



OXYTOCIN PARENTING

WOMB THROUGH THE
TERRIBLE TWOS

Susan Kuchinskas and Bryan Post

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Susan Kuchinskas

&

Bryan Post



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B. Bryan Post
Published by Fear to Love Press, Millsap,
Texas
www.bryanpost.com

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Part 1

Introduction

"The love we grew up with was rarely actual love. It was generally based in fear." -- Bryan Post
This is a shocking and transgressive statement. It seems to negate all the things our parents did for us -- as well as all the things we do to take care of our own kids.

Unfortunately, it's the simple truth.

Cutting-edge research in brain science lets us understand the molecular basis of emotions and how they play out in the brain. When you study emotion at this level, you can see that there are basically only two emotions: fear and love.

At this level, they are very simple: Fear is a response to stress, while love is the state of balance and connection in the absence of stress. Fear is the result of **cortisol** racing through your body and tweaking your brain's fight-or-flight circuits; love is the result of **oxytocin** calming your body and flooding your brain's love and connection center.

When we look at it this way, we can see how, so many times, we relate to our children from a place of stress. Because children, with their undeveloped nervous systems, rely on their parents to help them calm down and stabilize their own emotions, it's inevitable that a stressed-out parent will create stressful relationships in the family.

This book will show you how to parent from a place of real, physiological and emotional love.

What Is Oxytocin Parenting?

Oxytocin Parenting is an approach that focuses on helping your child's brain to develop a strong oxytocin response, that is, the ability to love and trust appropriately.

There are four elements of Oxytocin Parenting:

Relationship: Parent from a place of calm and connection. We're social mammals who need skin-to-skin contact and emotional connection at every age. Through a process called co-regulation, which we'll explain in detail later, you teach your child learn to cope with stress and to connect with love through your own behavior. This approach may require you to do some work building up your own coping and connection skills. When you're angry, stressed out or depressed, for example, it's really hard to be open to your child's needs.

Influence: Show, don't tell. Instead of trying to change your child's behavior by telling him what you want him to do, guide him through your own actions. This guidance includes modeling behavior such as getting up on time or saying thank you, as well as letting him watch you respond to stress calmly.

Understanding: Parent the stage, not the age. When we're stressed, we regress to an earlier stage of emotional or cognitive development. This is especially true for children. When you understand your child's developmental path, you can learn to give your child what he needs right now, not what you think he needs based on his physical age.

Flexibility: Give what's needed in the way it can be received. Your child's unique communication style may make it easier for her to take in information or emotional meaning in some ways more than others. Moreover, what works with your child on Tuesday may get the opposite response on Wednesday. Yes, this is frustrating. But the ability to alter your communication and action until you connect is essential.

As we look at the stages of your child's development, we'll show you how to use these concepts promote healthy relationship and positive behavior.

Oxytocin Parenting means making choices that increase your child's opportunities to learn to connect -- however you can, whenever you can, as much as you are capable of.

Chapter 1

Oxytocin and Emotion

What Is Oxytocin?

To understand love is to understand the oxytocin response. Oxytocin is truly a miracle molecule. As the body's chemical of rest, relaxation and balance, it does all sorts of wonderful and important things. We'll talk more about those later in this book. But the key thing you need to understand for healthy, happy parenting is that oxytocin is responsible for love.

That's right. Oxytocin acting in your brain and your body creates the experience we know as love. That's love in all its dimensions: friendship, the love between parent and child, and the love between you and your mate. It's also responsible for most of the other positive feelings we have for other people, from the quick exchange of smiles with a stranger you pass, to admiration for a co-worker, to the way you trust your car mechanic not to rip you off.

Oxytocin does all this -- and more -- in two ways. First, it calms the brain's fear center. Then, it activates the brain's social center, making you feel good about interacting with someone.

Calming the fear center is crucial. Fear is one of our strongest survival mechanisms, helping us survive physical danger. But it's usually not the best reaction to social situations. When you're anxious or afraid, you can't see things clearly. You may see someone as threatening when he has no intention of harming you. You're on guard and shut down, as fear chemicals race through your bloodstream.

Oxytocin counteracts the fear chemicals, relaxing you and making you able to see other people as potentially friendly and trustworthy. At the same time, when it activates the brain's social center, it actually makes you desire social contact.

A healthy brain releases oxytocin in response to positive social cues. For example, when a mother cuddles her child, both of their brains should release oxytocin. The oxytocin travels into their bloodstreams, where it relaxes them and encourages cellular repair. It also enters the parts of their brain that process social information, making them feel secure and loving.

Humans are hard-wired to not only enjoy but to need to be close to other humans. Scientists think this is because, in the brains of highly social mammals -- including monkeys, wolves, many birds and humans -- the social centers are highly sensitive to both oxytocin and dopamine, the chemical of reward-seeking and pleasure. This combination makes socializing very pleasurable and calming. When we're close to people we trust, the interaction of oxytocin and dopamine leads to us feeling happy and secure.

But there is one very big IF in all this. When we say that humans are hard-wired to connect, we mean that our brains have this potential. But the desire for social interaction and the brain's ability to release oxytocin are not automatic. This is a learned response, and it can fail to develop or its development can be thwarted.

The Bodymind

Please let us introduce you to a concept that explains so many behavioral issues: the **bodymind**. The term was coined by Candace Pert, the molecular biologist and neuroscientist, author of the *Molecules of Emotions* and featured in the movie *What the Bleep Do We Know!* Pert was a pioneer in research exploring the physiology of emotion. Scientists now know that what we think of as emotions are really physiological states that encompass all of the body -- including the mind. Physical pain affects the emotions, while the pain of, for example, losing someone you love changes your physical state.

In fact, the chemicals of emotion -- including oxytocin, the chemical of love, and cortisol, the chemical of fear -- equally affect the brain, nervous system and internal organs.

What's more, some of these changes may be very long-lasting. For example, if a child experiences a trauma, its effects may be apparent years later in his physical development, in the way his brain functions and in the way he relates to other people.

Pert writes, "With all of the breakthroughs in science we must now acknowledge that there is no separation between the brain and the body. They are both mutually engaging and exchanging at all times. The notion of a gut feeling is no longer a metaphor, it is a biological reality."

We'll use the term bodymind throughout this book, as we explore how create a state of peace and love inside ourselves and within our families.

Programming Your Baby's Brain

Think of your baby's brain as a new computer. The hardware may be able to run a large variety of software programs. But first, you have to install the software. If you don't install photo editing software, for example, the computer will never be able to edit photos, period. If the installation goes wrong, the software won't work correctly; and, if your computer gets a virus, it may stop working altogether. More problems may come up if two software applications conflict with each other. One may not run unless the other one is turned off.

The oxytocin response -- as well as all the other processes your brain goes through as you respond to the world -- is more like software than hardware. The oxytocin response needs to be installed, ideally, during the first three years of life. This response, the ability to love and trust, is usually installed by a baby's parents. It's a slow process that nature intended to start during labor and birth, and then continue to develop through early childhood.

We'll spend the rest of this book explaining how the oxytocin response should develop, why it may not develop correctly, the implications of this for you and your family, and, most important, how you can guide your baby's or toddler's brain toward a healthy, happy oxytocin response.

Why Should I Learn About Oxytocin?

As a parent, your days are already very full. And now, we are asking you to take the time to delve into neuroscience and molecular biology! Before you throw this book away, let us explain why it's so important that you understand the oxytocin response.

It's simple: As a parent, you have the power and the responsibility to guide the development of a healthy oxytocin response in your baby.

Just as a child's other organs grow and develop after birth, so does the brain. But there's a key difference in the way a child's brain grows. While the other internal organs mostly get bigger and stronger, the development path of the brain is strongly influenced by experience.

Groups of brain cells fire in response to experience; if an experience is repeated, the same group of brain cells are more likely to fire in response. Over time, this repetition causes the group of brain cells to synch up, becoming "wired" together, creating what we call brain circuits. Eventually, the brain circuits will automatically light up in response to the experience.

On the other hand, brain cells that don't get used eventually die, in a process known as neural pruning. By the time a child is two or three, the number of potential connections among brain cells is at its maximum. At this point, if they're not used, they begin to disappear.

This doesn't mean that that new connections and circuits can't be formed; it's just more difficult after this initial development period. That's why it can be so difficult to break habits or form new ones -- and that includes emotional habits.

If a baby experienced too much fear and not enough love, this oxytocin response can be weak, while his fear response can be too strong.

Because this information is so new, it hasn't percolated into our society. Most of us still tend to think of kids' negative behaviors as issues of will or morals. When a child chronically lies, it's really difficult not to expect that, once he understands why it's wrong, he'll stop.

In fact, the behaviors of our kids that we struggle with -- lying, defiance, rage, causing harm to others -- are the result of improper brain function, caused by less than optimal development in the earliest stages of life. Using a rational approach with a child whose brain doesn't work right is like asking a child with diabetes to just try harder to control his blood sugar.

In this book, we'll explain how to form a strong oxytocin connection with your kids that will let you parent from love, so that you can help your family move from fear to love.

The Fear and Calm Circuits

Scientists spent the last decade of the twentieth century using brain-scanning to map the brain. What they've uncovered gives us a new model for not only understanding behavior but also for changing it.

They've found that there are different "brain circuits" or systems that handle things like memory, decision-making, judgment and emotion. In fact, there are different circuits for fear and for love.

Fear and Stress in the Brain

In a *healthy, grown-up brain*, information comes in through the senses and is first relayed to the **amygdala**, an almond-shaped region of the brain that acts as our emotional switchboard. The amygdala is the body's first defense against danger. Its role is to mobilize the body to fight or flee without waiting for the conscious mind to figure out what's going on. When you instinctively reach out to fend off an out-of-control soccer ball, your amygdala has saved you from a bump on the head.

The amygdala does this by activating what scientists call the **HPA axis**. (If you enjoy understanding the nitty-gritty of how the brain works, we'll go into more detail about the HPA axis in the next chapter, Stress and Regulation.) For now, we'll simply call the HPA axis the fear circuit. The fear circuit starts a chemical chain reaction that ends with a rush of cortisol moving into the bloodstream.

Cortisol is a powerful hormone that combats illness and helps to keep us healthy. But too much of it can damage both the body and the brain.

The amygdala is very good at reading facial expressions and body language. It makes snap judgments about other people's intentions and how they may react to you. It's very important to remember that the amygdala reacts the same way to emotional danger. In fact, in modern society, fear of being hurt emotionally is much more prevalent than true, physical danger.

At the same time that the amygdala is making these snap judgments, it's sending information up to the **prefrontal cortex**, or PFC, the thinking brain. But the amygdala doesn't just send up the raw data; instead, it applies an emotional flavor to it. It may tell the PFC, "There's a scary-looking person approaching."

The PFC compares the information from the senses to previous experience to make a more informed decision about what's going on. It has the ability to override the amygdala's snap judgment. It can tell the amygdala, "No, this person is not dangerous."

You could call the PFC, your brain's pilot, while the amygdala is the autopilot. Just as an airplane needs a pilot to keep it on course, so the PFC needs to manage the automatic responses of the amygdala.

The amygdala completes its development somewhere along the eighteenth month. At this point, the amygdala is almost fully formed, sensitive and functioning. In other words, your child's stress and fear receptors are working full-time. You may see new, fear-related behaviors. For example, the child may suddenly resist or even fear going to the father, even though he's been there every day of the child's life.

All sorts of night-time issues may develop or intensify. Monsters may grow in the closet, as the random sounds of the house turn into threatening noises. Your child's brain shoots out fear hormones in response to all this -- without the ability to override them or for him to soothe himself.

The Calm and Connection Circuit

Oxytocin influences so many processes of the body/mind that it's difficult to identify a calm and connection circuit that would be similar to the fear circuit. But, like the fear circuit, the hypothalamus and pituitary gland play a central role.

The hypothalamus releases oxytocin directly into the parts of the brain that handle positive social interaction. It also sends some to the pituitary gland for release into the bloodstream, where it affects our internal organs.

Many parts of the brain process different kinds of positive interactions with other people; what links them is that they all can take in oxytocin. Even though there's no one, simple piece of the brain that embodies the calm and connection system, Pepperdine University psychologist Louis Cozolino has named this group of structures the "social brain." That's a simple and effective way of thinking of it.

What seems to happen in the brain is, when we get a positive signal from another person, such as a smile, the hypothalamus releases a bit of oxytocin into the brain. This oxytocin stimulates cells in the social brain to release still more oxytocin.

Oxytocin calms down the activity of the amygdala, reducing fear and anxiety and helping us to respond to the other person.

Chapter 2

How to Shape Your Baby's Brain

In the previous chapter, we talked about how emotional regulation works. In times of challenge or fear, the stress response kicks in, giving us the energy and drive to get out of trouble. In times of safety, the calm and connection circuit takes over, allowing for rest and rejuvenation.

That description applies to a healthy, fully mature brain. But this brain development, including the PFC's ability to inhibit impulses and override the amygdala's emotional hair-trigger, won't be fully complete until your child is almost 23 years old. At newborn to two years old, your child's brain is at the very beginning of the developmental journey. At this stage, you act as the co-pilot for your baby's amygdala.

This is called **co-regulation** and it's a profound and amazing thing. But it's very simple. **Regulation** is our ability to respond appropriately to stress and connection without going to extremes. We need to be able to tolerate a certain amount of stress in order to respond to the demands of daily life -- as well as to some of the more extreme demands, such as jumping out of the way of a car.

To understand regulation, think of the thermostat in a house. When it's working right, it keeps the house at a nice, steady 70 degrees. When a cold wind blows, the thermostat tells the furnace to put out some heat. When the sun beats down, the thermostat tells the furnace to turn itself off.

In this analogy, stress is that cold wind, prompting us to amp up a bit to deal with things. The opportunity to relax or connect is the warm sun, soothing the HPA axis and revving up the calm and connection system.

But your thermostat can go on the blink. It may turn the furnace on when it gets cold, but not signal it to turn off when the house has warmed up enough. Or, it may let the house get really chilly before it turns on the furnace. In our analogy, your brain may not be able to turn off the furnace of emotion in response to stress. Or, it may not be able to rouse your emotions to react. Both are forms of dysregulation. Emotional dysregulation is the inability to control your mood.

Your most important job as a parent of a newborn to three-year-old is to train your child's emotional thermostat to keep on an even keel, that is, to regulate the body/mind/emotions.

Now, think about a house where the windows are old and leaky. There's no insulation, and drafts rush in under the front door. The thermostat may work okay, but it has to constantly adjust the furnace in an attempt to keep the temperature somewhat even. If the house is

well-insulated, on the other hand, it's easy to maintain comfort. A parent's love and care in the first three years of life acts as emotional insulation, giving a child a secure base from which to meet the challenges and disappointments of life. Without this emotional insulation, a child may over-react to little things like being corrected by a teacher or being denied a cookie.

In the period between newborn and three, a parent co-regulates with the child. Co-regulation is more than modeling behavior or guiding a child's interactions with you. In co-regulation, your body and your child's actually synch up, communicating directly below the level of consciousness.

Because this is a deep body/mind communication, you cannot help your child learn to regulate if you are not able to regulate yourself. In fact, much of the work of parenting is work on yourself.

If your bodymind is not well-regulated, you give mixed messages to your child when she becomes **dysregulated**. For example, there comes a time in every parent's life when the child says, "You don't love me." The response is, "Of course, I love you. I'm your mother (or father)." While you may think your child is saying this to manipulate you, he may be expressing his true experience of you in that moment. While your core feeling may be a deep love for the child, in that moment, your emotional expression may be anger or fear. Your child is giving you a clear and direct message that he needs something different from you. He needs you to respond from a place of calm and connection.

Co-regulation is about more than suppressing fear; maybe even more important is increasing your child's capacity for joy and love. Every experience of pleasure and security encourages her brain to release oxytocin. This oxytocin release increases the number and sensitivity of oxytocin receptors in the social part of the brain. Practicing connection strengthens the brain's circuits for love and connection.

Emotional Weather

Edward Tronick, an associate professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at Children's Hospital Boston, says that, very early, babies develop a predominant mood. That is, one baby becomes more likely to be content while another one develops the habit of being anxious. While every baby is capable of a wide range of emotions and moods, the tendency to develop a habitual mood is shaped both by her internal state and her parents' emotional input.

According to Tronick's theory, your baby normally cycles through different states in which she's more or less receptive to being in a certain mood. You can encourage that mood or not.

For example, in some parts of the cycle, she's more receptive to positive emotions. If you play with her while she's in this part of the cycle, she'll react with joy and fall into a positive mood. After that first bit of play, it will take even less to make her smile and laugh.

On the other hand, if she's not in the part of the cycle when she's receptive to joy, she may not respond to your tickles and giggles.

She will also naturally be more susceptible to negative emotions at different times. When she's in a cranky mood, it doesn't take much to get her crying, while it's harder to please her.

Tronick thinks that the intensity of the emotion you show to your baby combined with how long you interact that way influences how deep into that mood the baby will sink and how long it will last.

Quite simply, a happy mother will be more likely to raise a happy baby, while a grouchy mom can increase the susceptibility to bad moods. This is not to say that your baby should never be fussy and always happy. Remember that it's natural for her to cycle through these moods.

You're acting as a co-regulator of your baby's natural states. Your actions influence the baby's release of cortisol or oxytocin, and your baby's behavior influences your own state. As you use Oxytocin Parenting to teach your baby to regulate, you are lovingly encouraging her to feel at home in a state of calm and connection with you.

Parenting Your Child's Brain

As the grown-up and the parent, you have so much responsibility for your child's physical and emotional development. This can make it easy to forget that, as much as your relationship with your child in the first two years of life guides her development, the relationship changes you, as well.

This is a key concept of oxytocin parenting and the basis of our approach at the Post Institute. As a unique individual, you bring the sum of your emotional experience and learning to the relationship with your newborn. As you enter into and maintain this relationship, each of you responds to the other.

Alan Fogel, a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Utah, uses dynamic systems theory to explain nonverbal, unconscious interaction. According to dynamic systems theory, nothing in nature is isolated and nothing remains the same -- including human relationships. Your own emotions are part of the greater system that's your relationship with your family, friends, co-workers, your religion or spiritual beliefs, even your nation.

When you look at the way patterns form in nature, according to Fogel, it's clear that big differences may begin with very tiny differences. These little differences, for example, how long it takes for a mother to respond to her baby's cries, reinforce certain patterns while weakening others. Over time, one little thing can turn into a very strong predilection that lasts our whole lives.

In *Relationships that Support Human Development*, Fogel writes, "All interpersonal relationships tend to evolve or grow into a number of recognizable patterns, some of which lead people into a fuller and more creative relationship with the self and others of which lead to a more constrained and apparently painful relationship with the self and others."

Your ability to calm your child's fear, and to teach her to self-soothe, depends on your ability to do this for yourself. In the newborn to two stage, when you react with fear to a situation, your child will mirror your fear. Only when you can react to events and be present in the relationship with love will she be able to learn the oxytocin response.

What About Discipline?

In Oxytocin Parenting, everything you do is oriented toward relationship: triggering the oxytocin response. Being a loving, responsive and regulated parent does not mean that you're never upset. It does not mean that you don't set limits. It does not mean that you don't discipline. But this approach puts a different spin on the idea of discipline.

The core of who we are is nonverbal and is unconscious. Therefore, it's not what you say or do but how you feel when you're saying and doing it. You shouldn't "act nice" when you don't feel nice, nor should you feel that you have to walk on eggshells. If you're walking on eggshells, you're already stressed out.

Dad used to say, "I'm giving you this whipping because I love you and want you to learn." Or, "I'm sending you to your room without dinner because you have to learn manners and respect. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't care." These are not examples of Oxytocin Parenting.

We have been taught that love includes spanking, yelling, control, force, power, punishment, and much more, but these actions are fear disguised as love. The reason we struggle with love and to be "in love" so much is that we seldom get to experience true love. Love is understanding, flexibility, acceptance, tolerance, patience, and faithfulness. In love, there is joy and pain, worry and concern, but those states don't last when we dwell in love. Instead, they are fleeting.

You certainly will get upset and even angry with your kids. You can and should honor your feelings, understanding that some behavior has triggered your own fear. When you can do this, you can express your anger without shaming or blaming your child. As you do that, you'll find yourself calming down and moving back into regulation, while staying in relationship with the child.

If you lose it and do say something hurtful, you simply go back and apologize and repair the relationship. Your ability to repair the relationship shows your child that human beings can get angry or upset, but this doesn't mean that they won't love you anymore. This is not about perfect parenting; it's about taking responsibility and staying present in the relationship.

When your children see that you set limits based on what's best for her and not as punishment, she learns the value of limits. And, when you stay connected as you discipline, she gains a deeper experience of relationship.

Oxytocin Parenting means taking care of yourself, finding things that will bring you more oxytocin, reducing your own stress. Then, acting from a place of calm and love, you are able to take away your child's stress and fear.

Will My Kids Be Too Soft?

A big fear parents have is that if they are "too nice" to their kids, they will be shocked when they get out into the "real world." Some parents think they need to toughen up their children in by making them undergo stressful experiences at home. They want their kids to build up a hard emotional shell, so that they won't buckle under the inevitable hardships of adult life.

Consider this theory in light of a traveler undertaking a difficult journey through a desert. To prepare, should she drink as little water as possible? Would this keep her from being thirsty?

Of course not. Depriving herself of water would give her less endurance and less chance of completing the journey.

It's the same with love and joy. When you parent softly, you're giving your child a reservoir of love that she can draw on in times of loneliness and pain. She will be more resilient, more able to handle stress. And she will also be better equipped to find and accept emotional support from other people.

When she inevitably encounters the anger and craziness of this society, she'll compare it to the love and connection she experienced in her family. She'll know that there's a better way to live, and she won't stop until she finds others who can give her the same kind of love and connection that she got from you.

Chapter 3

Being the Parents You Need To Be

Now that you understand how the oxytocin response is formed as a baby grows, you can see how important it is that your own oxytocin response be strong and healthy. In addition to shaping your child's oxytocin response, oxytocin benefits parents in other ways. Because it reduces fear and increases the sense of connection, a strong oxytocin response can help you deal with the inevitable frustrations of parenting without plugging into your children's anxiety or fear.

We often focus on the physical aspects of nurturing our children: making sure they eat right, go to bed on time, and don't hurt themselves. These things are critical, of course. But as we care for their bodies, we're also directing the development of their brains. Most important, when you care for your child from a place of love, you are building a healthy oxytocin response that will let her live her life from that same place of love.

She learns love from your actions: the way you touch your baby, how often you look at her, the tone of your voice. All these things send signals to her undeveloped brain.

Just as you shape your baby's brain for love and connection, your ability to calm her fear and respond to her with love was shaped by the way you were parented. This is the key to oxytocin parenting: You may need to deal with your own fear before you can parent from love instead of fear -- and you may need to heal some things in your adult relationships.

Nature's Plan

In the abstract, at least, our mind/bodies are designed to live in a continuum of love: love for our parents, for a mate, for our offspring, and for our comrades. While the real world is never ideal, it's worthwhile to take a look at how mating and parenting are "supposed to" work. Understanding this makes it easier to identify things that we can make better -- what to shoot for.

Oxytocin is the chemical thread that binds together all forms of positive social interaction. It begins to guide you -- in the ideal world -- as you first enter the world, during birth. But perhaps at no time is the oxytocin experience so intense as during sex. Our society has become highly sexualized as opportunities for other kinds of connection have dwindled. But in this ideal world we're about to enter, sex is the beginning of nature's plan for a life lived in love, not fear.

Humans usually bear just one baby at a time, after nearly a year of gestation, making this one offspring extremely precious. To increase the chance that this tiny and very helpless baby will survive for 12 long years, it was important that both parents be intensely devoted to its care.

This is why the excitement of sex is so closely tied to the bonding effects of oxytocin. In prehistoric times, if a woman copulated with a man, it was likely she would become pregnant. If sex caused them to feel closely bonded with each other, they would want to stay together until the baby was born.

Although we can now -- usually -- avoid making a baby when we have sex, this ancient formula still drives our brains. During sex, oxytocin causes erection of the penis, engorgement of the clitoris, and the release of orgasm. At the same time, it floods our brain, combining the pleasure and excitement of sex with a deep emotional connection to the sex partner. This connection is often especially deep for the woman, because estrogen enhances oxytocin's bonding effects.

Every time the couple has sex, the bond goes deeper. When a baby comes, the couple is deeply tied to each other and ready to do whatever it takes to help their baby thrive. Just as oxytocin is central to sex, it guides the process of labor and birth, again tying physiological processes to emotion.

When the fetus is fully developed and ready to emerge from the womb as a baby, it produces chemicals that cause the mother's brain to release oxytocin. Much of this oxytocin travels from the pituitary gland into her bloodstream, where it causes rhythmic contractions of the uterus. These regular contractions begin to push the baby down the birth canal. At first, the contractions are far apart, moving the baby just a tiny bit. Over time, the contractions become stronger and closer together. But they're not constant. The rest between contractions helps the mother to relax, and it allows unimpeded blood flow into and out of the baby's circulatory system. Remember, the mother's heart is beating for the baby at this point.

At the same time, oxytocin in the mother's brain calms the amygdala, her fear center, as it activates her social center, causing her to feel peace and love. Some women who experience natural childbirth report feelings of mystical transcendence. A few experience orgasm. At first, the idea of having an orgasm during the birth of your child may seem disturbing or wrong. But physiologically, it makes sense. After all, women use the same equipment for making a baby and giving birth to it, while oxytocin is the chemical of sexual engorgement and satisfaction, as well as the hormone of birth. This is simply another example of the way Nature has connected sex, love and parenting.

This intense bodymind experience, whether or not it includes orgasm, creates an overwhelming feeling of love and connection to the baby. While scientists haven't determined whether the oxytocin flowing through the mother's body reaches the baby's brain, many midwives and obstetricians believe that it does. In any case, the mother's feeling of love causes intense desire to hold and caress the newborn.

As she cares for the newborn, especially when she feeds him, his brain begins to respond by releasing oxytocin. Soon, his brain will release oxytocin in response to other people who hold him and speak to him. As his world expands to include more and more people, he'll be

able to use the baseline of love and trust within his family to evaluate strangers and to build loving connections with those who are also open and trustworthy. Someday, he'll feel a strong attraction to another person. Sexual desire will cause them to come together. When they do, the special combination of sex and oxytocin will create the deep bond of committed love, readying them to have a child and introduce a new generation to the oxytocin cycle of love and procreation.

We're designed to be born and die in a multi-generational web of love -- all kinds of love, from the passionate and sexual to the spiritual to the familial. All these kinds of love are fueled by oxytocin, which also makes us more resilient to stress. So, love keeps us healthy as well as happy.

Sex and Love in the Real World

When we compare our own experiences to this idealized scenario, we may get sad or even angry. In this modern world, few of us get to enjoy the bodymind experience of sex, love and birth the way nature intended it. So it's important to remember that nothing is perfect, and often what we have is good enough. Our smart and flexible brains allow us to endure trauma, pain and loss while maintaining the possibility of growth and connection throughout our lives.

As you compare your life to the ideal, you may find one or more sticking points, things that continue to stress you, interfering with your ability to relate to your family in the way that you want and need to.

Sex, for example. When sex comes at the beginning of a relationship between two people, before they've developed trust between them, it can lead to a lot of fear. A woman may fear she'll get pregnant; because estrogen increases the bonding effects of oxytocin, she may fear that she will become bonded to someone who won't be committed to her. A man may fear that his sexual performance will be judged negatively. He may fear having to become responsible for a family when he's not ready or able.

Then, there's work. Today's workplace demands that most of us work harder than ever before, putting in longer hours with less access to daylight and the outdoors. Wages don't seem to grow as fast as expenses, and job security is a quaint historical notion. Fighting traffic or public transportation to get home leaves us so stressed out that we don't have the emotional energy for the family.

Finally, there's the idea of love itself, which has been twisted so far away from the natural that a stable, healthy relationship can seem inadequate. The media's portrayal of love is impossibly romantic. It emphasizes the intense excitement of meeting an attractive stranger, while stable marriages are portrayed as troubled, boring or, at best, funny. Trying to find and maintain a love relationship that lives up to these impossible expectations can blow loneliness out of proportion or make us reject a mate or suitor who doesn't give us that movie-star glow.

All these factors make it harder for us to connect. Emotional absence is the most pervasive form of trauma in our society, and it is the least understood because you cannot see it.

Add to all this the traumatic burden of our own ancestors and our society. Not only do we live in a stressed-out world today; we live in a world that has undergone generations and generations of stress and trauma. You may only have to go back a single generation to find the trauma: Did one of your parents fight in Viet Nam? Or World War II? Did you grandparents suffer loss and privation during the depression? Did your great-grandparents experience slavery? Were they refugees?

What about your own earliest experiences? A pregnant woman's anxiety or fear begins to shape the brain of the fetus in the first weeks of life, beginning to set the emotional thermostat. Even when the woman is happy and at peace during pregnancy, hospital procedures can turn the labor and birth process into a traumatic event. Many newborns are roughly handled; they may not be held by their mothers for the first time until hours after they're born. These earliest experiences set our expectations for what life will hold for us. All these experiences of trauma occur in the context of human relationships. They become imprinted in the brain, to be expressed when we get stressed. While I may be able to trust and interact with others most of the time, when I become stressed, I experience, deep, unconscious fear of someone -- even when there is no reason to be afraid.

Living and Loving Through Fear

I may struggle to trust other adults for the rest of my life simply because I've associated other people with fear and abandonment from my earliest moments. I don't trust that anyone can meet my needs or keep me safe. My earliest imprints tell me that the best way to survive is by taking care of myself, not by letting someone else take care of me.

All this happens at the unconscious level, that is, at the level of physiology and brain chemistry. When I move into that fear state, my cortisol and adrenaline surge and my amygdala goes into high alert. This overloads the ability of my thinking brain, the prefrontal cortex, to correctly evaluate what's really going on. However, the PFC doesn't usually just give up. Instead, it tries to explain this surge of emotion.

Instead of thinking, "This situation has reminded me of the time when I was a baby and my mother went away," it decides, "This person has said something so hurtful and hateful that I have to push him away and make sure he never comes back."

This explains those troubling moments in a relationship when one person says something innocent and the other becomes furious.

In *Bonding and Attachment in Maltreated Children*, psychiatrist Bruce Perry explains that, in times of stress, we revert to our developmental zones of comfort. Another way to say this is that when you stress, you regress. This happens to everyone, whether or not we were

maltreated as kids. So a lot of times, when we become stressed, we're not adults anymore. We're adolescents or we're two-year-olds, or we're infants.

Unfortunately, this happens not only when we interact with other adults. When your child gets stressed, she may regress to two years old. If this stresses you out, you may respond as your two-year-old self. No wonder it spirals into all-day tantrums.

The key to short-circuiting your own (natural) tendency to regress is to learn to call on your oxytocin response. This is the root of oxytocin parenting. As your oxytocin calms you down, you return to your loving adult self, the self that can then co-regulate your child. When you can choose love, you change your relationship to your child. If you can do that consistently, you create healing and growth opportunities for them.

Here are some things you can do when it feels hard to deal with your own emotions and those of your child:

Accept tears. There is no harm in a baby crying as long as you're present. Many parents become overly anxious when their baby begins to cry, feeling as if they must calm him immediately. Crying is a natural part of stress expression. It's a signal that a need of some sort needs to be met. Typically, we become stressed by the cries of our baby because of past negative experiences when we were made to believe that our emotions weren't okay. Pick your baby up, rock him gently, and say, "Oh, my little baby is all upset about something. I wonder what it might be." As you check for a cause of the crying, such as the need to burp, keep telling him, "Yes, yes, let those cries out. It's okay. I'm here. We'll find out what you need." If you begin to feel stressed, remind yourself that you are a good parent. You are loving, gentle, and understanding; you can meet your baby's every need.

Give yourself a time-out. When crying is more than you can handle, take a time-out for yourself. Crying for a short time will not harm your baby, and it's much better for you to remove yourself rather than do something you'll regret later out of the distorted thinking that stress creates. Call a friend or family member, and ask for a little support. Sit down, drink a glass of water, and breathe. (Of course, try to avoid leaving your baby to cry except under the most critical of situations. Too much being alone is scary and overwhelming for your baby.)

Express your feelings. Because babies can't talk, we may not share and talk about the feelings we are experiencing or that he is experiencing. It's important to understand that there are more to words than just the talking; they also convey an emotional state. Say to your baby, "Mommy is feeling really tired and stressed right now." Getting into this pattern of communication with your baby at the earliest stages will begin to set the groundwork for his ability to communicate and identify his own feelings as he grows older. Later, when he understands language, it will teach him empathy.

You and Your Mate

It takes two to tangle, but the emotional tangle can be even harder to unravel when you and your mate each bring your own struggle with fear to your relationship and your co-parenting. As we've seen, sex should deepen and reaffirm a couple's bond. But it may not work that way.

If you've suffered sexual abuse, physical intimacy with your mate may trigger unconscious fear -- fear that you try to work out by avoiding deep emotional intimacy with your partner.

If you grew up in a home with a depressed or angry parent, or parents who were emotionally absent, you probably didn't get enough opportunities to develop a strong oxytocin response. Your emotional thermostat may be turned up too high -- your fear response is too strong. Your love response may not be strong enough to overcome your fear of others.

As an adult, you may be able to fall in love and get into a relationship, because nature gave us lots of dopamine, the chemical of reward-seeking and pleasure, to get us over our fear of strangers so that we could find a mate. But once the excitement of dopamine wears off, we need the oxytocin response to keep us together.

If we're not pumping out lots of oxytocin -- during sex, cuddling, sleeping side by side, eating together -- it may be a struggle to keep the fear in check.

When you first get into relationship, you're experiencing all this oxytocin and dopamine, and it feels great. But suddenly, what used to feel good doesn't feel so good anymore. Now, intimacy feels uncomfortable or threatening, while conflict escalates.

If this is a pattern you fall into with your mate, you can see how it would complicate your parenting. When you and your mate regress emotionally, how can you act as a stable, co-regulating parent to your child?

This is not to say that you won't be able to employ the oxytocin parenting strategies successfully until and unless you have no fear yourself. What we are saying is that you may need to learn to use the same strategies to help each other move out of the place of fear and into a place where you can calmly connect with each other again, so that you can help your child regulate.

Parenting Each Other

You and your mate co-regulate, just as you do with your child. When your mate becomes dysregulated, you may too, and vice versa. If you've practiced regulation techniques that replace cortisol and adrenaline with oxytocin, you can help your mate come back into regulation -- to calm down. It's much harder to co-regulate an adult than it is a child, because the adult's brain is so much more developed. But it can be done.

If you're stressed or even having a fight with your mate, it may seem difficult to stay connected. Establish ahead of time that, when things heat up, either of you can ask for a "connection break."

The process of healing in your relationship begins when each of you can see through the coldness or anger to the fear, and then help the other come back to a place of calm and love.

In the next section, we'll go over some ways you can chill out yourself and your mate. Remember, until you and your mate can learn to help each other move through fear, it will be harder to help your child.

Remember:

- We all have a natural healing ability.
- We are innately equipped to heal ourselves, our families and our children.
- The more you spend time working on yourself and your own process, the more you open up and can make that healing possible for the rest of your family.

How to Chill Out

In the event of an emergency, put the oxygen -- or oxytocin -- mask on yourself first, and then help the person beside you.

Here are three simple ways to trigger your oxytocin response when you need a quick dose of calm:

1. Ten deep breaths: People always tell you to take a deep breath because it really works. It's difficult to breathe slowly and deeply when you're stressed and, conversely, breathing as though you feel calm tells the body/mind to relax.

Inhale slowly through your nose, counting to 10. Then, exhale for another count of 10, trying to empty your lungs completely. Don't gasp or force in more air than your lungs can hold; just find a comfortable, consistent pace for drawing air in and out. Repeat 10 times.

2. Make eye contact: Gazing into the eyes of someone you're close to helps trigger the oxytocin response. Our brains naturally switch into the mode of connection when we look into each other's eyes. It's not necessary to stare or get into a contest to see who blinks first. Instead, feel free to look away for a moment and then return your gaze to the other person's.

3. Hug: A hug is a safe, socially acceptable way to get a little hit of connection when we need it. (Although it seems like an obvious oxytocin producer, scientists haven't studied the effects of hugging on oxytocin levels.) Hugging brings us back to our baseline of calm and connection.

Part 2

Building Love, Step by Step

As we discussed in the first chapter, a baby's brain continues to grow and change rapidly for the first three years of life. This also seems to be the time when the "emotional thermostat" is set, creating the tendency to be anxious or mellow, open to connection or fearful of getting close to others. This section will focus on this critical three-year period.

As we go into more detail about what Oxytocin Parenting means during these three years, please keep in mind that:

- Every child is different
- Every child has the capacity to grow and change during this period and throughout their lives
- Your parenting doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to be good enough.

The Good-Enough Parent

Donald Winnicott was a British psychiatrist and pediatrician who intuited many of the concepts of child development that today's neuroscience have confirmed. He identified the importance of the many tiny interactions between mother and baby that help shape the baby's personality.

One of his key concepts is the "good-enough mother." Winnicott observed that new mothers were completely absorbed in their babies, ready to immediately answer their every need. (He was writing in the 1950s, in a very different social and economic environment.) But eventually, the mother begins to tend to her own needs and those of the rest of the family.

She still needs to give the new baby an environment of safety and love, but she may not be quite as quick with her breast or the bottle, for example. She needs to be good enough, but not perfectly attuned to the baby.

In fact, Winnicott believed that this gradual, slight withdrawal was crucial for the baby, helping him learn to differentiate other people from himself.

As you read this book, keep in mind that when your child experiences you falling out of attunement and then coming back to connection, he's learned a valuable lesson: that love can survive anger, hurt and blunders.

Go for good enough.

Thanks to management guru Tom Peters, our culture is obsessed with excellence. We're bombarded with commands to be outstanding, to achieve, to do more than we dream is possible. You've probably picked up this book hoping to learn how to be an excellent parent. That's wonderful.

But the task can seem overwhelming. Throughout this book, we're going to emphasize that you don't have to be perfect, or even excellent in order to succeed at Oxytocin Parenting.

Just good enough is great!

Chapter 4

How Pregnancy Sets the Oxytocin Tone

As the fetus grows in the womb, its development is guided not only by its genes but also by the chemistry of the amniotic bath in which it floats. You could say that the mother's body sends messages to the developing baby via the release of chemicals that are circulating in her body. Remember, at this point, mother and fetus share the same blood via the umbilical cord.

Inside the Womb

According to Mitch Gaynor, author of *The Sounds of Healing*, the fetus is already capable of hearing sounds from outside around the fourth week after conception. Attachment psychiatrist Thomas Verny, author of *The Secret Life of Your Unborn Child*, says that as early as the second trimester, the fetus is capable of psychological processing. By the time your baby reaches its eighth and ninth month of life in the womb, he has experienced the world through you on many levels. Your nutritional patterns, your thoughts, stressors, relationships, joys, and concerns create the foundation for the lens through which your child will experience and see the world.

Already, the baby is learning about what kind of a world he'll be born into and live in. The baby's HPA axis, or fear system, is being primed, as is his love and connection system, the oxytocin response.

The idea that a pregnant woman's feelings can influence the way her fetus develops is no longer new-age woo-woo. There's strong scientific evidence that when a woman is stressed out during her pregnancy, her child will later be more likely to have emotional or cognitive problems, including an increased risk of ADD and hyper-anxiety. Scientists aren't sure of the exact mechanism, or of what kinds of stress produce negative impacts on the fetus, but problems in the woman's relationship with her partner seem to be a big factor.

Domestic violence, the loss of her relationship with the baby's father or another important relationship, illness, as well as external events such as being in an auto accident all cause trauma not only to the woman but to her developing baby.

As early as the fourth week after conception, the fetal brain responds to sound, and as early as the second trimester, it displays signs of thinking.

Even if a pregnant woman is in a stable household, relationship or life stress can influence the baby's development.

Co-regulation Begins In-utero

Remember co-regulation, when two people become attuned and help each other chill out? In a two-parent household, both parents begin to co-regulate not only each other but also

the developing baby, as they co-create his emotional environment in the womb and outside. The kind of emotional ecosystem they create begins to affect the child probably from the moment of conception, and it continues to affect the developing fetus until the moment of birth.

To truly parent from love, you must commit enormous amounts of time, energy, focus, and mindfulness until you have reconditioned yourself to dwell in the state more continuously. When you can shift your emotional state from fear to love, your parenting actions and the manner in which you relate to your child will reduce your own stress and that of your baby's.

That's why it's crucial for a couple to work hard to resolve conflicts in their own relationship during this time, as well as to try to come to terms with their own fear. This doesn't mean that every time they fight or get stressed out, they're damaging the unborn baby.

There's Good Stress, Too

In fact, some exposure to stress seems to be beneficial. The cycle of stress/relaxation/stress/relaxation helps build a flexible, adaptable nervous system in the baby.

The key is simply to have an emotional atmosphere that's predominantly positive. Psychologist John Gottman of The Gottman Institute, who studies marriages, found that happy couples say five positive things for every negative thing. This is a good rule of thumb for your oxytocin parenting recipe: Make sure that there's approximately five times as much good stuff in your home life than there is negative stuff.

What If I Adopted My Child?

You may or may not know some details about your child's biological mother and her situation before and during the pregnancy. It's natural for you to worry about how it might have affected the earliest development of your child. Your child's brain is continually changing and making connections for the first three years of life, so this is your opportunity to provide plenty of positive physical and emotional experiences. Skip ahead in this book to the stage at which you brought your child home.

Remember:

- Gestation was only the first stage in the development of your child's brain and nervous system.
- Much more growth takes place after a baby leaves the womb and enters the world.

- There are no "perfect" pregnancies, anyway.

If you do your best to give your child what he needs to thrive -- from whenever he enters your family -- he has the capacity to develop into a loving, trusting, fulfilled human being. In fact, a 2010 study at the University of British Columbia found that, while highly sensitive children had a harder time handling stress, they also responded more strongly to the support and nurturing of their families than more laid-back kids did.

Action Steps for Pregnancy

1. **Visualize:** It's natural to wonder what the baby will be like and imagine taking care of her after she's born. Indulge in this behavior as often as you can. Imagine holding, feeding and cuddling her, how happy you'll be and how much you'll enjoy her. Researcher in Israel found that simply thinking about the baby to come can increase oxytocin levels -- and pregnant women with higher oxytocin levels felt more bonded to their babies after they were born.

2. **Repair Relationships:** While you ready your home for the new baby, clean up your emotional household, too. Try to make up with friends right away if you fight; make amends with anyone you've hurt or let down. If you have a spouse or partner, consider some couples counseling or taking a workshop that brings you closer together. Repairing all your relationships has double benefits: It reduces stress -- and the stress chemicals circulating in your bloodstream -- while increasing your opportunities for enjoying the oxytocin response as you increase your positive social interactions.

3. **Add Music:** Listening to happy music is one of the easiest ways to elevate your mood. Your positive feelings as you dance, sing along or simply let yourself follow the rhythms transfers to the baby in your womb. The music may have a more direct influence, as well. Because babies are born being able to recognize their mother's voice, it makes sense that your developing baby may be able to respond directly to music.

Chapter 5

Labor and Birth

Nature seems to have tied love to the survival of a woman in labor. The huge amount of oxytocin flowing through her bloodstream produces the contractions that gradually push the baby down the birth canal and out into the world. At the same time, oxytocin reduces her pain and keeps her calm. This oxytocin causes her to crave a quiet, safe place to give birth, and it increases the bond she already feels for her baby.

In ancient times, all of this -- the instinct for safety and quiet, the calm, the attachment of mother to baby -- increased the likelihood that the mother would be able to deliver her baby and keep it from harm. Today, she doesn't need to find a nice cave in order to be safe during her labor, but she still craves quiet and stillness.

The extra oxytocin flowing through her bloodstream and the baby's, by way of the placenta, may activate the oxytocin receptors in the baby's brain. Some infant psychology experts believe that the birth experience actually "sets" the sensitivity of the baby's oxytocin receptors. In any case, it's well documented that the oxytocin receptors in the brain tend to respond to oxytocin by synching up and releasing even more, in a positive feedback loop.

When the receptors in the developing baby's brain come into contact with enough oxytocin, they get set to a point where it's easy for them to take up oxytocin later in life.

In order to develop a healthy oxytocin response, it may be that a baby's brain needs the right amount of oxytocin during birth and for a short period after it. Just enough, and her brain's oxytocin receptors begin to bloom, opening up to be able to translate this neurochemical into feelings of love and intimacy.

Hurried in the Hospital

One especially critical period may begin as the baby enters the birth canal; some midwives believe that the birth experience itself sets the reactivity of the limbic system, the part of the brain that produces and controls emotions and the body's involuntary processes. According to this theory, the tone of a baby's first moments out of the womb creates an emotional set point, just as you'd set a thermostat. A frightening experience sets the baby's amygdala to high alert, limiting how much the baby can calm down. A soothing birth experience, they believe, will enable the baby to experience deep relaxation and peace, while his rages and fears won't be as intense.

Today, most women in the United States give birth in the "safe" environment of a hospital. But modern birthing practices can hinder the natural oxytocin response and immediate attachment of mother to baby.

Although she may know -- with the thinking part of her brain -- that the strangers rushing around are there to help her, the laboring woman's amygdala, the fear center, may become

very stressed during the medical procedures taking place in the brightly lit and rather unwelcoming hospital environment. This stress may increase her levels of cortisol and adrenaline, the fear chemicals, instead of increasing oxytocin.

In addition, it's routine for hospitals to administer artificial oxytocin in order to make sure that labor proceeds according to a predetermined schedule. Often, this continuous dose of oxytocin causes contractions that are very strong and painful, and that come without respite.

This pain and fear overwhelm the laboring woman's natural oxytocin response, keeping her from enjoying the final moments before the baby is born. Her pain and fear may be transmitted to the baby, making his first experience of the world frightening instead of comforting.

Hormonal Imprinting

Our ability to enjoy the bonding effects of oxytocin -- the number, distribution and sensitivity of oxytocin-producing cells and their receptors -- may be shaped during labor and birth by a process that Gyorgy Csaba, a biologist at Semmelweis University in Hungary, calls hormonal imprinting.

Csaba thinks there's a critical period when developing receptor cells first encounter the hormones they bind with. How strong the hormonal bath is determines how sensitive that receptor is and sets its binding capacity for the cell's life.

Sue Carter is director of the Brain Body Center at the University of Illinois, and one of the leading researchers on oxytocin's role in bonding. Her studies of animals suggest that the oxytocin system can be "tuned" in early development, permanently changing its sensitivity to hormonal fluctuations. She writes that exposing newborn nervous systems to pitocin may "reprogram the nervous system, altering thresholds for sociality, emotionality and aggression." Moreover, she thinks that the body's future production of oxytocin is especially vulnerable to postnatal experience.

If the baby was pulled out by forceps or vacuum extraction, his body's first experience is pain and terror. This hormonal imprint can have lifelong consequences on behavior and on the ability to love.

Whether it's trauma before the child is born or following birth, it can be stored as the child's earliest memory, called the state level. This memory can be actively triggered throughout the rest of a person's life.

Early traumas for infants before birth or just following birth can set the child up to be much more sensitive to stress, fear, and stimulation than other children. These experiences can create difficulty for the child in active settings such as family time, shopping or school.

Hospital vs. Midwife

Doctors save lives, and hospital birth may be the best option for you. At the same time, there's intense societal pressure to have the modern version of a traditional birth: Lying in a hospital bed with a fetal monitor attached, oxytocin dripping through an IV, and an epidural to take away all feeling below the waist. Even the medical profession has begun to realize that these procedures may not be necessary in all cases or even improve outcomes.

Natural childbirth has been positioned as an experience of overwhelming pain and trauma. But many women find that it's actually less painful than a medical birth. Ancient ways, such as letting the laboring woman move around, letting gravity help push the baby down the birth canal when she's upright or floating in water to relieve pressure and pain turn out to work just as well for modern women.

TV personality Ricki Lake has become an advocate of natural birth with her documentary, "The Business of Being Born." It makes a strong case for choosing the least medical interventions possible when giving birth.

If you have the resources, consider alternatives including birth at home with a licensed midwife or using a hospital birthing center. Birthing centers have sprung up all over the nation. They feature private rooms with residential furniture and the option of having your birth attended by your own obstetrician or midwife.

Even if your doctor recommends that you give birth in the standard hospital setting, you can still begin Oxytocin Parenting as soon as you deliver the baby. According to Marshall Klaus, M.D. one of the co-authors of the book *Bonding*, wonderful things can happen between mother and baby in the first hour of life. *Bonding* recommends that, as soon as possible, the parents have a period of at least one hour alone with the baby.

During this time, babies seem especially open to the first connection with their parents. They typically look around and, if placed on the mother's stomach, will crawl up to the breast. It's the beginning of a sensory dialog between the baby and his parents that is the first step to intimacy.

You have the opportunity to get a great start on your Oxytocin Parenting during labor and birth. If it makes sense for you and your unique pregnancy, go for it.

Action Steps to Prepare for Birth

1. **Read and Learn:** Find out everything you can about the different options available to you. Consult the reading list at the end of the book for some options.
2. **Talk to your Healthcare Providers:** Interview hospitals and doctors to find a good match. Find out what they recommend for your unique pregnancy.
3. **Make a Birth Plan:** Detail whether you want such interventions as continuous fetal heart monitoring or an epidural. Give it to the healthcare professionals who will attend you, whether that's a midwife or obstetrician. Share it with your partner and family.
4. **Prepare to Change the Plan:** Remind yourself that the birth plan is only that: a plan. It may need to be changed as labor progresses. The most important thing is that mother and baby stay well.

What If I Need a Cesarean?

Many women feel fear and grief when they find out they need to have a cesarean. It's certainly a more dangerous procedure than vaginal childbirth, and it's less than ideal for Oxytocin Parenting.

But, if your doctor recommends this for the health and safety of you and your baby, you should listen.

The best thing you can do as an Oxytocin Parent is to accept the need for this procedure as calmly as you can, remaining positive and focusing on the moment when you first hold your new baby in your arms. Remember, anxiety and fear are the result of stress chemicals flowing through your veins. These stress chemicals also communicate anxiety and fear to your baby.

Remind yourself that having a C-section is one of the many things you are doing to give your baby the best possible start in life.

It will not prevent you from bonding with your baby, and it won't harm his ability to learn the oxytocin response.

The Final Word

While it's ideal that each baby come into the world in an environment of comfort, peace and love, humans continue to adapt to our environments throughout our lives. You can start right now -- from wherever you and your child are -- to create that environment of safety and love.

Chapter 6

Newborn to 23 Months

In the last chapter, we painted a pretty picture of mother and newborn baby gazing into each other's eyes, sunk into an oxytocin moment of peace and connection. Of course, it's not always that way.

Society sees women as "natural-born mothers." Women supposedly have an innate desire to mother, and an effortless competence at it. And certainly, the oxytocin released during childbirth and breastfeeding can make mothering seem like the most natural thing in the world to some women.

However, it's not uncommon for a new mother to feel anxious or indifferent when confronted with this little stranger. Whether you gave birth to or adopted this baby, although you've been preparing for months or even years, it may be hard to merge the feelings you've developed for the baby of your imagination with this very real human being who's suddenly appeared.

Becoming a parent, whether by giving birth or via adoption, triggers any fears you have about intimacy and love. Just as you're beginning to shape your baby's ability to love by the way you nurture her, so your own oxytocin response was shaped by your own parents' style of nurturing.

As we discussed in Chapter 2, if you didn't receive Oxytocin Parenting when you were a child, you'll have to be careful not to pass on learned tendencies to react with fear. On the other hand, opening up to love with a baby is a wonderful way to expand your own capacity to love.

So, don't be concerned if you find yourself taking those first steps after the baby has arrived.

The simple acts of physically caring for the baby can activate your oxytocin response. Your bond with your baby will continue to build over the first few days, weeks or even months of her life.

Remember, at this period you are setting the brain's emotional thermostat: shaping her stress response and her oxytocin response. The most important activities for Oxytocin Parenting at this stage are also the most obvious and natural: feeding and touching.

What's Happening in Your Baby's Brain?

You know how a child's cognitive abilities develop over time. Each milestone, such as sitting up, crawling, talking or toilet training, builds on previous development. Your child's emotional development runs on a parallel course, and it too builds on previous steps.

At the newborn stage, you begin to build your baby's basic sense of security and trust. Positive experiences of comfort and nurture encourage the spread of oxytocin receptors in the brain.

At the same time, the amygdala, or fear center, continues to develop. It's normal and inevitable that your baby will experience anxiety and fear. Your goal as an Oxytocin Parent is to make sure that safety and love experiences outweigh fear experiences -- that's all.

At about two months, your baby will begin to smile when she looks at you. This is a crucial period, because it establishes the connection in your baby's brain between positive emotion and another person. At around two months, your baby will move from simple attention to active emotion. His attention may seem more focused as you look into each other's eyes, and he may coo or make other positive noises.

During this period, you really begin to build the attachment between you, as emotion becomes more reciprocal. As you gaze into each other's eyes, make faces and smile at each other, the baby is learning how to communicate positive emotion through expression. Your infant may seem more responsive, and this makes it more fun to interact with him.

Your baby experiences this, too. His brain associates the pleasure of looking at you with good physical feelings, and every time you interact, this association becomes reinforced.

Your attention becomes more and more pleasurable and important to him, and it becomes the basis for your stable, loving relationship.

This positive feedback loop is building his oxytocin response. His brain begins to release oxytocin when he looks at you, creating a strong association between you and pleasure -- and this will become a neural habit. His brain cells wire themselves into a circuit that he'll use for all kinds of positive social interactions.

Feed the Emotions, As Well As the Body

The most important bonding activity for both of you is feeding. It's about much more than nutrition. Feeding is a baby's first experience of nurturing, and the flow of oxytocin from the mother's body to the baby's may be his first experience of the oxytocin response.

In *Bonding*, Marshall Klaus, John Kennell and Phyllis Klaus describe the actions of a newborn if he's placed on his mother's belly instead of being taken away for cleaning or medical procedures within the first hour of life. He quickly finds his way to her nipple and begins to suckle. (This process was first observed by a team that included Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg.) The suckling increases the mother's release of oxytocin, causing her milk to let down; it's likely that it also increases the effects of oxytocin in her brain, causing the positive feedback loop.

As the milk begins to flow into the baby's stomach, it causes the release of CCK, a digestive chemical that signals the brain to release oxytocin into the bloodstream. It's probable that the baby's brain also fills with oxytocin, which begins the bonding process with his mother.

Every time she nurses him, strokes him, gazes into his eyes, she's building the oxytocin response. His brain is learning that another person -- this one special person -- is a reliable source of comfort and pleasure. He also comes to expect that his physical needs will be met. He'll be safe, secure, warm and protected.

Your pediatrician will no doubt give you plenty of information about how much to feed your newborn, and about how fast his body should be growing. But providing his nutritional needs is far from the whole story. One of the key concepts of Oxytocin Parenting is feeding to build attachment by triggering the oxytocin response.

Think of feeding in two parts. One part is the providing of food to your baby, whether you're breast- or bottle-feeding. The other part is the close physical contact as you hold her close to your heart. Babies who are bottle-fed may miss the sensory contact with mommy's breast, but you still can cradle her against your breast as you feed her -- and this is at least as critical as actually getting sustenance into her.

You may not always be able to drop everything for a feeding session, but avoid getting into the habit of bottle-propping while you feed the baby. There are products on the market designed to hold the bottle comfortably and securely so you can do other things. But bottle-propping is dangerous for two reasons: First, it's all too easy for your baby to choke; this is a life-threatening situation. Second, it short-circuits the brain development linking sensory pleasure and emotional comfort that your newborn should be developing.

Also resist the temptation to multi-task. You may feel like you can't get anything else done while your baby is eating every two to four hours. Your arm may get tired. It may be irresistible to take a phone call -- especially if you can use your mobile phone's headset anyway. But your baby needs you to be present and involved in her feeding.

Remember how the baby's stomach releases CCK when it's digesting milk? This seems to be an essential part of the bonding process. When oxytocin researcher Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg blocked the effects of CCK in baby sheep, they lost the ability to recognize their mothers.

You're probably aware of the way baby geese and ducks imprint on the first being they see after they're born. Humans, with our more flexible brains, may not have such a strong and sudden imprinting, but it's likely that a similar process of imprinting takes place during feeding. One of the effects of oxytocin in the brain is to tie positive experiences to individuals: We remember who we love and seek to be with them.

As your newborn's brain begins to associate the reward of food with attachment to you, you are imprinting his brain with the pattern for love.

Touching Your Baby

If touch is so important, why do we tend to be stingy with this special gift to our babies? The skin is the largest organ of the body and one of the most direct sources of stimulation to the brain. Unfortunately, this is a two-way street. To give touch is also to receive it.

If a parent isn't used to touch, feels immune to touch, or has experienced touch in a negative way in the past, such as from abuse, that parent will unwittingly avoid affectionate touch with the baby to avoid the unconscious triggers that it creates. Additionally, if a parent is already stressed, the addition of touch combined with the crying of the baby or demand to nurse is more than he or she can handle.

The other challenge to touch and affection is the constant negative reinforcement of the medical establishment's views on spoiling children and the pressures we're given to instill independence in children as early as possible. You cannot spoil a child by holding him too much. This is physiologically impossible. You can only spoil a child through material overindulgence which becomes a substitute for your presence and involvement.

Arms, Not Furniture

Many of the tools and tips that are provided to parents at the earliest stages of their baby's vital brain development are contrary to optimal emotional health and development. A few of these are bottles, pacifiers, baby carriers, strollers, and cribs. These very common things create obstacles to secure attachment and bonding with our children.

Bottles are encouraged from the beginning, as are pacifiers. Often, we view feeding our children as a mere necessity to sustaining life, but breastfeeding is about more than just providing nutrients. It also provides eye-to-eye and skin-to-skin contact, the sound of the heartbeat, the smell of the mother, and the matching of body temperatures. All of these sensory experiences have direct brain-altering effects, and they all generate a tremendous oxytocin response, providing the baby with sustained and prolonged soothing which enables the regulation of emotions. Unfortunately, many of us grew up on a bottle, so giving it to our child becomes second nature that is nearly hereditary.

The natural barrier created by the bottle grows when we prop the bottle, avoiding all contact, and the pacifier that's given with every cry or whine prevents the much needed oxytocin response brought about by pleasant parent/child exchanges.

Baby carriers, strollers, and cribs are additional obstacles to the attachment bond because they enable further disconnection. In some tribal cultures where carrying the baby is commonplace for up to three years and beyond, parents become so attuned and sensitive to their child's experience that they can predict exactly when the child is about to relieve himself.

In our culture, we constantly look for ways to make parenting easier while failing to understand that artificial parenting tools deprive our babies of the natural soothing sensory experiences that they need. When you walk with, carry, hold, sling, or swing your child, you generate necessary soothing experiences for your baby's brain during these critical stages of development.

Certainly, you will use a stroller, carrier, crib and bottle -- and don't feel guilty about it. Just remember that the more times you touch, hold and carry your baby, the more oxytocin you share.

Action Steps for Birth Through 18 Months

The following practices don't need to be done all the time or even every day. But each of them will help make up for the times you can't be physically connected with your baby.

1. Sleep With Your Baby. The family bed is a very important way to connect with your child if you must be absent from him during the course of a day. Research has demonstrated how bed-sharing brings all members into physiological alignment, contributing to improved relating, attunement, and need-meeting. In her book, *Attachment Parenting*, Katie Granju notes: "Babies usually sleep better, as well as children. Parents sleep better. Night feeding and nursing is made easier. It provides built in snuggle time for the father, teaches babies that nighttime is for sleeping, and it also can make up for a hard day."

2. Bathe With Your Baby. A warm tub simulates the womb. For many babies, this was a pleasant and oxytocin-rich time. Spending time in a warm bath with your baby is an excellent way to create soothing for both of you.

3. Massage Your Baby. While lying in bed or on the floor, take deep breaths – inhaling and exhaling – as you stroke your baby's body gently using baby-sensitive oil or lotion. Think positive thoughts, and speak positive words. Turn him over, and gaze into his eyes as you stroke his arms, tummy, head, legs, and feet very gently. Permit him to gaze into your eyes. This is a powerful attachment and bonding experience.

4. Sling Your Baby. When you can, put your baby in a sling, facing toward you as you walk around the house, do chores, and go for walks. (Facing babies outward away from your body before they're neurologically developed enough to handle all of the stimulation is a common sling mistake. There is far too much sensory stimulation for a baby to manage at this young age while facing out. When she faces toward you, the bouncing and contact with your body soothes her brain, stimulates positive hormone changes, and helps her body's rhythms sync with yours.

5. Gaze into your Baby's Eyes. Breastfeeding simply isn't always practical. When bottle feeding, hold him in your arms with eye-to-eye contact. If possible, get skin-to-skin contact with your baby by moving aside some of his and your clothing. Make eye contact, and sing, hum or talk as you give the bottle.

What If My Baby Is in Daycare?

More than half of working women in the U.S. have a child under a year old. If you're among this majority, you may wonder, "Will my baby love her care provider more than she loves me?" Or, "Will she be able to develop a strong oxytocin response if she's in daycare?"

A national study of the effects of childcare on children from infants to kindergarten found that babies formed insecure attachments only when a mother had "low levels of sensitivity" when interacting with her baby and the baby received poor-quality daycare. (This study did find that more time in daycare translated into more problem behaviors, like arguing a lot, between two- and four-and-a-half-year-olds.)

On the other hand, children who spent time in daycare programs that provided enrichment and learning activities actually showed better language and cognitive development than kids who were cared for at home.

In any case, the study found that the home environment -- the characteristics of the parents and the family -- were more strongly linked to a child's development than were the features of childcare.

Focus on Oxytocin Parenting During whatever period of family leave you can take and continue to provide Oxytocin Parenting as much as you can when you're home with your baby.

If you come home from work upset or exhausted, you must learn to calm and settle your own stress reactions following a difficult day away from your baby. Upon returning home, be willing to spend uninterrupted time reconnecting and regulating your baby. Your baby will experience significant stress when you're away, but you can repair this rapidly by making skin-to-skin connection.

Chapter 7

Fathering

Because it plays a huge role in labor, birth and breastfeeding, scientists assumed oxytocin was a woman thing. But early in this century, researchers found that oxytocin influences a man's emotions in the same way as it does a woman's. Oxytocin is just as essential for all kinds of bonding in men as it is in women.

And that means that men can play an equal role in helping babies develop a healthy oxytocin response.

The Work Begins At Birth

While society expects women to immediately succeed at mothering, it gives men a lot more leeway in learning to be good fathers. In fact, the stereotype of the new dad is a nervous wreck, frankly squeamish about the blood and mess, and terrified he'll drop the baby.

A father's body hasn't gone through the intense hormonal changes that a pregnant woman's does. However, there's evidence that his body and brain may change quite a bit in response to fatherhood.

A study of human couples found that men had higher levels of prolactin and lower levels of sex steroids after the baby was born. Prolactin is, of course, familiar as the primary hormone of breast-milk production. But it also plays a role in sexual satiation. After orgasm, a man's prolactin levels go up temporarily, reducing his immediate desire for more sex.

Breastfeeding mothers often experience milk let-down the moment they hear their baby cry; sometimes, even thinking about the baby when she's away from it is enough to let down her milk. Prolactin also seems to influence a new father's responsiveness to his baby's cries.

Other studies of men in multiple cultures have shown reductions in testosterone in married or monogamous men. Testosterone seems to mute the bonding effects of oxytocin, so it makes sense that dads with lower levels of testosterone would be more sympathetic to their babies and more motivated to respond to them.

This reduction in testosterone could be triggered by the odor of a man's children, as well as the sight and sounds of a newborn. This is certainly the case in rats, where fathering behavior doesn't begin until the male sees its pups.

A Father's Body Changes, Too

To maximize the physical changes that support parenting, the best thing a prospective father can do is take an active role in birth preparations and be physically close to his partner and their child when the baby is born, snuggling close and inhaling that unique Oxytocin Parenting

baby smell. Research by Jay Fagan, a professor of social work at Temple University, shows that fathers who get involved in pregnancy seem to be more committed to their partner and the child after it's born.

Marshall Klaus found that fathers who are included in the process may bond more. Fathers who actively take part in dressing and undressing the baby and establishing eye contact during the first three days of life tend to do more care-giving to the baby during its first three months.

So, it's really important that a new dad stays close to the newborn, holding her, feeding her, changing her diapers. It may not feel natural or comfortable, but these actions can actually spark his bond with the baby.

The New Father Prepares

1. **Prepare Yourself for the Birth;** your bonding process begins as you ready your home.
2. **Prepare with Your Partner;** doing this together deepens the bond between you.
3. **Learn,** so that you can immediately begin to help care for the baby.
4. **Hold the Baby** as often and as long as you can.

Action Steps for Father

A man may need to learn to ignore conditioning that may interfere with giving affection to the baby. Make no mistake; dads have a strong role to play in the emotional and physical life of the newborn. Here are some good ways for a father to practice Oxytocin Parenting.

1. **Be There.** When possible, do everything that Mom does: Bathe with your baby, feed your baby, be present while she is nursing or change diapers.

2. **Get Into Contact.** Fathers can do plenty to give babies the physical and emotional intimacy they need. Take your shirt off and get skin-to-skin contact with your baby or take a nap with him.

3. **Support the Mother.** Caring for an infant is a full-time job plus. It is both physically and emotionally exhausting, and it will usually leave her feeling unattractive and tired. It's your role to support her in every way that you can. Get up in the middle of the night with her to care for the baby. See her as the vessel for your child's ultimate health. If she is upset, calm her. If she is depressed, support her.

4. **Parent Yourself.** Many times, new fathers can also feel overwhelmed. If negative associations and experiences from your own early childhood seem to interfere with fathering, take steps to heal from them.

5. **Examine Your Jealousy.** Many new dads unwittingly find themselves jealous of the baby. You have gone from having your partner all to yourself to having a new little person who is the center of her attention. Your own early baby experiences will determine what feelings may get triggered for you. You may resent that you didn't get such loving care when you were tiny. Simply saying, "I feel jealous" can deepen communication between you and your partner.

6. **Play with Your Baby.** A primary evolutionary role for dads seems to be providing exciting experiences for both boy and girl babies. It's fun; it lets you express your masculinity and provides a positive image of strength and protection to the baby. Once your baby is around six months old, it's acceptable to begin the typical Daddy interactions of tussling, rolling, tossing in the air, blowing bellies or carrying upside down.

Exercise: The Attachment Dance

Any time you interact with your baby -- or with anyone you care about -- you do a subtle dance together. Responding to changes in tone of voice, facial expression and gaze, each of you makes subtle adjustments to become more attuned. You may go into limbic resonance, the state in which you are co-regulating, each of you affecting the other's bodymind state.

This process usually takes place without the awareness of the prefrontal cortex, the thinking brain. This exercise is designed to let you consciously practice going into limbic resonance with your baby. At the same time, it teaches your baby how to communicate emotional states, and also that it's natural and okay to move from one state to another. It will trigger your oxytocin response and let the baby experience it, as well, beginning to form the template for other intimate relationships.

The Attachment Dance can be especially useful for fathers, because it encourages them to slow down and tune in to the baby's subtle movements.

The Attachment Dance is based on the work of Alan Schore, the UCLA psychiatrist whose Regulation Theory explains how mothering shapes an infant's nervous system. A version of it appeared in Susan's book, *The Chemistry of Connection* (New Harbinger 2009).

- Try to set aside at least 20 minutes for this exercise. Turn off your phone, the TV and music.
- Sit comfortably with your baby in your arms. Tune into how you're feeling. If you're used to having media playing most of the time, you may feel anxious or worried about being bored. This is natural -- and a little sign that this exercise will be rewarding. On the other hand, you may feel relaxed and happy to get a chance to not be multi-tasking.
- No matter how you're feeling, sit and watch your baby's face. Where do her eyes go? What's her face doing? Is she making sounds? Try to get inside her head, without naming or analyzing what she's feeling.
- Let her take the lead. Don't try to attract her attention. Wait until she looks at you. When she does, look back at her. Check in with your body. Do you feel restless or relaxed? Interested or nervous? Take some deep breaths, which signal your bodymind and hers to relax.
- Wait for her to look at you, then smile and talk to her. Stroke her, tickle her, do all the things she likes. Watch what pleases her at this moment, and do more of it. You may find some new way to please her, or something she usually likes may not please her right now. As you find ways to positively stimulate her, you will both move into the state of arousal, that is, heightened awareness and intensity of feeling. Try to match and amplify the baby's state.

- At some point, she may spontaneously look away. This is a normal response. It means she needs to come down from the aroused state -- and it also shows the beginnings of self-regulation. When this happens, don't try to bring her attention back to you. Let her do her thing, as you check in with yourself. Do you feel different now? Do you feel energized, more relaxed -- or do you feel some tension or anxiety that the baby has disengaged a bit from you? Notice and accept these feelings, while reminding yourself that this is part of a normal cycle of engagement and detachment that every person cycles through.
- Be ready for when your baby once again looks into your face, so that you can welcome the interaction warmly and again move with her into connection.

You can continue to do the Attachment Dance -- forever. As your child grows, the interaction will change, but it's just as bonding and comforting for both of you.

Chapter 8

Why the Twos Can Be Terrible

One of the most dreaded phases for all of parents is the Terrible Twos. Some parents start dreading it from conception, and there seems to be at least one article on parenting your two-year-old in every issue of parenting magazines. Why is there such fear around a child turning two?

One of the things that are scariest about parenting is the experience of helplessness. Empowering your child experience his new sense of self can make you feel helpless indeed. According to the myth of the terrible twos, almost overnight, your child transforms from pleasant and joyful to demanding, headstrong and disobedient. Parenting experts have come up with all manner of behavioral interventions like time-out, color charts, and rewards to help conquer the helplessness parents experience with their two-year-olds.

Before we explain Oxytocin Parenting for this stage, let's look closer at where this anxiety comes from.

As we discussed in Chapter One, in a healthy grown-up, the amygdala is the body's first defense against danger. Whenever we sense a threat -- emotional or physical - the amygdala causes the release of stress hormones. When your little two-year-old takes off running in the parking lot, your amygdala sounds the alarm. Your fight-or-flight response kicks in, causing your pupils to dilate, your heart rate to increase, and your body to mobilize. You can suddenly jump and run faster than you've been able to in years.

At a time when your baby has developed the physical capacity to get into real danger all by himself, you may find your stress response going into overdrive.

But here's another scenario: Now, you're shopping at the supermarket, and your two-year-old grabs a bag of chips. Again your amygdala goes off. Why? Your child is in no imminent danger. What's the big deal, right? Wrong. If you've bought into myth of the Terrible Twos, your brain believes you're about to deal with a huge tantrum the moment you say, "No!" So, you become instantly stressed. "No, Michael you can't have those!" Then, you wrestle the chips from Michael's little hands -- because if you don't, he will tear them open and begin eating them.

You're afraid that your child is going to throw a huge tantrum and therefore cause you a tremendous amount of public humiliation. At this point, your stress reaction can be almost as significant as it was during the parking lot episode -- even though the only danger is to your ego.

In effect, you've just incited the very tantrum behavior you were so worried about. This kind of reaction can -- and frequently does -- create a spiral of tension and stress in you and your toddler that turns life into a constant battle.

The key to avoiding these battles is recognizing your own stress and fear reactions. If you can do this, then you can be mindful about what you are feeling and able to think more clearly in the presence of this kind of "threat."

Let's revisit the supermarket situation: Michael grabbing the bag of chips is normal exploratory behavior. While saying no to him is often necessary, how can you say no while avoiding a tantrum?

When Michael grabs that bag, the first thing you have to do is calm your own stress reaction. Remember the key to Oxytocin Parenting is stopping to take a deep breath. The next step is to respond in a way that acknowledges your child and responds to him genuinely. A great tactic is to turn this into a game -- one that doesn't end with his mouth stuffed full of Cheetos.

Stop what you are doing and smile at Michael. Make eye contact and really look at him; see his beauty. Get down on one knee and allow him to hand you the chips. He'll do this, because he anticipates that you will open them for him. Examine them closely and affirm, "Chips, chips, chips!" Give Michael a little tickle, then stand up slowly and say, "What else can my big boy find? Come on and find mama something else yummy." Place the chips in the cart and keep walking. After you've gone a few steps and Michael is off finding something else to hand you, then you can put the chips back on the shelf.

You've transformed a battle of wills into a game of cooperation and exploration. But don't forget, he may really be hungry. You can also hand him a healthy snack to keep his tummy and hands occupied.

The Two-Year-Old Brain

The two-year-old brain is in overdrive. This is one of the most rapid stages of growth your child's brain will ever go through. Every minute, new cells are blossoming, nerve cells are connecting, and neural pathways being laid down.

Neuroscientists say, "Neurons that fire together, wire together." That is, groups of neurons that fire at the same time tend to be more likely to do so again. Especially during this period of rapid growth and connection, experiences that are repeated tend to create habits of reacting that may last a lifetime.

Among the most important of these habitual reactions are the ability to love and trust. John Bowlby, the pediatrician who first developed the theory of attachment, stated that the first three years of life establish the blueprint for all future relationships. Obviously, this is a very important stage in your child's development.

This is also the stage at which your child's stress response begins to firm up. According to neuroscientist Allan Shore, the amygdala completes its development sometime around the eighteenth month. By the time your child hits two, he has a fully functioning and sensitive

amygdala that functions much the same as that of an adult: It actively perceives threats in the environment, sends forth a cascade of stress hormones, and activates the autonomic nervous system.

While the two-year-old amygdala is fully functioning, the hippocampus is not. The hippocampus is the part of the brain responsible for short-term memory and assisting with clear thinking in the midst of stress. Its job is to receive the impulses of the amygdala, evaluate the threat based on stored memories of similar experiences, and then identify the best response.

But the hippocampus doesn't complete its development until around the thirty-sixth month of life, while the oxytocin response is still being trained and depends on co-regulation by the parents. It is not until your child reaches three that he has the ability to regulate himself: calm his stress, control his impulses, manage his aggression or overcome his anxiety.

Co-Regulation and the Two-Year-Old

Because your two-year-old's brain is not equipped to deal with significant stress, you need to continue to act as his co-regulator. Think of stress as rain. Rain is good, but too much of it can cause flooding, washing away buildings and the landscape itself.

Like rain, stress is important for your child's healthy development. But too much of it actually inhibits the growth of certain parts of the brain, washing away important neural pathways while causing the stress response to be over-reactive.

When your child is in distress, you should provide soothing as soon as possible. Scientists refer to this as helping the baby return from a dysregulated state back to a regulated state.

Simply put, dysregulation is being stressed out. It occurs when you are unable to successfully manage the degree of stress being experienced. Regulation is the ability to tolerate the level of stress that an individual will normally encounter during daily life. A baby's window of tolerance for stress begins at zero and expands with his development in the context of secure relationships with others.

When Michael goes into the grocery store, he's not reacting with the same fully-functioning brain you're using. He may be overwhelmed by all the sensory experiences, such as the glittery packaging designed to lure your grown-up brain into grabbing. Naturally, he is going to put his little explorer hands on every shiny, tasty, round, smooth, crinkly item he can find. It's actually healthy for him to want to do so.

When you use your Oxytocin Parenting skills to accept and encourage his exploration while keeping him safe -- even if it's just safe from a tummy-ache -- you not only reduce his stress and provide a model of impulse control; you also strengthen your bond with him.

At this stage in your child's development, stranger anxiety becomes much more pronounced. In some instances, the child may even resist and fear going to the father, even though the father has been there every day of the child's life.

Hyper- and Hypo-Arousal

In the supermarket, as well as in other places outside the home, the sensory experience can be intensely attractive, creating good stress in your child's system. But it's also important to remember that not all two-year-olds are explorers.

Bruce Perry, a brain expert and founder of the Child Trauma Academy in Houston, says that there are two different reactions to stress: hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal.

Hyper-arousal is behavior we tend to associate with male children: aggression and hyperactivity. Hypo-arousal manifests as withdrawal and depression, reactions we tend to identify as female. In fact, boys are twice as likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, while girls are much more likely to be diagnosed with depression. But nevertheless, both boys and girls are subject to both hyper- and hypo-arousal.

Boys may seem to be more prone to Terrible Two behavior, because we tend to focus more attention on the outward demonstration of behaviors than the inward. A two-year-old girl who clings to her parent when in public, or insists on being inside the basket, typically is not viewed with the same negativity as the one running and screaming up and down the aisles. However, you should remember that both children may be experiencing the same level of stress. The only difference is that one acts out, and the other "acts in."

Social Pressure vs. Development

It's not just a rapidly developing brain that can cause the twos to be terrible. When a child turns two, the social pressure goes up. All sorts of new expectations kick in. The two-year-old brain and body are changing fast, but so are the rules. No sooner does she acquire one new skill than she finds a new demand on her behavior. The behavior bar keeps getting raised.

She finds out she's supposed to use the potty. She hears, "Big girls do this, big girls don't do that." She wants to be a big girl, but it seems hard.

At the same time, while she's beginning to understand herself as an individual with a will of her own, she still has the needs for nurturing and protecting that a baby does. This conflict is almost as intense as it will be when she hits adolescence.

As an Oxytocin Parent, you must approach this stage with both wisdom and flexibility. Author Jean Liedloff in *The Continuum Concept* took a close look at Western parenting in relation to more traditional tribal approaches and found that we Westerners have a Oxytocin Parenting

tendency to really push the development of independence the moment our children begin to walk and babble. Now that Hannah can walk, she should also, feed herself, bathe without constant supervision, spend more time entertaining herself, and successfully socialize with others. When we pile it on, we really pile it on.

One of her key accomplishments between eighteen months and two years is the development of an individual identity. That's why the two-year-old's favorite word is "no!" In order for her to keep progressing, she must believe she can do things -- even when she can't or shouldn't. This becomes a major challenge for the parent.

On the other hand, Liedloff found that many tribal societies continued to foster dependence during the two-year-old stage of development. In many instances, parents continue to carry and hold their toddlers a great deal of the time.

She found that in these tribal communities, which are often viewed as primitive by Westerners, early dependence in their children actually bred an increase in security and emotional stability later in development, quite noticeable as early as three years of age. The children demonstrated greater socializing ability, more courage for tackling tasks, and more respect for their parents.

What does this mean for Oxytocin Parenting? Our societal expectations for our children's independence are at odds with their stage of neurologic growth. We're demanding a level of independence beyond what the child is capable of handling both neurologically and emotionally. Just because Hannah can walk now, that doesn't mean she should be walking all of the time. Even though she can feed herself, that does not mean that she should feed herself all the time. Nor should she go to sleep alone, play alone, or be expected to take sole responsibility for her hygiene.

The neurologic reality is that she is just barely equipped to do many of these things independently. Your demand that she do so only creates more stress for her.

Parent the Stage, Not the Age

Neuroscientist Bruce Perry says that when we stress, we regress. Your two-year-old may sometimes seem more like an infant again. Indeed, she has regressed and is reverting back to her development zone of comfort -- infancy. She acts more infantile -- kicking, screaming, biting, refusing to share or throwing her food around. At this point, you become more stressed, too. The amount of touch and loving interactions steadily decrease, and before long, the oxytocin response becomes overwhelmed by the stress response in both your brains.

In fact, your child actually needs you to step up your parental involvement and support. Remember, at two, she is fully equipped to experience fear and stress, but her ability to override them and regulate herself is still up to eighteen months in the future.

Don't worry, she won't remain regressed. It is natural for children to regress before moving to the next stage of development. Where we err is by seeing this regression as immaturity and stunted development rather than as a natural process. Then, we become more stressed, anxious, and forceful in our attempts to make her be "a big girl now." This increases her own stress, thereby creating exactly what we fear, our child not maturing appropriately.

Even though she's experiencing all kinds of firsts, the two-year-old still needs her parents' very active engagement in order to continue to foster her development. Because the brain's development is spiking during this period, it's an excellent time to expand and reinforce the development of the oxytocin response.

On the other hand, a decrease in bonding activities including holding, carrying, nursing or feeding during this period of rapid brain growth can lead to a significant decrease in the opportunities for triggering the oxytocin response. During a time when a child needs the most active teaching and reinforcement of her oxytocin response, too often we begin the slow and steady decrease in opportunities for connection.

You may be afraid that by doing things for your child instead of demanding that she do them herself, you'll make her too dependent on you. This can lead to you trying to impose your will on her in order to teach her how to become an adult.

Socialization Begins at Home

We tend to be in a rush to socialize our children, because we don't want them to miss out on the mastery of any important development stages. It's important to remember that in Oxytocin Parenting, nothing need be rushed. In fact, the slower you are willing to go in following your child's natural development, the more enriched his oxytocin experience will be. This experience will establish the framework for his ability to successfully navigate the emotions and behaviors required for new relationships.

Because the brain is so sensitive around this stage, children can oftentimes be overwhelmed. When this happens, it's not uncommon that children, especially boys, will hit, bite, spit or be unwilling to share.

Such behaviors can be displayed by girls, as well. However, girls who are overwhelmed often withdraw and try to isolate themselves.

This natural reaction to being overwhelmed means that it's critical to lay the foundation of socialization at home. Safe at home, he can continue to experience oxytocin in relationship and return to calm more quickly when he gets stressed.

Learn to attune yourself to the non-verbal cues that he is beginning to feel overwhelmed. He will provide you these cues through facial gestures, body posture, tone of voice, and actions. He may intrude into the personal space of other children, take things from others, or becoming more clingy and demanding of you. Realize that these behaviors don't mean he

is being mean or unkind. They are simply signals that he is not managing very well on his own and needs you to help him regulate.

At these times, he may be a little resistant when you move in and redirect him, or pick him up and remove him from a situation. He may fuss, cry, kick and throw a tantrum. Reassure him that he is okay, that you can see he is becoming stressed, and that you want to keep him safe.

Reassure him verbally and take him to a quiet place, then sit down and relax your arms. Don't fight to hold on to him; instead, give him space to step away from you. By this point he will have already begun to experience his oxytocin kicking in again. If he chooses to stay in your arms, that's great. Otherwise, just stay nearby, continue to breathe and tell him it's going to be okay. He will begin to respond to you by calming down.

The key to making it through this stage of learning and development is to remember that he is responding as much to your state as he is to what you say. If you are stressed and anxious, this reinforces his current state. But if you can breathe and settle yourself, be present and mindful to him, you will engage his entire bodymind system and initiate his oxytocin response.

Fostering True Independence

Fear leads us to want to hold our children close when we should be letting go. On the other hand, our fear of our children not moving forward prompts us to push them forward when we should be holding close. The key to Oxytocin Parenting is flexibility and awareness as opposed to fear and control.

When you remember that brain development is most enhanced by nurturing, you can see that allowing her to experience her dependence while continuing to enjoy your care is the best thing you can do to ultimately foster secure independence. Oxytocin Parenting focuses on meeting the child's actual developmental needs, rather than dictating at what stage her development should be.

Co-Sleeping

According to a March 2010 survey by the National Sleep Foundation, between 8 and 28 percent of parents sleep with a child or infant; 28 percent of Asian-Americans did so, 22 percent of Hispanics, 15 percent of African-Americans and 8 percent of Caucasian parents did so.

The survey didn't consider how old the children who were sleeping were in the family bed, but two years old is frequently the turning point. A child who is beginning to walk and talk is no longer seen as an infant, so parents -- as well as family and friends -- begin to think it inappropriate for the parents to continue letting the child sleep with them.

However, this is a stage at which your child seems to constantly encounter new expectations and challenges. If he's enjoyed the comfort of being close to you while he sleeps until this point, he will need it just as much or even more as he begins to explore his identity as an individual.

Remember, the first goal of Oxytocin Parenting is to provide as much connection and love as your child needs -- at every stage.

Chapter 9

Oxytocin Parenting the Twos in Action

Let's take a look at Oxytocin Parenting in action with normal, rambunctious two-year-olds.

Dad takes Sophia to her weekly play date with her friends. Usually Mom takes Sophia, but Dad volunteered today. When they get there, Sophia doesn't want to play. She insists on crawling into Daddy's arms and clinging to him. At first, Dad gently consoles Sophia and tells her everything is okay, so she should go and play. She refuses. When the other parents comment that Sophia is usually happy to play with the others, Dad begins to feel frustrated. His natural inclination is to push Sophia into play or to threaten to leave.

But this time, he does something different. He sits down on a bench with Sophia and begins to do yoga breathing, inhaling through his nose and exhaling from his mouth slowly and rhythmically. He is calming his own anxiety. He lets Sophia cling to him, and he clings to her, as the two of them begin to experience the satisfaction of oxytocin.

As Dad begins to calm down, he realizes that Sophia is not accustomed to having this time with him, so she'd rather be with him than go play with the other kids. With this understanding Dad picks Sophia up, and they over to the play area together. He sits and begins playing with Sophia and the other children without forcing Sophia to leave his lap. Once Sophia's own stress has subsided, thanks to the triggering of her oxytocin response, she begins to play as well. In a short period of time, Sophia is engaging with the others in toddler play, and Dad is over chatting with the other parents.

Mom takes Ethan to the park. Ethan is one of the most active and physically developed two-year-olds in the area. He immediately begins running toward the big jungle gym. Though Mom wants him to explore and be all the boy he can be, she is still worried about him falling and breaking his little neck. She feels her pulse rate begin to rise.

As Ethan runs away from her, Mom checks in with her own anxiety. She realizes she doesn't need to run; she can walk at a quick pace to stay close to him. Ethan falls but is up in no time, still heading for the jungle gym. Mom continues to breathe and be thankful for her strong little guy. When they reach the play structure, Mom picks up Ethan and begins touching the bars along with Ethan, saying, "Wow. What a fun place to play." She even helps Ethan to climb up onto the first set of bars while keeping a good hold on him.

Without anxiety about Ethan hurting himself, Mom is able to be in the moment with him. She is attentive to his attempts to try a little more as she maintains the feeling of safety associated with physical touch -- as well as the actual safety of keeping him from falling. She is able to maintain a steady, regulated state, which enables Ethan to learn to climb in a more controlled way.

Mom and Chloe stop at the store to pick up things for dinner. They're running late, so Mom hopes to just run in, grab a few items, and then rush back out. Typically, Mom would let Chloe walk ahead of her in the store and explore. But today, because she's in a hurry, she decides to carry Chloe instead.

By opting to carry Chloe, she is able to maintain physical containment, which also triggers the oxytocin response. This helps Chloe to remain calm and connected to Mom while in the store. But her load of goods becomes too heavy, so she has to put Chloe down. Rather than becoming anxious about Chloe wandering away or getting into things, Mom grabs some additional items, takes a few steps in front of Chloe and then waits. She prompts gently, "Come on, baby, let's go," and moves on another few steps.

In this I lead/you follow experience, Chloe is able to explore the new world but at the same time remain connected to Mom as the safety figure and leader. When Chloe becomes distracted, Mom waits momentarily before taking a few more steps and prompting Chloe again. "Come on, baby, follow Mommy." They make it to through check-out and out to the car without losing more than a couple of minutes -- taking much less time than if they'd had to stop for a tantrum.

These stories sound simple because they are.

The key to making the two year stage of development more manageable is to remember that your child responds to the way you are more than to what you say. If you are stressed and anxious, this reinforces his stress. But if you can breathe and settle yourself, be present and mindful to him, you will engage his body-mind in the oxytocin response.

When you learn to calm yourself and connect with your toddler, you'll discover ways to meet his needs. And when his needs are met, the result is joy and security. In fact, the Terrible Twos may not be a normal stage at all. They may be the result of the hands-off approach we've been told is necessary for a child's development. If you focus on keeping connected and finding plenty of opportunities for the oxytocin response, you may find that the twos are a lot of fun.

Traditional vs. Oxytocin Parenting

Parenting fads come and go. One expert decides it's better to let your child cry so he learns that life is hard; another decides that you should wear your baby as much as possible. Only in the past few years has science begun to connect a child's early experience -- the way he's mothered -- with what's happening in his brain.

Instead of, "This is just what you do with babies," we can now say, "Here's why you want to do these things with your baby."

Using this new information, we can objectively decide what we want for our child. In this section, we'll compare the traditional view of some parenting practices with the way Oxytocin Parenting approaches them.

Carrying Your Child

Traditional View: I have to carry you, because you're not very good at walking yet, and you can't keep up. I enjoy carrying you sometimes, but I will encourage you to learn to scoot, crawl, and then walk as soon as possible. You will be more mobile and able to explore the world. Once you begin walking, I will carry you less and less, mostly when I'm in a hurry or there are lots of adults around.

Oxytocin Parenting View: I have to carry you, because you're not very good at walking yet, and you can't keep up. I also realize that when I carry you, it helps to keep you regulated and calm, it releases oxytocin, helps develop the connection circuits in your brain and builds our bond. There will be plenty of time for you to walk, and this will develop naturally. I will carry you as much as I can for as long as I can because I understand the benefits of this practice.

Holding Your Child

Traditional View: I hold you when you are upset or we are playing but you need to start being independent. Holding you too much can spoil you and lead you to believe that you need to be in my arms all of the time. If I hold you whenever you want, you may grow up to believe that all your demands should be met. The older you get, the less I'll hold you.

Oxytocin View: The more I hold you, the closer I feel to you and the closer you feel to me. When you are in my arms and I am calm, you get washed with all of the wonderful feelings that come with oxytocin and relationship. I'm not worried about holding you too much because I know it helps you to feel more secure and develop at an advanced pace. I will lead and you can follow as we explore the world together. I will continue to hold you as long as you want me to.

Soothing Objects

Traditional View: You're almost two and too old to depend on your soothing objects -- and they're getting ratty, besides. Soon, you'll be going to school, and kids will make fun of you if you still use your blankie or suck your thumb. So, let's start weaning you away from them now, so it's not a big deal later.

Oxytocin View: Even though you're getting older, I know that your favorite objects continue to soothe you. I won't fight with you over these things. In fact, when you want to hold them, I'll not only make them available to you, I'll hold you on my lap and spend time with you while you suck or cuddle. I know that what you really crave is the oxytocin release that comes with our relationship. When I have to be away from you, reinforcing the soothing they give you will make your comfort objects even more comforting.

Keeping Him Close

Traditional View: It's time that you start exploring the world more. First it's crawling, then walking, and now running. There is no real need for you to be too close to me unless you need something. Of course I love you, but I really would like to get this project done. Now that you can play by yourself, you should go do it. Just don't get too far away, because that scares me.

Oxytocin View: I love that you are getting older and can walk and run. That's wonderful. However, I still need to keep you close, because the world can be overwhelming. As your brain is developing I don't want you getting too stressed, so I want you to stay close enough that I can help you regulate. I can continue enriching you with the calm connection, so that you can gradually explore farther away less anxiety and more ability to assimilate what you experience.

Feeding Her

Traditional View: I need you to learn to feed yourself. It's important that you learn the fine motor skills necessary to manipulate silverware, and it will save me time when I don't have to feed you. I'm so proud of my big girl, the way she gets that food right in there. Slow down though honey, you don't want to put too much in your mouth you might choke. Food goes in your mouth and on the plate not on the floor.

Oxytocin View: As you learn to feed yourself, it's important that we still share the process of eating together. I held you and fed you for so long, so we are both conditioned to need and enjoy that. To help you learn, I'll model how to do it, instead of giving you a lot of verbal instructions. I'll feed you a bite, and then help you feed yourself a bite. It's not that important that you start feeding yourself so soon. As your fine motor skills continue to develop, you'll get the hang of it.

Offering the Breast or Bottle

Traditional View: You're growing up. It's time to act like it. Use your sippee cup, drink out of regular cups, and act your age. Since you've been weaned from the bottle, there is no way you are going to go back and start using one again -- and that includes pacifiers. It's just not appropriate for your age, plus I don't want you to become dependent on it. It's hard enough dealing with your thumb sucking.

Oxytocin View: When you are stressed, you will revert to an earlier emotional age. Many parents consider this immature behavior in their children, yet I know that it's a reflection of a developmental state you are still trying to accomplish. From time to time, when you are regressed, I will let your nurse or fill a bottle for you. I know this soothing will bathe your brain in oxytocin and give you an opportunity to work through a stressful developmental stage successfully. I know that this is a temporary need, and I am willing to meet it for you. I know that when you no longer need your bottle, you will not accept it or you will tell me so.

Communicating

Traditional View: You are becoming a real little person! You're developing your verbal skills, so, while I'll still do some baby talk with you, I'm going to communicate in grown-up language. When I make a request, you need to begin minding me and doing what I say. I know this is hard, especially when you are two, but you must learn respect and compliance now so that you won't be an out-of-control teen.

Oxytocin View: Wow, you are growing up so fast and becoming such a little person. Nevertheless, I can't let your mobility and verbal development fool me. You are still much closer to a baby than you are to a teenager, and I need to keep that in mind. It is important for me to talk to you normally but always to listen, watch, and respond to your cues.

Usually, it's still better for me to pick you up and direct your actions instead of expecting you to understand and respond to what I tell you. I will try to pay attention to your cues so that you can learn how to do it, too. Then, when you're a teenager, you'll know how to listen, respond and be flexible.

Socializing With Other Children

Traditional View: Now it's time start socializing. At this point, you need less of me and more of that out there. Go on, you can do it, don't be shy. There's nothing to be afraid of. All you have to do is get in there "Hi little guy. Here's my little guy. His name is Johnny. Look at you big boys playing together."

Oxytocin Parenting view: Socializing is important, but primary socialization begins at home between the members of our family. It is here that you learn how to be in

relationship with others in the most secure way possible. It is within our home that you learn to experience the warmth of oxytocin in relationship. When we venture into a social setting, I'll follow your lead and won't move too far away until you are truly ready. To teach you how to play with others, I will join you in play and help keep the interactions calm and gentle. I want you to learn that new relationships can be as warm as our relationships at home.

Action Steps for Parenting the Twos

- Carry him more Hold her more Keep him closer to you Feed her sitting on your lap
- more Reintroduce the bottle at important times such as waking, in the afternoon,
- and the
- evening
- Stay close by as he plays with other children

Conclusion

Bryan Post's Seven Gifts of Oxytocin Parenting

Oxytocin Parenting is a lifelong practice. Because it's at odds with more than six decades of expert advice, and it may be very different from the way you were parented, think of this new way of parenting as a process with inevitable bumps. When you parent this way, you give your child gifts that lead to secure attachment and a strong oxytocin response, which is the foundation for emotional health, social conscience, and intellectual success.

Here are the Seven Gifts of Oxytocin Parenting:

The First Gift: The gift of understanding that your child's world begins or began in the womb. Some of the most important challenges that your child will experience can be linked the time between conception and birth. Understand that your developing baby experiences everything you experience. Your body and that little package inside of you are alive and responsive to your every thought. Engage your baby as if it were already here with acceptance, understanding, excitement, and lots of love.

Sometimes, a woman and her family are afraid to feel joy at a new pregnancy, because they're afraid the pregnancy won't come to term. What if you are a single parent with the stressors of life weighing down on you, a woman who has experienced domestic violence or a couple that didn't plan for this baby and is uncertain that you really want it? Many parents have such thoughts. It's normal to feel anxiety and uncertainty, but understand that the baby receives these messages.

For parents in these circumstances, it's important to seek help, whether that's from a social worker or psychotherapist or the wisdom of a friend. Share your anxieties, issues, and concerns. When you share these feelings with someone you trust, your brain releases oxytocin, which triggers the relaxation response in your body and activates your brain circuits for love and connection.

Once your baby is born, begin talking to her in a loving voice about the concerns and fears that you experienced. Acknowledging those fears within the context of love and connection begins to teach the baby that stress can be handled within loving relationship.

The Second Gift: The gift of your healthy emotional state. The next greatest gift you can give your child is a calm and relaxed state.

Emotional regulation is your ability to manage stress within a window of tolerance. As you become a new parent, you will encounter stressors unlike any you've experienced before. There is the alarm of your baby's cry, which doesn't merely alert you to your baby's state of distress but also triggers your own stress reaction inside your brain. There's also sleep

deprivation, the bustle of friends and family visiting, fluctuating hormones in the mother's body, as well as all the other demands of life.

As you face these new challenges and demands, recognize your own limits. Express your frustrations, and find positive ways to deal with the inevitable stress. These tactics may include conscious breathing, exercise, prayer, meditation, relaxation techniques, journaling, eating well, and breastfeeding. All of these activities will help to sustain your window of tolerance.

You may be wondering why we mention breastfeeding as a self-care activity. Breastfeeding is not only the provision of vital nourishment for the child. A breastfeeding mother continually triggers the release of oxytocin, the anti-stress hormone, for both her and the baby. Dads can also experience the oxytocin response by staying included in the moments of joy shared with the mother and baby. By holding the mother as she breastfeeds or lying next to mother and child, a father can share in the oxytocin experience.

This gift isn't always as easy to give as it may seem. As you gift your child with your own emotional regulation and self-understanding, it's important to revisit what it was like when you were a baby. These early experiences can still have a profound impact on you, activating your own stored memories. If, as an infant, you experienced stress because of a depressed parent, an absent parent, or you were placed for adoption, all of the core emotions associated with these early experiences will most likely resurface when your own baby is born.

By staying proactive and revisiting your past, you will be able to have greater control over any negative associations you may have when your baby cries and makes demands on you. This is an important activity for both mother and father. Try journaling about your earliest experiences, talking to your parents, and processing your feelings with a friend. The point is to be able to identify if there are any triggers that may get pulled by something as simple as your baby's cry. Seeking to gift your baby with your own self-understanding is much like parenting, not always easy but certainly growth-promoting.

For future new fathers, their ability to ensure the emotional well-being of the mother is tantamount to all else, for this permits the baby to feel secure. For the single parent, it's important to develop a network of friends and family members who can give you and your baby both practical and emotional support. This gift is too important to be overlooked, and gifting your child with your emotional regulation is too important to be denied.

The Third Gift: The Gift of Attachment. John Bowlby, the father of attachment, believed that the earliest experiences of a child's life create an indelible imprint upon their future. He stated that the first three years of our lives establish the blueprints for all of our future relationships. So, these first years of your child's life are some of the most important. Neuroscientist Allan Shore, author of *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*, says

that attachment is the dyadic regulation of emotion. In other words, attachment is the foundation for how two people regulate emotions together.

There are several components which go into developing healthy attachment. These include eye contact, attunement, meeting needs, skin-to-skin contact, holding, rocking, singing, laughing, and sharing food. Essentially, any experience between you and your child which generates joy will assist attachment. Any experience which generates stress and anxiety will challenge it.

Attachment is a natural process and is dependent on two critical components: oxytocin and regulation. When you can successfully gift your child with your own self-understanding, you're engaging your child in a more regulated way. When a father can support the mother to feel soothed and supported, the mother can do the same for the baby. When you're regulated, you have the greatest potential for creating an oxytocin-rich environment.

The oxytocin response is learned over time. You will be teaching your child's brain to trigger the oxytocin response each time you are mindfully present and responsive to his calls of distress: hunger, sleepiness, fear, in need of a diaper change, playing, etc. Each interaction based in love triggers the oxytocin response and keeps the body in a state of calm. Because this is a conditioned response, the more you do it for your child, the more he will learn to do it for himself.

The Fourth Gift: The gift of accepting emotional expression. One of the most challenging areas we experience as parents has to do with crying. To cry or not to cry – that is the question!

You can never really keep your baby from distress or crying. By providing a relationship rich in oxytocin, you can most certainly diminish distressing episodes, but they will continue to occur before you realize what's happening. At these times, your baby will experience some distress, but this isn't a bad thing -- as long as it's temporary. Once you soothe your baby and trigger oxytocin, she returns to a calm state. The momentary burst of stress is good for triggering a growth experience, and the interruption of that experience permits it to become associated with something positive in your baby's system.

When your baby cries, accept it and communicate to her that it's okay and natural. Practice picking up your infant, rocking her, patting her, and simply saying, "Oh, my baby is upset. It's okay to be upset, Honey. Mama's here. Just let it out. Let all that stress come out." Starting this practice with your baby will lead to a child who is unafraid of expressing her emotions; she'll be better equipped to soothe her emotions in the future.

A baby who grows up feeling heard and feels that her voice is accepted is a baby who will grow into a child, teen, and adult who knows how to use her voice for good rather than bad. Teaching your baby that emotional expression is okay and acceptable is one of the greatest gifts you can offer.

The Fifth Gift: The gift of skin-to-skin contact. “Essentially, first touch – not only the first moment of physical touch, but the touch that the infant receives at the beginning of his or her life – is the single most influential factor that will determine a future life of love, or one of loneliness. ... First touch is that important,” says Marianna Caplan, author of *Untouched*.

It is estimated that in the United States, we touch our babies less than in any other country. Yet, yet touch is one of the most crucial keys to healthy emotional development.

Gentle touch in a trusting relationship causes your child's brain to release oxytocin, soothing his nervous system and building his attachment system. There are many ways you can offer loving touch to your child. When he's a baby, gentle massage and holding him against the bare skin of your chest provides a deep sense of security and comfort. As he gets older, bath time is a good opportunity to let him experience your touch, as you wash him and put on lotion. As he gets more independent, your skin-to-skin contact may take the form of holding hands or placing your hand on the back of his neck.

At every age, skin-to-skin contact is a crucial emotional gift to give your child. Do as much of it as you possibly can. When it comes to positive touch, there is no such thing as too much.

The Sixth Gift: The gift of a regulated helper. Child trauma neuroscience pioneer Bruce Perry discusses in his lectures how in generations past, the ratio of children to adults was one child to four adults. Today, that ratio has reversed: Now, there are four children cared for by one adult.

Children have extraordinary needs and require a tremendous amount of time, energy, patience, understanding, and flexibility. Few babies have the experience of completely being the center of attention for several years at a time. Due to divorce, two-parent working families, and the stress of commuting, getting through traffic, and fighting off the constant interruptions of cell phones, beepers, and deadlines, it's a wonder that we don't have more deeply disturbed children than ever.

A regulated helper may be an individual or group of individuals capable of being calm and present in the midst of our own stress, providing us with necessary support to give our babies and children the best.

A regulated helper can come in many forms. It can be a close friend, loving family member, your child's physician, or a hired nanny. The point is that raising children requires enormous emotional presence and peace of mind if we are to bestow them with confidence, security, and attachment. Having a reliable and trusted friend to sit with the baby while the parents have a night out is invaluable. This presence in the life of your family can lend

much support in helping you restore your own regulatory state and combat the resentments and frustrations that can be a part of daily parenting.

A baby-friendly doctor can be a huge support. Mindfully selecting a physician who is open, caring, unhurried, reassuring, and present, may seem like a stretch, but it isn't impossible. There are many baby-centered physicians out there who love working with newborns and small children. Many are wise first and medical savvy second. They understand that helping you to feel supported and understood is the best way to bring about both emotional and physical health for their new little patient.

Protect your child well emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

The Seventh Gift: The gift of love. The thread which binds all of the above gifts together is love. There is no fear within love. Mindfulness, which involves slowing down and paying attention to your thoughts and actions, is one of the most immediate ways to display love to your child. A mindful parent is one who brings a healthy oxytocin responsive system into their baby's life. Whenever possible, think oxytocin! What can you do in this moment to bring soothing and security to your child? Always begin with yourself. Breathe deeply and slowly, calm yourself, and remember that nothing is more important in this moment than the exchange you are sharing with your child. An excellent resource for mindfulness in parenting is a book by Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn called *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*.

It isn't easy to parent from love in a society so dominated by fear and disconnection. Mothers still have to battle the awkward looks of others when breastfeeding, fathers have to face shaming by other men when they cry, cuddle, and snuggle their babies. It's terribly sad that we have become much more comfortable operating from our fears than our feelings of love.

Remember: Love is the most nurturing, healing energy force in the world. It is open, responsive, flexible, patient, and understanding. Yet this is not common. You must continuously work to be mindful of your fear so that you can transcend it and choose love. Remember that it isn't tomorrow that matters to your child – it's only today, right now, this moment.

Learn More Today!



At Fear to Love, we don't hand you a binder full of theory and wish you luck. We give you a battle-tested roadmap to stop the screaming, end the chaos, and finally bring peace back into your home.



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Whether you're a parent trapped in daily emotional firefights or a professional drowning in broken systems, our programs are designed to do one thing: get real healing started—fast.



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About the Authors



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Susan Kuchinskas is the author of *The Chemistry of Connection: How the oxytocin response can help you find trust, intimacy and love* (New Harbinger 2009). She writes about science and technology for a variety of publications, and blogs about oxytocin at [Hug the Monkey](http://HugtheMonkey.com). Find out more and contact her via her website, ChemistryofConnection.com.



Bryan Post

Bryan Post is the founder of the [Post Institute for Family-Centered Therapy](http://PostInstitute.com). A retired licensed clinical social worker, Bryan has spent the past 15 years dedicated to understanding the impact of stress and trauma on the lives of children, adults, and families. His pioneering work in the fields of attachment and trauma have been referenced and taught at several graduate schools and medical schools throughout the country. An internationally renowned clinician, lecturer, and best-selling co-author and author of several books, videos, and audio programs, he has traveled throughout the world providing expert treatment and consultation to a variety of groups. He publishes [Oxytocin Central](http://OxytocinCentral.com), a source for oxytocin information.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider writing a review on Amazon.com. Your review will help others find the book and make the purchase decision. Please click now to [write your review of Oxytocin Parenting](#).

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