

# Bonding with your children



## It's a stressful time — everyone is feeling it.

But, when you or your children feel like throwing a dummy spat, try to do the opposite and offer a hug instead. Why?

Humans are 'bonders', meaning we're social creatures. We have an incredible system that integrates, learns and adapts to our surroundings. It enables us to create and solidify relationships with those in our lives we feel will benefit our health. Evolutionary speaking, humans had better chances at survival when they were in groups, so the body developed a system rewarding them for bonding with others.

"...tending or nurturing oneself and offspring as well as befriending others and expanding and maintaining social networks is advantageous. Social isolation on the other hand, is largely a predictor of disease and poor quality of life."

Socialising by forming bonds with others is a natural instinct that dominates a lot of our behaviour and has huge effects on our health. Not surprisingly, with the Coronavirus pandemic lessening our contact with others, we need to nurture the relationships within our household, especially the ones we have with our children.

## Our first and most important 'bonding' experience happens as kids.

Babies and their parents (especially the mother) form an automatic and lifelong bond, resulting from a mixture of 'bonding hormones', developed for the baby's survival. Almost immediately, a mother's biological makeup is 'imprinted' on her newborn baby, establishing trust and a feeling of 'safety' (when paired with a calm, nurturing environment) every time her baby can smell her, hear her voice and feel her touch.

Parents who engage with their newborns get to experience rushes of these 'bonding hormones', creating a connection which, chemically, is very hard to replicate.

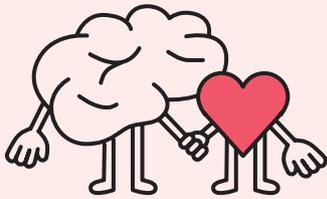
These hormones (Oxytocin, Vasopressin, Prolactin, Opioids, Norepinephrine and Pheromones) reward parents by feeling good when they look after their baby (e.g. breastfeeding, nursing, interacting and even when parents live together). Babies are rewarded for essentially keeping themselves alive (e.g. feel-good hormones are released when they are being fed and held close).



## Oxytocin's role in bonding

One of the most commonly researched 'bonding' hormones is Oxytocin. It's flooded into a mother's bloodstream during childbirth, which moves the baby into place in the uterus by intensifying contractions, dilates the cervix for birth and alongside other hormones, promotes breastfeeding. But its role in the human body extends far beyond childbirth experiences.

Oxytocin has also been linked to promoted generosity, inducing sleep, triggering protective instincts, improved social skills, stress relieving, solidifying relationships and even elevating pain thresholds. Oxytocin 'reaches several important areas in the central nervous system (CNS), which are involved in the regulation of social interactive behaviours, fear, aggression, perception of pain, calm, wellbeing and stress reactions'. See the study [here](#).



Oxytocin works to calm us down by lowering blood pressure, reducing heart rate and aids in balancing out cortisol (a stress hormone) simply through its release.

Its release can be triggered by sounds, smells and warmth (temperature) but one of the more powerful ways is through touch (the warm fuzzy feeling you get when you hold your baby, are hugged by a loved one or play with your dog or very affectionate cat). And it's a powerful hormone when it comes to stress.

## Less stress, better brain

Research has shown the calmer kids are, the better they are at school and in the playground. When kids are living free of prolonged stress (internal and external), their brains can focus on building and strengthening essential neural connections.

We've all been known to suffer from bad memory or being unable to multitask when under pressure and, as adults, we've learnt certain ways to deal with it. Kids haven't quite discovered healthy ways to manage on their own. Noticing when our little ones are emotional, sensitive or having behavioural outbursts can be signs they're experiencing stress. A loved one's caring touch or voice can sometimes be enough to trigger those hormones and calm them down.

## But not all stress is bad

Stress is actually a very normal experience because, as we all know now more than ever, life is unpredictable. Remember when your partner first introduced you to their friends or parents? Many social settings release Cortisol into our bloodstream, which is known for triggering the 'flight or fight' response — not so great if we're trying to impress the in-laws.

Luckily, when the primary goal is to socialise, Oxytocin is also released to help regulate that stress response, enabling us to engage, make conversation and follow along with that hilarious dad joke.

## Experiencing a little stress can be better in the long-term.

Research has shown that, when kids are exposed to a moderate amount of adversity, it can lead to better handling of stress later on in life. By establishing a safe environment where kids can engage in trial-and-error (trying and failing) behaviour, you can encourage their self-esteem, resilience, sense of accomplishment and social skills. It's all to do with the body learning how to self-regulate hormones and find balance (homeostasis).

By practicing how to take a step back as parents (although incredibly hard to do sometimes), you're giving their bodies the much-needed practice to be emotionally autonomous for life. Similarly, creating a safe home environment, when the world appears to be spinning off its axis, will go a long way in stabilising your children at this time and preparing them for anything that may occur in the future.

## But they still need you

Even if they don't know how to ask for it yet. Having your attention and care is actually what your little ones crave but it takes some time of trial-and-error to figure out when they need it and how to ask for help. By reaffirming we are always there for them when they're going through this process of learning and adjustment to a scary situation, we can achieve a lifetime of health and happiness.

We think we have all the time in the world with our kids but, before we know it, they're buying their first car! In this day and age where it seems quality time is becoming more precious, we often forget how good it feels. The moments when we really connect with our loved ones are the ones we all remember and pass on to others

## What you can do while stuck at home

### Getting your Oxytocin going

Your little ones are learning how to be happy from you, so try to look after you. Having like-minded people who also understand your current experiences can work wonders for your health and overall wellbeing. Doing something creative or physical are great Oxytocin-boosting activities.

### Scheduled time to hang out

Setting aside about 20 minutes of your attention daily for your children (we know it's difficult some days but it helps!) makes them less likely to engage in 'attention-seeking' behaviour such as yelling or throwing insults. Spending time with them is actually the 'reward' they crave and it works better than food, games (apps) or toys.

Giving your children your undivided attention, phone away, signals to them they're important. It will also teach your little ones to imitate that behaviour in their social life as well.

### Have chill-out time

Kids are increasingly stimulated these days by food, school, activities, toys, TV, grocery shopping after school and choice (e.g. do you want this for dinner or that for dinner?).

“Kids need tons of down-time to balance their up-time,” says Kim John Payne, M.ED, consultant, author, researcher and educator in child behaviour. “When we build in plenty of quiet time, playtime and rest time, children’s behaviour often improves dramatically.”

Effective down-time could be finger-painting, cooking, gardening and reading a silly book to them (especially great before bed, helping them disengage and unwind).

### Praise them

Positive reinforcement works wonders. Whether they’ve picked up their wet towel, or shared something with a friend or sibling, let them know. They want your attention, and positive reinforcement receives better results than negative.

To get more desired behaviour, you can praise them even when they’re doing their designated chores. We also love this tip from [Parenting](#):

“Gossip about your kids. Fact: What we overhear is far more potent than what we are told directly. Make praise more effective by letting your child ‘catch’ you whispering a compliment about them to Grandma, Dad or even their teddy.”

### Set family expectations

Kids love pushing boundaries but they need to know what they are and what’s expected of them. A great way to remind kids of their behaviour is establishing family ‘rules’. The [Raising Children Network](#) has put together a fantastic guide to doing this. These can be done with the whole family, and kids as young as three years of age can join in.

Creating family rules helps your little ones feel included and have a sense of autonomy, while, instilling a sense of importance in the family.

As you can no doubt see, the Coronavirus shutdown offers an invaluable opportunity to look at what’s happening within your family and undertake some bonding that may, otherwise, have got lost in the activities of daily life. Think of this as your chance to set things right when it comes to strengthening your family ties.

**Attention is a skill that needs to be taught. Use TALi DETECT to assess attention skills and TALi TRAIN to strengthen attention skills in your children.**