

BONDING: A BRILLIANT BRAIN BUILDER

The importance of supporting parents to bond with their child from the earliest years

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- It has long been acknowledged that children benefit from a strong bond with their parents. Accumulating evidence now shows positive parenting approaches strongly influence children's brain development, enabling them to build skills necessary for lifelong wellbeing, with additional benefits to society as a whole. Specific policy and awareness-raising actions are critically needed to support parents in caring for children.
- The early years of life, especially from conception to the age of two, are immensely important for brain development. The basic aspects of brain function are laid down and serve as a foundation for further brain circuitry. This includes executive functions, a set of skills that help us pay attention, plan, work towards goals and control impulsive behaviour. They are important in achieving success in school and work, and maintaining good relationships with others. Therefore, early life brain development is critical to lifelong wellbeing and success.
- In order to thrive, children need a secure relationship with their parents (or primary caregivers). Emotional security helps enhance executive functions and is associated with improved socioemotional development, cognitive coping skills and psychological resilience. Children who do not experience strong bonding are at greater risk of a wide range of poorer health outcomes in adulthood, including poorer executive functions, psychosocial problems, depression and other mental health problems.
- Strong parent-child bonds are facilitated by parenting that is supportive, responsive and sensitive. Interactions should be frequent and meaningful. Skin-to-skin contact after birth helps stimulate responses in both parent and child that promote bonding. During infancy, 'serve-and-return' activities that engage parent and child in back-and-forth exchanges help strengthen their bond. In early childhood, serve-and-return style book reading strengthens bonding, and improves literacy skills and socioemotional development.
- Brain imaging reveals differences in brain structure, connectivity and/or activity among children exposed to emotional neglect or even simply less sensitive parenting.
- Parent-child bonding is not solely an individual endeavour. It also depends on the family/whānau context, such as stability of the home environment and parental mental wellbeing, and broader factors such as socioeconomic status and supportive government policies.
- Parents' mental wellbeing is critical. Bonding may be adversely affected by depression during pregnancy and after birth. Women who experienced childhood emotional neglect are at greater risk of prenatal depression, thus perpetuating a vicious intergenerational cycle.
- Fathers play a critical role in their child's development. Stronger father-child bonds are associated with improved outcomes in areas such as cognition, language and socioemotional development. However, many fathers wish to engage in early life bonding but cannot due to a lack of structural support such as adequate paternal leave.
- Screen time tends to substitute for interactive activities between parent and child, and should therefore be monitored.
- The following actions deserve special consideration: improved paid parental leave, monitoring screen time of parents and young children, raising awareness of the importance of executive functions and how bonding cultivates them, promoting serve-and-return interactions between parent and child, supporting parental mental wellbeing, and promoting paternal involvement.

To read the full evidence brief, visit informedfutures.org/bonding