

Daddy time!

Hints on making a strong connection with your baby

As the dad, you may never share the same bond that a mother shares with her baby, but the bond between a baby and his father is just as important.



Babies Need Their Daddy When fathers are consistently and positively involved in their child's life, their child does better emotionally, physically, and cognitively. Studies show that babies with involved dads feel more secure when their needs are met by *both* parents. Later in life, these children have more confidence, a stronger sense of who they are, tend to do better in school, and have a host of other positive characteristics. *Dads may be involved in their child's life in somewhat different ways than moms, but the important thing is that dads get (and stay) involved.*

What to Do It's normal for fathers (and mothers) to feel unsure of how to take care of their new babies. If you have never been around babies before, they can seem fragile and scary. Give yourself time to learn how to care for your infant. Watch what others do, ask questions, ask for suggestions, and discover what works best for you. This is a very good time to call on friends and family for support, assistance, or simply a listening ear. Seek the support and guidance of other new or experienced dads. *Good fathering, like good mothering, takes time and practice.* Here are a few quick tips to get you started:

- **Listen to your baby.** Your baby's cries and coos are how she says I'm hungry, hurting, sleepy, lonely, soiled, etc. By spending time with and caring for your baby, you will learn what your baby needs and how she communicates it. Respond to her needs quickly. And don't worry, you can't spoil baby by responding too fast.
- **Gently hold your baby close.** Babies love to be held, and feel most comforted when held close. If you are not sure how to hold baby, don't be afraid to ask someone to show you how. During this first month, your baby can only see things about 8-12 inches away. Babies love to look at human faces, so remember to hold your baby close enough to see you. Pick up your baby as much as possible, remembering to support baby's head to protect his growing brain. Holding your baby often will help you connect with your baby and help him learn to feel safe with you.
- **Stay calm and relaxed around your baby.** Like everything else, with time you will discover what holding and comforting techniques work best for your baby. Remember, *never* shake a baby. Shaking a baby can cause brain damage, injuries, and even death.
- **Nurture your baby.** If your partner has chosen to breast-feed, you may feel a bit left out during feeding times. Once the mother and baby are comfortable breast-feeding, your partner may start pumping milk. This may make it possible for you to share in the feeding of your baby. However, even if you do not feed your baby, there are many other nurturing activities you can engage in. Try to take time each day to rock and hold your baby. Learn to comfort your baby when she is upset, change her diaper when it is soiled, and regularly give her a bath.
- **Talk softly to your baby.** When holding, changing, or feeding your baby, speak or sing in a calm voice using a higher pitch than you normally use. This is called speaking in Motherese. Babies prefer this higher pitched sound, and it helps them learn early communication skills. Also, talking to your baby regularly will help him recognize and feel comfortable with you. He will be more receptive to what you are doing. This is a great time for him to start hearing and learning new words.

- **Let your baby know what's happening.** When interacting with your baby, tell her what you are doing ("Let's put your arm through the sleeve.") or where you are going ("Up you go on the changing table.") or what is happening next ("Time for bath. Let's get the water ready."). Talking to your baby when you are feeding, changing, bathing, or simply lying down on the floor with her helps her understand, feel safe with, and predict what is happening in her daily routine.

- **Don't worry too much about discipline at this point.** All parents want their children to grow up to be respectful and well behaved. Many parents are concerned that their baby will become spoiled if the parents respond to every cry at this age. Relax! The most important thing for your baby to learn at this age is that he can trust his caregivers to be there when he is cold, hungry, wet, or just bored. The self-discipline you teach your child later will be much more effective if you focus now on building a consistent, caring relationship.



Supporting Your Partner Whether you are married or not, being there for your baby's mother is another important way of being an involved dad. As she deals with this emotionally and physically demanding transition, she will need your support and understanding. After the birth, be prepared to feel left out at times as she focuses most of her energy and attention on herself and your new baby. Her behaviors are not a rejection of you. To help her during this time, pick up more of the house work or anything else you can think of that will allow your partner to focus on herself and your baby. If you have other children, use this time to enhance your connection with them. Attending to their needs will not only help your partner, but also help diffuse sibling rivalry. Remember, the better your partner's needs are met, the better your baby's needs will be met.

Balancing Work and Family Time For many fathers, the birth of a new child gives new meaning and importance to paid work. The growing needs of a child create added costs and financial concerns for all parents. While fulfilling your financial commitment to your child, be careful that you do not fall in the trap of retreating into your work. If possible, take paternity leave sometime during your baby's first year. Most new fathers have access to some form of leave, but only a small percentage actually take advantage of it. If paternity leave is not an option, be sure to carve out enough time each day to spend with your baby. Mom will appreciate the support, and baby will benefit from the attention.

The Bottom Line Being a father may be the most emotionally rewarding experience in your life. Take time to enjoy these feelings, and take an active and positive role in the care of your baby. Have fun discovering creative ways to interact and connect with your baby. The time you spend with your baby now will make you a more effective parent in the future.

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For more information, contact your FACS Cooperative Extension Agent at 1-800-ASK-UGA1 (275-8421) or visit: www.gafamilies.org for more helpful resources on parenting your growing child.

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