

## ARTICLE

### Hold Me Close

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Did you know that holding babies and comforting them when they cry or feel distressed, particularly during the first 6 months, is related to their feeling more secure and confident? And these benefits last into toddlerhood and early childhood. During these early months, you cannot spoil a baby when you quickly pick them up and hold them. Responding in this way promotes a baby feeling safe and meets their needs. When a baby communicates the need to be held or needs a nurturing touch and a caregiver consistently responds with sensitivity and warmth, a trusting and secure relationship develops.

Providing physical and emotional closeness is so important for young children's development. Infants' primary sense is touch and this is why infants often seek physical contact. Being held can help calm an infant and holding newborns can help them sleep better. In a recent review of studies of infants born premature, skin-to-skin contact was found to be very important in reducing infant stress, increasing weight gain, boosting their immune system, regulating body temperature, and supporting healthy brain development. Skin-to-skin contact is having an infant dressed only in a diaper and then placing the infant on the caregiver's bare chest. It is important to make sure the baby can breathe during skin-to-skin contact. Be sure that the baby's mouth and nose are uncovered and that their head is higher than their feet. Holding an infant in this way can provide a sense of calmness as the infant listens to the caregiver's heartbeat.

The benefits of this skin-to-skin contact can happen with any close caregiver. In some studies, infants held this way experienced reduced levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and reduced rates of infections and readmissions to the hospital. There are also benefits for the caregiver. Holding an infant with skin-to-skin contact can lessen the stress of the caregiver and increase the hormone oxytocin, often referred to as the bonding hormone that promotes love and affection.

Holding an infant close in this way can also support increased expression of breast milk and promote bonding during breastfeeding. Breast milk has antibodies that fight germs and It is

also beneficial to hold babies if bottle-feeding. This way the baby experiences both touch and eye contact, an important interaction for developing social relationships and language skills.

This does not mean that you have to hold a baby all of the time. You can also provide some nurturing physical contact during bathing, getting dressed, diapering, and reading stories. These are all opportunities to provide both emotional and physical nurturance.

So, when your baby communicates that they want to be held, take the time to snuggle up and hold them close.

#### **References:**

Norholt, H. (2020). Revisiting the roots of attachment: A review of the biological and psychological effects of maternal skin-to-skin contact and carrying of full-term infants. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 60, 101441, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infbeh.2020.101441>.

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#### **Resources:**

- CDC: Breastfeeding is the natural way to feed your baby, but it can be challenging. If you need help, you can call the National Breastfeeding Helpline at 800-994-9662. You can also call your local WIC Program to see if you qualify for breastfeeding support by health professionals as well as peer counselors.
- <https://www.breastmilkcounts.com/breastfeeding-101/skin-to-skin/>