Description

Building Relationships: Connecting With Baby During Pregnancy

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Pregnancy marks the beginning of a lifelong connection between women and birthing people and their babies. It's a common misconception that maternal/infant bonding begins the moment the baby is born; for many, the rush of love felt at the point of birth, is a culmination of feelings – emotional attachment steadily developed during pregnancy. The notion of bonding during pregnancy has been studied for many years and the relationship between a woman and her unborn baby is often described as maternal-fetal attachment (MFA) by researchers.[1]

> For health professionals, having awareness of the level of attachment someone has to their unborn baby can help with assessing prenatal depression.

How important is MFA during pregnancy?

When mothers connect with their babies in the womb, it can strengthen the bond between them both, which lays a great foundation for the emotional development and wellbeing of both mother and baby. Women who have a healthy attachment with their unborn baby are more likely to have a desire to protect their baby from harm and to nurture emotional wellbeing during infancy and early childhood.[2]

These connections can be made early in pregnancy. The senses in an unborn baby begin to develop early. Their hearing develops at around 18 weeks, followed quickly by touch and sight in the following weeks. When parents talk to their babies in the womb, the baby may respond to this through movement. This is particularly more evident in the third trimester.[3]

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What ways can women connect with their unborn babies?

Most of the research points towards voice and touch, with touch being the most optimal for promoting MFA. Touch is

thought to provoke more responses from the fetus than voice. Massaging the abdomen during pregnancy is a popular way to enhance MFA as it has many benefits.

As well as connecting with the baby by encouraging a response to abdominal touch, massage can help with keeping the mother's skin supple and healthy. It can also increase oxytocin levels and lower stress hormones in the mother, thus promoting a healthy environment for growth and wellbeing.[4]

Massage in pregnancy itself has a list of other benefits including:

- Inducing a state of relaxation that could support optimal foetal positioning.
- Reduction in the discomfort associated with oedema as massage stimulates the lymphatic system.
- Increased blood flow to the placenta and uterus.
- Supporting digestion and elimination via increased blood flow.
- Reduction in the chance of postnatal depression and anxiety.[5]

Midwives can optimise health and wellbeing by suggesting a combination of connecting with their baby through voice, along with sharing the benefits of abdominal massage to them and their babies. **TPM**

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