

Emotions

An overview

To feel is to be alive

Feeling emotions is a sense as important to us as vision, hearing or touch. There is a prevalent school of thought, particularly in 'developed' Western countries, that language and the ability to reason are far more important than the ability to feel. But developments in neuroscience and biology have revealed just how central – and important – emotional feelings are: right from the beginning of life, when we are in the womb.

Emotions are signals, telling the brain and body how to act so that we will survive and thrive. For your baby, emotions are his primary driving force and help him to express his needs, both with physical signs (a flushed face, for instance) and through crying, or gurgling, etc. For an adult, emotions remain strong, but the rational brain is also functional; so that emotional feelings may be put into context and considered. Your baby does not have this ability: he expresses himself openly and spontaneously, according to how he feels. But because he is physically undeveloped, he needs another person – preferably a loving parent - to meet his needs, and to help him learn how to deal with his strong feelings.

The importance of relationship

Recent understandings about brain development show that the key to feeling safe, and to optimal growth in body and brain, is to be in relationship. It's not by accident that babies are so dependent – they need a parent, and wider community, for more than just food and warmth. It is important for a young human being to feel listened to and understood: for brain regulation and growth and for the development of a sense of self, as he is learning how to interact with others. The urge to bond is one of the 7 fundamental emotional drives.

It's all about feeling: it's not about what is said, or even what is done; what your baby experiences emotionally informs what he learns. Your baby needs to feel loved: for who he is, rather than for what he does.

Your baby triggers bonding hormones in your body while you are pregnant; after birth, he will know your smell, he seeks out your eyes and makes eye contact, he will recognise your face within hours, and he will attempt to keep you with him, either by calm, quiet temptation, or with loud wails of protest. All these activities trigger your urge to bond. When you feel connected, you and he experience activity in the emotional area of your brains and an increase in the flow of bonding hormones including oxytocin. There is a rich interplay between brain, hormones, and the power of touch, which itself triggers genes that encourage healthy growth and the deepening of bonding.

Not all mothers (or fathers) experience the drive to bond, or they may feel it weakly or intermittently. There are many factors that come into play, ranging from a parent's own early life bonding experiences to current health issues or difficulties in adult relationships. We explore bonding in depth on a babiesknow weekend course and discuss the many ways that secure bonding can be encouraged.

Separation distress

When your baby feels alone for too long, he goes into a state of separation distress - one of the 7 fundamental emotional drives. This important emotion causes him to cry so that he can be connected once again.

Babies who are in a prolonged state of separation distress show a wide range of negative effects; it's very challenging for a baby to deal with such an intense and extended emotion. The brain, in an attempt to cope and maintain equilibrium, triggers changes throughout body and brain that lead to a kind of 'shut-down'. The measurable effects include disruption of temperature regulation, an increase in pain sensations, and a rise of stress hormones by up to 10 times their normal levels, a compromised immune system and disruption of normal sleep. This is also known as 'protest-despair' - the response that's very common when a baby is left to cry for too long.

Prolonged or repeated separation distress can affect the way cells in the brain connect to one another: the patterning of neural networks that relate to the experience of separation or being alone. The pattern that is laid down in infancy tends to persist right into adulthood. If a baby experiences extreme or repeated stress, neural networks that run via the amygdala (the seat of fear), function in a way that inclines a baby to reach a state of high anxiety more rapidly than normal. There is also a reduced ability to trust and to feel safe.

At the same time, high levels of exposure to stress hormones including cortisol and adrenalin predispose body cells (including cells in the brain, the gut, the muscles and so on) to react quickly to stress in the future. In adulthood, the patterns of neural networking, and the sensitivity of body cells, persist. The grown-up baby may be susceptible to anxiety.

You and your big feelings

On a Babiesknow weekend we look at each of the emotional drives in detail. These are the 7 emotional drives that govern behavior. We discuss simple, practical ways to reduce separation distress, even if your baby is unwell and needs special care. We explore ways to make good use of the urge to bond, to acknowledge fears, and to make time for playfulness – for you and your baby if you have one.

We also take you on a journey into your past: reviewing how the drives affect you today, and how you experienced them as a child, is a powerful way to understand yourself, and make informed choices as you follow your own unique path through life.

Making repair

Although patterns from infancy do tend to persist, the brain is also 'plastic': this means it can change. New cells grow, and patterns of thought, behavior and reaction can alter. Most powerfully, change tends to come about in relationships. This is because between two people, there is always limbic resonance – a phrase used to describe the impact on the brain when there is emotional resonance, or any kind of relationship, between two people.

If your early emotional experiences were traumatic, it is never too late to make repair. The Babiesknow team will guide you according to your personal needs; it may be best for you to spend time with your partner, with your mother, or with an objective, professional counselor. You may even find that your baby is one of your greatest teachers.

If your baby has had traumatic early experiences, for instance with a difficult birth or illness or separation after birth, it is similarly possible to make repair, often simply with loving honesty, a willingness on your part to acknowledge your baby's feelings, and to listen. On Babiesknow courses we spend time modeling conversations with babies and children, with an emphasis on age-appropriate language: how to talk to a baby even when the subject matter is difficult, and the incredibly positive impact of talking, honestly, about a difficult experience. Babies know when things are difficult; and they respond well when they are told what is happening.

For more, please come to one of our courses.