building the parents' confidence. When parents feel confident in their ability to care for their babies, they are more relaxed and better able to focus on bonding. Here are a few tips to support parents as they prepare for bringing their baby home.

- Help them with organizing baby items, sleep space, and so on. In some situations the baby may arrive before they have had a chance to prepare the nursery or organize their items.
- Support them in following their discharge instructions and plans.
- Many doctors recommend that preemies stay home and that visitors are limited for awhile, especially during cold and flu seasons. Encourage parents to follow through and limit visitors.
- Suggest they place a sign near the entrance of their home requesting everyone wash their hands upon entering.
- There are often multiple doctor visits and appointments once a baby is discharged from the NICU. Accompany families to visits if they want extra support and assistance.

- Build their confidence. Remind them they are the parents, not the NICU staff. Praise their efforts and kindly support and assist when needed.
- Let them know that just like in any new relationship, it takes time to get to know each other. It takes time for all mothers to learn to read their baby's cues. Reassure them that it is okay if their baby cries. Educate them on infant soothing techniques.
- Some preemies overstimulate easily. Dim lighting and white noise can really help an overstimulated baby.
- Some preemies are sensitive to touch. Remind parents that this can be a normal thing for preemies and not to take it personally or believe it is a lack of bonding.
- Be sure the parents have contact information for early intervention services.

The NICU journey can be extremely taxing on families. While it may seem over once the baby comes home, it is just another step in the journey of raising a preemie. Some parents might need extra emotional support while others may just need some practical help. As you develop a relationship with the family, you will better understand how to help them.

Previous Loss

Unfortunately, around one in four women will experience a miscarriage and some women also experience stillbirth or infant loss. These past experiences can impact bonding with a new baby for a variety of reasons. If a mother is really struggling, encourage her to reach out to a professional counselor familiar with reproductive loss. It is important to practice active listening when she needs to talk. Be a safe place for her to express grief or concerns. Remind her that being sad or missing another child is not a reflection of her love and her ability to bond with her baby.

Mother Baby Separation

Most of this is covered by the NICU section but occasionally the mother-baby separation occurs in other situations. If the mother experiences health complications and is not discharged with her baby, or if the mother is readmitted without her baby, separation may occur. Whenever possible, families should work with care providers to limit separation. Depending on the facility, they might allow the baby to be present 24/7 as long as another adult is present. Some facilities will even allow the mother to stay or be readmitted to Labor and Delivery so her baby can stay with her. In these situations, in addition to the tips in the NICU section, the following might be helpful:

- Reassure the mother about the importance of self-care. Part of caring for her baby is having the mother to be healthy..
- Encourage the mother to have an open dialogue with her providers to find ways to limit separation.
- Be a safe place for the mother to discuss her disappointments, frustrations, and concerns.

- Once she and the baby are together again, encourage her to spend time resting with her baby giving skin-to-skin contact.
- Encourage her to get extra help once she comes home, to facilitate the time to rest and bond with her baby.

Whether our clients experience a simple transition into parenthood or a difficult one, it is our role to support them and facilitate bonding. Always remember S.U.P.P.O.R.T. and you should find you are able to provide a professional level of service and support.

Application and Understanding

1. Name five ways you can help a new mother bond with her baby.
2. Name five obstacles that may interfere with bonding of a mother and her baby.
3. What concerns might a new mother have whose baby is just coming home from the NICU?
4. Describe in a short paragraph your dialogue with a new mother about the importance of mother/baby skin-to-skin contact.