

The First *1000 Days*

*How the relationship between mother and baby shapes
emotional and cognitive development*



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Welcome. *You're already doing something important.*

If you're reading this guide, you're probably pregnant, have a new baby in your arms, or care deeply about a little person in your life. That already says a lot.

In these pages we share what research tells us about attachment — the deep emotional bond between a baby and the people who care for them — and why the first 1000 days, from conception to around two years of age, matter so much for how a child's brain, emotions and relationships develop.

This isn't a checklist, and it isn't about being a perfect parent. It's an invitation to understand what's happening beneath the everyday moments of care, and to know that connection can be rebuilt.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

We talk about “mother” and “mum” because much of the research describes this relationship. Everything here also applies to fathers, partners and any primary caregiver.



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What is attachment?

Attachment has proven to be one of the most important influences on a child's development. Thanks to advances in technology and research, we can now describe it through an interpersonal neuropsychological lens, and understand how it lays the foundations for a person's development — with effects that reach every area of life, from conception to adulthood.

At its most basic, attachment can be defined as a deep and lasting emotional bond between two people — mother and baby — in which each seeks closeness and feels safer in the presence of the other. This evolutionary mechanism is essential not only for the development of behaviour and cognitive functions, but also for self-regulation and the emotional and social capacities that help us adapt to the world around us (Schoré, 2019a).

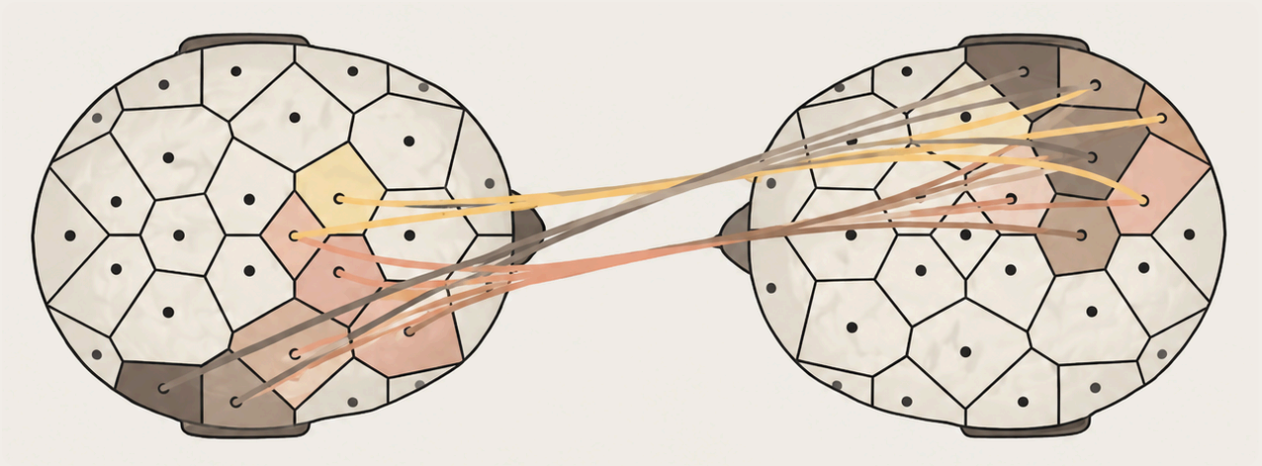
Its impact is so lasting that Schoré (1996) adds that the whole self-organisation of the developing brain happens in the context of a relationship with another self, another brain.

A relationship that shapes the brain

Because early interactions have such a strong impact on a child's developing brain, Schoré (2019a) speaks of **modern attachment theory**: the understanding that this relationship creates neurobiological changes in the structure of the brain, laying the foundations for future development.

Research shows that when there is connection between mother and baby at the start of life, the right hemisphere of the brain — responsible for emotions, non-verbal communication and unconscious information — becomes active in both. Schoré highlights the role of the right brain in shaping who we are and how we relate to others.

These right-brain-to-right-brain interactions in infancy and early childhood (the first 1000 days) support the development of our sense of self, our unconscious processes, our attachment patterns and our capacity to regulate our emotions.



Right brain to right brain: early connection happens largely without words — through faces, voices, touch and rhythm.

03

The language between mother and baby

A mother uses affective communication — visual, facial, auditory and touch-and-gesture signals — to regulate her baby's inner states through the autonomic and central nervous systems.

In essence, through this affective communication, the unconscious right brain of the mother communicates with the unconscious right brain of the baby. When they are in tune, the baby experiences emotional synchrony; when they are out of tune, the baby may move into states of over-arousal or under-arousal. These early experiences help shape our autonomic and central nervous systems, and with them, our capacity for self-regulation.

This is why, when connection feels difficult, support for the mother–baby relationship can make a meaningful difference.

04

It begins before birth

We now also know how important the relationship between mother and baby is even before birth. Schore (2019a) describes how the relationships in the womb, and in the days and early years after birth, can have direct and lasting effects on a child's brain development and behaviour.

Face to face: finding a shared rhythm

Research consistently points to the long-term importance of the connection between mother and baby for healthy brain development. Face-to-face interactions, which appear at around two months of age, are brief, highly stimulating, emotionally rich moments that expose babies to a great deal of social and cognitive information.

This attunement, synchrony and way of communicating lays the foundations for both emotional (right hemisphere) and cognitive (left hemisphere) development. Synchrony develops as mother and baby learn each other's rhythmic structure and adjust their behaviour to fit it (Lester, Hoffman & Brazelton, 1985). To enter this conversation, a mother needs to tune in — body and mind — to the rhythms of her baby's inner states.

What your baby needs to feel

Early, affectionate interaction between mother and baby is essential. And for it to happen, mothers often need to feel supported and emotionally held by the people around them too.

Unconditional acceptance and warm communication happen when a mother can respond to her baby: answering their cries by meeting physical and emotional needs, and connecting through social play — movement, smiles, gestures and a tone of voice that conveys closeness and calm.

Over time, the baby internalises the feeling of being loved and accepted unconditionally, of feeling safe and regulated by their mother. This is what later allows them to explore the world freely, knowing that mum will be there as a **secure base** to return to in moments of doubt, fear or uncertainty.



Your baby needs to feel, deep inside, that they are loved and accepted unconditionally.

Repair is possible

We know that, for many different reasons, mothers can sometimes find it hard to build this connection. That's why it matters so much to know that this bond **can be repaired** — that it's possible to reconnect, and that it's okay to ask for help to find the way back.

Caring for and supporting the mother is just as important as caring for and supporting the baby.

WORTH REMEMBERING

- Connection shapes the developing brain — especially in the first 1000 days.
- Babies learn to regulate through us, long before they can do it on their own.
- No one is in tune all the time. Moments of disconnection are part of every relationship; what matters is coming back together.
- Mothers need care and support too.

Small everyday moments *of connection*

None of this needs special equipment or a perfect routine. Connection is built in ordinary moments, many times a day.

Respond to crying

Crying is communication. Responding with food, comfort or closeness tells your baby: *I'm here.*

Share face-to-face moments

From around two months, short moments of eye contact, smiles and “conversation” are rich experiences for the developing brain. Follow your baby's lead, and let them look away when they need a pause.

Use your voice

A warm, calm tone of voice helps settle your baby's nervous system, long before they understand words.

Hold, rock and carry

Touch and closeness help your baby feel safe in their body and in the relationship.

Learn each other's rhythm

Notice your baby's cues and pace. There's no script — you get to know each other over time.

Let yourself be held too

Accept support from the people around you. Feeling cared for makes it easier to care.

If you need support

If you're finding it hard to connect with your baby, or you're feeling low, anxious or overwhelmed, you're not alone and it isn't your fault. Please talk to your GP, child health nurse or a psychologist. In Australia, the **PANDA National Helpline** supports expecting and new parents: **1300 726 306**. In an emergency, call **000**.

ABOUT US

We are a Perth-based psychology practice founded by Francisca Lessa Stewart, Registered Psychologist. We support children, parents and families through attachment, early development, and perinatal and infant mental health — in English and Spanish.

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

The First 1000 Days workshop

A warm, practical space for expecting parents and parents of babies aged 0–2 to understand secure attachment, bonding and early emotional development.

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ONE-TO-ONE SUPPORT

Book a session

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