

5 Surrender and self-nurture More about relaxation

The thought of a baby practicing yogic relaxation may sound strange at first, but it is the perfect counterpart to the more active yoga postures. If you integrate relaxation into your yoga practice with your baby, it becomes an essential component that makes it complete. The point is to relax jointly with your baby: your own relaxation is just as important as hers is.

Every yoga posture combines and contrasts stretching and relaxing. Moreover, each sequence ends with a rest and each session with a longer relaxation, usually in the Corpse pose. Relaxation enlivens the subtle energies of the body, and can become a powerful tool for enriching your parenting in a great variety of ways. It is also a skill that your baby acquires for life, at a time when her central nervous system is at its most receptive. The earlier you start relaxing with your baby after birth, the easier it is to experience the benefits of relaxation and the more profound these benefits can be. If you are starting when your baby is over six months old, follow the basic steps described on pages 106–7 first, before reading this chapter.

At the end of her daily yoga routine, particularly if you do some massage as well as the exercises and bathe her too, your baby is likely to be pleasantly tired and to fall asleep after a satisfying feed. This is good for her, but relaxation as an acquired skill can achieve even more. Just as with an adult, deep relaxation will alter your baby's body functions in a similar way to sleep, but within a waking state of consciousness. Her heartbeat will slow down and her breathing will become more even, she will get very warm and her flow of energy will change. You will also notice that her overall behavior becomes calmer and more contented.

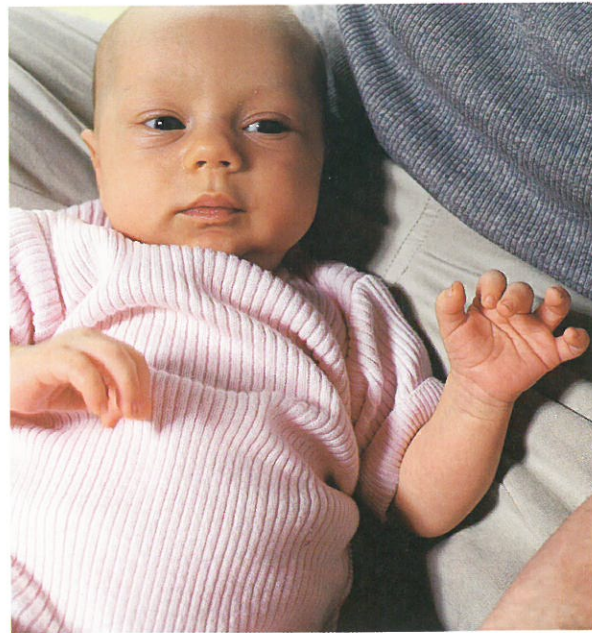
Although you may have chosen to develop your baby's practice of yoga rather than your own with this book, in deep relaxation you cannot separate your baby's practice from yours. The two work together, reinforce each other and have an effect on you both, together and individually. Relaxation with your baby is quintessentially an interactive practice: it originates within the exchange between your body and your baby's body and transforms it in the process.



The process of relaxation

If you have never experienced deep relaxation, you may need to make a leap of faith while you follow the basic steps until you feel the physical process of relaxing in your own body. You will realize that it involves your whole self, including your emotions and your mind, in a way that differs profoundly from just resting or having a quiet cuddle with your baby. If you already practice yogic relaxation regularly, you can apply the techniques you know to relaxing with your baby as described here.

Relaxing with your baby is different from relaxing on your own, because you are focusing on the interaction between you. Disengaging from the world, from activity, also means to let go of 'minding' her. The challenge is to take your attention away from her when you are holding her close to you and you are both awake. If you think of yourself as a car, it is like putting yourself in neutral gear, letting your engine idle. This does not mean that you are withdrawing your 'self' from your baby, but that your baby will be able to disengage from sharing your pattern of energy, which she has learned since she was in the womb. She will experience you free of superficial worry, and enjoy the deep nurturing silence and peace lying under the currents of stress that sustain your activity from day to day. At this time of mutual adjustment between you, particularly if she is your first child, relaxation with your baby is a priority for your well-being, hers and that of your whole family.



What happens between you and your baby

Be aware of all the possibilities of relaxation:

- *You relax, so your baby relaxes.* This is often the reason why parents do relaxation with their baby in the first place, but it takes considerable experience and skill before a distressed baby can be calmed instantly. This is your ultimate goal.
- *You start relaxing, you feel your baby relax, this makes you more relaxed, your baby responds by relaxing more, and so on...* An exchange takes

place between you and your baby that helps you both, deepening the process of relaxation as a mutual experience.

You can start observing, experimenting and experiencing 'being relaxed' together with your baby through your day. If you notice when it happens and when it doesn't, and when you don't know how to make it happen, you'll discover the best situations for allowing relaxation to take place.

Using self-referral

Babies define their perception of the world in response to what they experience. Remember the principle of 'self-referral' mentioned at the beginning of this book (page 19). The more you become aware of your own state of being, the more you will realize that your baby responds directly to it. She is aware of your inner disposition. This can be a revelation to you and change your attitude to your baby, as you no longer look at her behavior separately but at the interaction between you, a two-way process.

You are as 'good' a parent as you can be in your circumstances, and it is futile to try to relax all the time with your baby. In any case, babies need a balance of stress and relaxation in a rhythm that resembles that of day and night, waking and sleeping. So watch and register how you feel when your baby frustrates you, but at the same time live fully and own your emotions. There is no place for guilt or blame in the present, only potential for change.

- *Your baby is relaxed, so you relax.* Becoming humble about the interaction with your baby also enables you to learn from her how to relax more. This is explained in detail on page 120.
- *You and your baby relax together, so other members of your family relax.* The effects of your joint relaxation with your baby soon extend to other members of your household.
- *Now when you relax, you are able truly to relax your baby.* This is especially useful if she is upset or unwell.

Learning to use relaxation as a spiritual tool in this way can help you develop other dimensions of yoga, and expand your consciousness even more.



'For me, an important aspect of baby yoga has been the relaxation. I have truly learned to relax and I feel that I can switch off from Maria, knowing that she is happy and safe near me. I am amazed at how she has learned to respect my space when I'm relaxing, and find that she relaxes too.'

Getting ready to relax together

Besides the short relaxations that complete each yoga sequence, 'joint relaxation' can be a sequence in its own right. You can practice it with your baby at any time, either with the exercises or separately. It will take about ten minutes to go through the basic steps. Once you are familiar with them, you will be able to reach your 'relaxation space' quickly, and spend more time in deep relaxation.

1 Rapid self-awareness

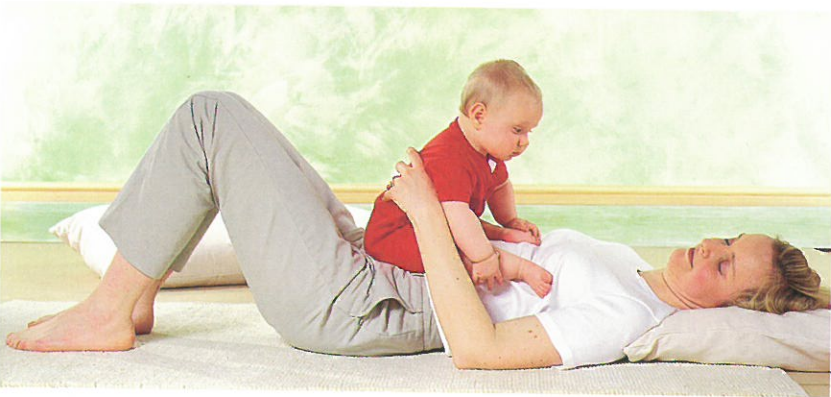
As you prepare to start relaxing, rapidly experience how you are feeling right now, first in relation to your baby and then to yourself. At first, you may feel confused, especially if you are short of sleep and you are finding parenthood very challenging. Acknowledge that you can't feel anything except exhaustion if this is the case. Later nuances of mood and energy levels will become more easily perceptible. It can be difficult for new mothers to distinguish how they feel in themselves from how they feel in relation to their babies. Acknowledge this too. If you have found the Mountain pose helpful to center and ground yourself, use it to complete your 'rapid self-awareness' before getting into a relaxing position.

2 Positions for joint relaxation

After gaining experience, you will be able to relax with your baby in any position. At first, however, make yourself as comfortable as possible together.

Lying down

Even if you are experienced in yogic relaxation, lying flat on your back may not be the most comfortable position to relax in with a young baby. With your lower back well supported, bend your knees if needed, and have your neck and head in line with your spine,



Before you begin

Remove all obstacles to relaxation, such as safety concerns, by for example placing cushions on each side of you, switching on the answerphone, and checking that you will not be disturbed. After a few times, your mental checklist will become automatic and you will cease to invent obstacles because the rewards of relaxation will motivate you to eliminate them outright.

neither dropped backward nor with your chin tucked in tight. Another good relaxing position with a baby is lying against a beanbag or a large pillow, so that the base of your spine is close to the floor and your body at a 20- to 30-degree angle.

Rest your baby on your chest, either face up or face down as you both prefer it. Very young babies often enjoy lying on their back or side. Be prepared to change positions as your baby grows, both for her sake and yours. Alternatively, have your baby next to you rather than on your body. Some form of body contact with her, however, helps join the two of you in relaxation.

Sitting

Sitting to relax during or after feeding your baby is comfortable if your lower back is well supported and your knees are level with your hips. Make sure you have something to rest your feet on in order to raise your knees if needed. If you sit on a low chair, you can also extend your legs over a cushion or beanbag. If you have had a cesarean section, place your baby on a cushion on your lap to help relieve pressure on your lower abdomen.

Standing and walking

Walking relaxation (see page 66), a way of relaxing with your baby using movement and rhythm, can also include all the steps described here for still relaxation.

3 Signalling relaxation to your baby

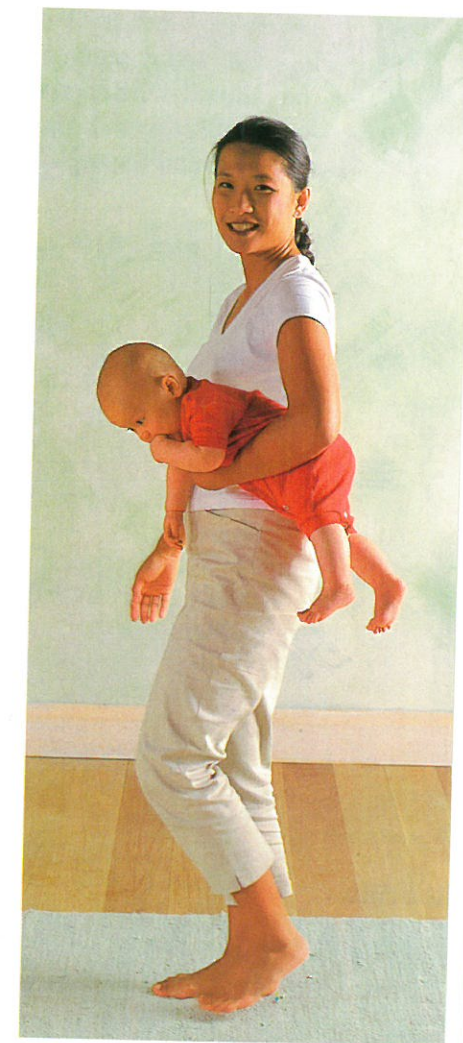
Your baby may quickly recognize when you are getting into your joint relaxing position, particularly if you give her definite signals in a set order, such as the following:

- 1 Free your back and neck by adjusting your chosen position. Drop your lower jaw and yawn if needed.
- 2 Exhale deeply two or three times, letting your lungs take the air in rather than breathing in forcefully in between. Voice your exhalations if you wish, perhaps with a yawn or sigh.
- 3 Loosen your hold on your baby. She should be resting in such a way that you do not need to hold her (except in walking relaxation). Do so in a loving way, perhaps stroking her body or head, or rocking her gently from side to side.
- 4 Feel the rhythm of your breath and register your baby's if you can. If you know how, you might want to chant at this point, or hum a note that feels good to you.
- 5 If you like, visualize an image that evokes security, closeness and happiness for you in relation to your baby. Set your intent on opening a space to enjoy relaxing together, freely and harmoniously.

Picking up your baby's cues

As you follow these steps, observe any pattern of behavior that your baby tends to repeat, such as:

- fidgeting before settling comfortably
- crying for food or attention
- opening her arms wide
 - cooing or singing
- a slower heartbeat and warmer skin



Opening the space of joint relaxation

Once you are settled and ready to relax with your baby, there is a threshold through which you have to go before you can enter deep relaxation. Sharing the space of relaxation with your baby can be challenging, and you need to take particular care to get it right from the beginning. Experience is what matters. Use this page as a practical guide when you start, and read the following pages to enrich your experience afterward, and again as your baby grows older and your practice develops.

Identity

The arrival of your baby changes all your existing relationships. It may be that you are so much in love with your baby that you cannot detach from her at all, or you may doubt that life will ever return to 'normal'. Many parents experience these feelings, which at times may threaten their sense of identity. As you start relaxing and 'centering' yourself, you will become quietly aware of both the closeness and the separateness of your identity and your baby's.

Steps to letting go

1 Identity

This is you, my baby, and this is me
I experience fully our closeness and our separateness

2 Trust

You are all right, I am all right
I experience fully our readiness just to be, without any wanting or doing for a while

3 Daring to let go

I can safely let go of minding you
I experience fully the difference between minding and caring from a deeper awareness

4 Releasing stress

Where does your crying go in my body?
I experience fully the tension that accumulates daily in looking after you, and it can be released

5 Surrender

I release tension and feel relaxed
I experience fully the process of surrendering to what is

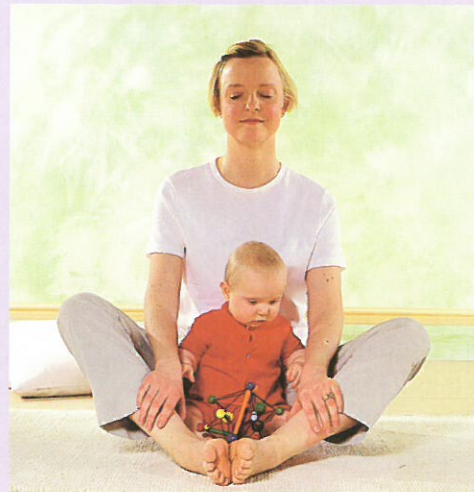
6 Self-nurture

I experience fully the infinite abundance of the

universal life force around us
I draw from it to nurture myself and the bond between us

7 Unconditional love

I experience fully how we are one
Loving you unconditionally gives me great joy



Steps to centering yourself in relation to your baby

- Press your feet on the floor, bending your knees. Hold your baby's hand or hands, being aware of your two bodies.
- Acknowledge any negative emotions you may have; for each one, find a positive counterpart.
- Close your eyes, feel how you are with your baby. Open your eyes, look at the two of you as you are now. Close your eyes again and experience your perception and your feeling together. As a mother, recall the feeling of your baby inside you and contrast it with your feeling and perception of your baby now outside you.
- Focus on your first and second chakras, in your perineum and navel, and breathe deeply into them, feeling the roots of yourself.

Trust

Yoga with your baby celebrates safe risk and promotes trust and self-confidence, which extend to other areas of your life together. If you find yourself worrying about your new responsibilities, you need to focus on trust in yourself, in your baby and in getting the support you need for relaxing with your baby. Trust is not only about having confidence that you are doing your best for your baby, your family and yourself, but also about being confident that you are perfectly taken care of in the cosmic orchestration of the universe. If you cannot quite believe this, you could call it a positive attitude to life.



'I find joint relaxation especially useful for my baby, who is otherwise constantly on the go. It trains him not to need entertaining all the time, and I love to be able to sit with him calmly, feeling content and at peace. People also remark on how easy going he is.'

Daring to let go

Now you are beginning to enter the 'space of relaxation'. If during this process of letting go your baby starts crying, stop and comfort her. Try again later when she is happy. She will soon learn your behavior, and after experiencing it as a shared, pleasurable activity will welcome the steps that lead to it. If your baby persistently begins to cry when you start relaxing with her, she may need to heal a traumatic experience of which you may or may not be aware. See page 120 for suggestions on how to help her welcome joint relaxation.

Letting go of your baby is hard to begin with, because it defies your normal state of consciousness. You want reassurance that you can do it without any harmful effects, and you may not be sure that it's possible unless you fall asleep. You won't know unless you try, and it may take a few trials before you feel it happening. Then you will need to explore it over time.



Releasing stress

- Close your eyes. Relax your eyes in their sockets, feeling your eyelids. Follow your optic nerves deep inside your brain. Rest the back of your head more on the beanbag or pillow and relax your neck once more. With your eyes closed, feel your baby, whether you are holding her or not. After some time your perception of your baby with your eyes closed becomes keener and richer. According to yoga, you learn to see with your 'inner eye'.
- Dissociate the aspect of your hearing that makes you attentive to sounds around you from hearing as a conscious activity. Like a dog asleep yet attentive to noises around the house, you remain faintly aware of external sounds while drawing your hearing inward. It is now part of your intuition, or inner knowing.
- Become aware of your breathing, just as it is. Do not try and change it in any way or judge it. Enjoy feeling the rhythm of your breath, close to your baby. When you feel your breath, you become, so to speak, your own witness. You step out of

activity and watch yourself 'being' without involving your mind. At first, thoughts and emotions can interfere with your experience, but if you allow yourself to follow your breathing quietly, particularly when your baby is peaceful or asleep with you, it becomes easier and easier. You may find that it calms you in no time at all, even if you felt at your wits' end just a moment ago.

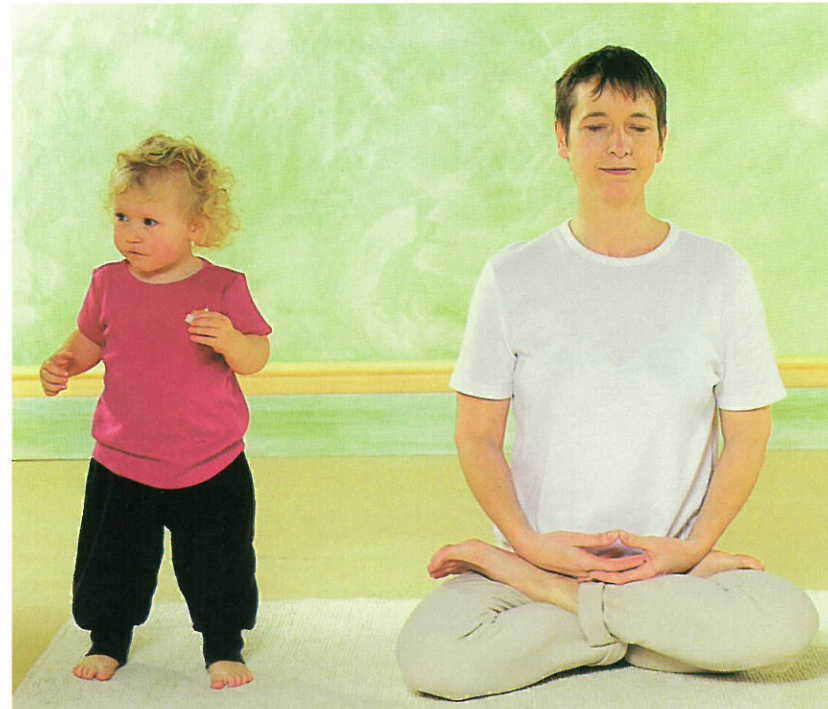
- Now you can start going deeper into the relaxation. You have done it, you have 'let go' of minding. You did not lose contact with your baby in the process. On the contrary, by withdrawing your senses inward and quietly focusing on your breathing, you find yourself closer to your baby, without the barrier of your constant stream of thoughts between you and her.

At this point, the relaxation becomes yours and hers jointly. You can now include her in your awareness of yourself breathing. Feel her breathing too. It is likely that your breathing rhythms have 'entrained', synchronizing with each other, from the time of birth.

Surrender

It now becomes possible to 'surrender' to what is. In the same way that you witnessed your breath just as it was, you can experience yourself being relaxed, together with your baby, now. This may be easy to do if you are tired, and it is fine if you both fall asleep. In fact, this is one of the ways in which you can get back to sleep after being woken in the night. But if you are very tired or affected by strong emotion, surrendering becomes the most challenging step. Do not worry if this is your experience. Acknowledge that you cannot believe that you are blessed with your life as it is, but the same time, welcome the possibility of receiving help and solutions. Surrender to the hope, if not the faith, that you can receive all the help you need.

In the 'space' of relaxation, surrendering in this way makes you more receptive to the dynamic web of love and goodwill that surrounds you and your baby. Even for a short time, accessing this space makes you contact that part of yourself that responds to deep rest and knows that under all other emotions and even through pain, a sweet harmony can be found again. If as you relax you become aware of deep-seated anger, which may be specifically at someone or non-specific, surrendering can also be helpful. Acknowledging your emotion without judging yourself will lead you to appropriate forms of resolution.



Self-nurture

Surrendering opens the floodgates of the universal life force (prana), which you can then fully receive and put to use for yourself and your baby straight away. Again, all you have to do is 'feel'. This feeling is like 'plugging in' or putting a battery on a charger. You can only know it by experiencing it and enjoying the benefits of it for yourself. Instantly, you feel more rested than you have been since before your baby was born. You might also feel some tingling in your hands and your facial muscles relaxing further. Mainly, you feel nurtured physically, emotionally and spiritually in a way that addresses your most immediate needs.



Gorge yourself with this self-nurturing each time you relax, and learn to generate the nurturing you need in order to nurture your child. As yoga adepts of the classic Indian tradition say, 'learn to become your own mother and your own father'. In the same way that you need to release tension, ideally each day, you also need to replace the nurturing you give your baby, storing more for the demands ahead.

Extending self-nurture to others

You can extend this self-nurture to your baby through you. For a mother, this is like nourishing your baby through an invisible umbilical cord. A father may experience it in this way too, or as an

Relaxation and postnatal depression

If you experience postnatal depression, doing joint relaxation as a yoga sequence will help you gain the deep rest you need, while still being actively involved with your baby.

- Action rhymes counting and registering your baby's toes or fingers, such as 'This little piggy', or 'One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive' can help you engage more physically with your baby after settling down to relax, using both touch and sound.
- Register at least two reasons for feeling good today in your immediate surroundings. The second one may not be as easy to find as the first, but with perseverance you can always spot it.

- Put a drop of an uplifting aromatherapy oil on a tissue and place it under your nose after you are settled for relaxation with your baby. Clary sage, frankincense and most of all rose are especially soothing.
- Be aware of your third chakra, in the solar plexus region. Breathe deeply into this area, which is associated with trust and self-belief.
- Try to make use of the unconditional love for your baby that is released in relaxation to nurture your own 'inner baby', which may still be in need of such love. Quietly direct unconditional love to yourself as part of your own nurturing as a new mother.

energy field that he shares with his baby. If you are familiar with visualization, use any image that comes to you at this stage for this purpose. As you do this, your baby is likely to become visibly affected. If she is awake, she may go very quiet, lying or playing peacefully. If she is asleep, she may go into a deeper level of sleep and feel warmer and floppier.

Once you are familiar with self-nurturing, you can extend it to other people close to you, such as your spouse or partner, other children, your own parents or close friends. Redirecting some of this good feeling to them, sharing it with them, is possible in relaxation without depleting you as it may do in activity. Until you are experienced, the time to do this is when the image of someone close to you presents itself as you are relaxing.

Unconditional love

The more you become able to nurture yourself and your baby in joint relaxation, the more you are able to experience the unconditional love that bonds her to you and you to her in a real, physical way. Relaxation helps you access the deeper levels of feeling that underlie the fluctuations of day-to-day emotions and physical states. As you access deep rest, it is easier to remember that you love your baby and truly feel this love. Beyond exasperation and exhaustion, and even through postnatal depression, you will find this undercurrent of love through relaxation and be able to find it again and again. It is a fount to which you can always return as your child grows older.



Exchanging relaxation with your baby

The relaxation already described was focused on you and invited you to include your baby in a process that you unfolded. You can also learn to relax 'from' your baby and actively develop ways of exchanging relaxation with her, so that after she gives you the impetus to relax, you allow yourself to relax fully and then, through physical contact, you help her relax more in turn.

Experience your baby's relaxed body

When your baby falls asleep in your arms, you can feel the difference between her superficial sleep and her deep sleep. You may have felt your baby relax completely while awake, for example while feeding, floating in water, or after a massage or her yoga practice. Whenever this happens, register it carefully and experience it as fully as you can, paying attention to all the cues your baby gives you about becoming relaxed.

Learn from your baby...

Besides observing your baby, practice deliberately imitating and reproducing the signals she is giving you. Wherever you find yourself with your feeding or sleepy baby, make yourself more comfortable and allow your body to become soft and floppy.

Contrast these bodily changes with those you observe when your baby experiences discomfort and register how they affect you. As you hold your distressed baby in your arms, feel how much it affects you physically, and your responses as you try to counteract her distress. Make a note of where and how much you tense up, according to how much you are affected. Write them down in order to get a more precise image.

...what your baby learns from you

Your baby has been watching you intently since birth and has learnt the signals you give her about being relaxed or tense. In fact it soon becomes impossible to separate your baby's responses to you from yours to her, although for some time you may still have the illusion that she is this way or that way irrespective of you. Your baby has tendencies and a character of her own, but the way in which these develop has much to do with her interaction with her main carers. In the same way as in yoga postures, the more you stretch, the



more you can relax, and the more you can contrast clearly tension and relaxation in your interaction with your baby, the more you can learn to exchange relaxation with her.

Two-way relaxation

Practice responding to your baby by physically relaxing when you feel her relaxing, for example during feeding or with yoga. When she is happy and smiles, you will be drawn to smile back. Look at her body language and go through similar motions, loosening your back, opening your hands and perhaps shaking them, yawning, frowning and releasing your frown, and relaxing your neck. Continue with your own ways of relaxing, making yourself as comfortable as you can in your interaction with her. Watch her responses to what you do.

After repeating this exchange a few times, make it more theatrical, exaggerating your imitation of her and your own ways of relaxing, so that it becomes a game. (You can also play this game in a more active way during your baby's favorite yoga sequences, imitating and playing back to her your own version of her delight.)

Lullabies

Using a 'signature song' may help you go through the motions you have selected, either using a song you know or making your own. This is the way in which people all over the world use lullabies. Rediscovering this ancient art is a marvellous way of exchanging relaxation with your baby, as lullabies exert their charm on you as much as they relax your baby.



Calming your baby

You can use the same behavior to pacify your baby or jolly her along when she is unhappy. As you hold your distressed baby, play back to her all the cues for relaxation that you picked up through interacting with her when she was relaxed. Because you have made them your own she is likely to be sensitive to them and respond to them. Babies are sophisticated imitators, and just going through the motions will have some effect, because

- It short-circuits your usual reaction to her distress, particularly if it has become a pattern.

- You are presenting her with a behavior that she will recognize, since it comes from both herself and you.
- It is a good way to distinguish genuine discomfort from boredom or a need for closeness.

After you gain experience, you can integrate this exchange into any 'relaxed holding' position you choose, going through the motions of relaxing yourself, inspired by your baby and in a more inward way.

Instant relaxation with your baby

Practice will make it possible for you to make use of relaxation instantly, wherever and whenever you need it. This is as true for going into a deep yogic relaxation with your baby as for exchanging relaxation with her by means of behavior inspired by her. Don't be discouraged, however, if you are not immediately successful. It may not always work, but each time you succeed in defusing tension between yourself and your baby and restore peace and contentment, you consolidate the process and make relaxation a more powerful tool for both of you.

Use one or a combination of these basic steps to instant relaxation, or find your own.

In any position

- 1 Exhale deeply two or three times, breathing abdominally
- 2 Relax your holding
- 3 Feel your heart center
- 4 'Plug in' the infinite source of unconditional love so that your body becomes a 'transmitter' to your baby through your contact with her

If sitting or standing

- 1 Drop your shoulders
- 2 Bend your knees while keeping your back straight
- 3 Let your whole back drop two or three times on an out-breath



Creating a 'relaxed field'

If you wish to pursue an activity at home that does not involve your baby, and you would rather not use a playpen or a chair, you may find this practice helpful.

Both the yoga postures and the practice of joint relaxation have made you aware that your interaction with your baby affects her contentment and well-being. You can use this awareness to create a 'relaxed field' that extends around your baby while you are in the same room or space. This can also be a useful way of resting with a very active baby, or when your baby needs special closeness, for example when she is unwell.

Besides these times of need, creating a 'relaxed field' around your baby greatly contributes to the expanding spiral of joy with her in day-to-day living. Although you may be sceptical at first, after two or three weeks of practicing it you will notice a new calmness and contentment in your baby, and so will family and friends.

- With your baby not in direct contact with you but in the same room, sit down comfortably and follow the steps for deep relaxation described in this chapter. Choose a moment when you are alone with your baby and when she is not crying.



- Make sure she is safe, particularly if she can roll over or crawl. If you are anxious about this, ask someone else to watch your baby from a distance, without interacting with her, for example in the next room, leaving the doors open.
- As you enter relaxation, register your resistance to let go of 'minding' and to closing your eyes, letting your baby be unattended. Trust that you are switching to a different, complementary way of caring for her and allow yourself to relax deeply, closing your eyes.
- As you find the deeper current of bonding with your baby in the space of relaxation, let go of it. This may be hard to do at first. Persevere until you experience a 'field', like a magnetic field, which surrounds you and your baby. If it helps, visualize a bubble or circle to make this field more real for you.
- Rather than focusing on the 'invisible cord' as you did earlier, both you and your baby are now together in a 'relaxed field'. The more deeply you relax, the greater the effect will be on your baby. She will be likely to find contentment with her own company, and with whatever she is doing at the time, while you will wonder at how free yet close you feel in relation to her.
- The older your baby is when you start practicing this relaxation, the more she will resist it. She may clamor for your superficial attention as she is used to. If she becomes distressed, pick her up and reassure her that you love her. At the same time, be aware of your own resistance to 'let her be'. The peace that comes with each of you being self-contained in the 'relaxed field' can be very liberating for both of you.
- As the mother of a growing baby or toddler, the chores of everyday life as much as relaxation become opportunities to create 'relaxed fields' between you both. Soon you will find that a silent dialogue flows through the day, creating a deeper harmony.