

Mother's Kiss



There are many people who are not close to their mothers. After 30 years of seeing the way some mothers treat their children, I don't blame them in the least. Which is not to say that the medical or nursing profession should not take some of the blame for the lack of affection that some mothers feel for their offspring. Some mothers do not instinctively love their children and have difficulty with their emotions after the birth. This is the great hidden secret of motherhood and it is not abnormal. Such a mother will seldom make her real feelings known since everyone expects her to go gaga over the newborn. Most of these mothers grow to love their children dearly, much more than their children ever love them. But some never do.

What is abnormal is when doctors and nurses place obstructions in the way of mothers attaching to their babies. The classic example is removing the baby from the mother as soon as she births. Or isolating the baby in a nursery. Why shouldn't the baby be left with the mother (and father) so that the baby can be touched and kissed?

Why do mother's kiss their babies? We expect mothers to kiss their babies after birth. One would think that this is simply because of the psychological bond that has formed or is forming between mother and child. While this is the case, there are also some other very compelling biological reasons as to why this occurs.

Those of you who have seen an animal give birth to its young, or watch the Animal Channel, will have seen that just after the birth, the mother spends a lot of time licking its child. Licking exposes its five senses to the young, so that the mother knows the taste, smell, feel, sound, and sight of her new baby. In this way, the mother claims the child as her own.

When a human mother gives birth to a baby in an environment which allows her immediate and free access to her child, the mother performs similar behaviours, called claiming behaviours. She will caress the child, exploring the softness of





the baby's skin and counting and fondling the fingers and toes. She will marvel over how much the baby looks like her or her husband or another family member, at the colour of the hair and eyes, and other physical features. She hears the baby's cries and learns to distinguish her baby's cry from all others. As she leans down to kiss the child, she smells the scent of her new baby, and through the act of kissing the baby, she actually learns to know his taste. She has exposed her five senses to the baby so that she attaches to the baby, feeling that the baby is now her own. It is not unusual to note that women who are deprived of the privacy and opportunity for bonding immediately after birth often state that there is an emotional distance between them and their babies, that they are never really sure that the baby is theirs. Claiming behaviours such as kissing the baby provide not only emotional but biological attachment.

There is also a very real health benefit for the baby in terms of kissing. When a mother kisses her baby, she 'samples' those pathogens that are on the baby's body and face, the very ones that the baby is about to swallow. These samples are taken up by the mother's lymphoid organs like the tonsils. White blood cells in the lymphatic tissues, called memory B cells, specific for those pathogens sampled, are stimulated and re-stimulated with each kiss. These B cells then migrate to the mother's breasts where they produce just those antibodies that the baby needs. We talk a lot about breastmilk, and about how it conveys antibodies to the infant and helps to prevent illness. However, the antibodies that the mother has made to the germs around her while pregnant convey little immediate help to the infant. It is the germs in the infant's environment at present, the ones he is in contact with right now which he needs protection from. Beyond its obvious pleasurable and attachment-promoting value, kissing the baby is a very important biological activity

