What happens to a mom's brain when their baby smiles for the first time

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THE MOTHERLY MINUTE

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In the middle of that postpartum daze, the sleepless nights, the recovery, the adjustment to a new schedule and learning the cues of a new baby, there are those moments when a new mom might think, *I don't know how long I can do this.*

Fortunately, right around that time, newborns smile their first real smile.

For many mothers, the experience is heart-melting and soul-lifting. It's a crumb of sustenance to help make it through the next challenges, whether that's sleep training, baby's first cold, or teething. Each time that baby smiles, the mother remembers, *I can do this, and it's worth it.*

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Dayna M. Kurtz, LMSW, CPT a NYC-based psychotherapist and author of *Mother Matters: A Holistic Guide to Being a Happy, Healthy Mom*, says she sees this in her clinical practice.

"One mother I worked with recounted her experience of her baby's first smile. At eight weeks postpartum, exhausted and overwhelmed, she remembered her baby smiling broadly at her just before a nighttime feeding," Kurtz says. "In that moment, she was overcome by tremendous joy and relief, and felt, for the first time, a real connection to her son."

So what is it about a baby's smile that can affect a mother so deeply? Can it all be attributed to those new-mom hormones? Perhaps it stems from the survival instincts that connect an infant with its mother, or the infant learning social cues. Or is there something more going on inside our brains?

In 2008, scientists in Houston, TX published their research on the topic. Their study, "What's in a Smile? Maternal Brain Responses to Infant Facial Cues", takes data from the MRI images of 26 women as they observed images of infants smiling, crying, or with a neutral expression.

The images included the mother's own infant alternated with an unknown infant of similar ethnicity and in similar clothing and position. In each image, the baby displayed a different emotion through one of three facial expressions; happy, neutral, or sad. Researchers monitored the change in the mothers' brain activity through the transitions in images from own-infant to unknown-infant, and from happy to neutral to sad and vice versa.

The results?

"When first-time mothers see their own baby's face, an extensive brain network appears to be activated, wherein affective and cognitive information may be integrated and directed toward motor/behavioral outputs," wrote the study's authors. Seeing her infant smile or cry prompts the areas of the brain that would instigate a mother to act, whether it be to comfort, care for, or caress and play with the baby.

In addition, the authors found that reward-related brain regions are activated specifically in response to happy, but not sad, baby faces. The areas of the brain that lit up in their study are the same areas that release dopamine, the "pleasure chemical." For context, other activities that elicit dopamine surges include eating chocolate, having sex, or doing drugs. So in other words, a baby's smile may be as powerful as those other feel-good experiences.

And this gooey feeling moms may get from seeing their babies smile isn't just a recreational high—it serves a purpose.

This reward system (aka dopaminergic and oxytocinergic neuroendocrine system) exists to motivate the mother to forge a positive connection with the baby, according to Aurélie Athan, PhD, director of the Reproductive & Maternal Psychology Laboratory (a laboratory that created the first graduate courses of their kind in these subjects).

These networks also promote a mother's ability to share her emotional state with her child, which is the root of empathy. "A mother cries when baby cries, smiles when baby smiles," Athan says.

While there's a physiological explanation underlying that warm-and-fuzzy sensation elicited by a smile, there may be other factors at play too, Kurtz says.

"In my clinical practice, I often observe a stunning exchange between a mother and her baby when the latter smiles at her. A mother who is otherwise engaged in conversation with me may be, for that moment, entirely redirected to focus on her little one," Kurtz says. "This kind of attention-capturing on the part of the baby can enable and cultivate maternal attunement—a mother's ability to more deeply connect with her infant. The quality of attunement in early childhood often sets the stage for one's relationship patterns in the future."

Whether a physiological response, a neural activation, simple instinct, or the tightening of emotional connection, the feeling generated by babies' smiles is a buoy in the choppy ocean of new parenthood.

And while the first smile may be the most magical by virtue of its surprise and the necessity of that emotional lift, the fuzzy feeling can continue well into that baby's childhood and beyond. It keeps telling parents, you've got this!

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During a week like this one where talk of the Weinstein trial and coronavirus have dominated the news cycle, many of us do need a break from all the bad news.

A recent study suggests that people pay more attention to negative news stories than to positive news, but the research proves that even though many people are drawn to negative storylines, "it's not the case that most people want mostly negative news all the time," according to the study's lead author, Stuart Soroka.

Soroka told the *Los Angeles Times* that there is a place for good news in modern media and since the news cycle has been quite negative this week so we are happily looking at the stories that shine a light on the good in this world.

So here are the good news headlines that made us smile this week:

Viral Facebook post shows stranger supporting breastfeeding mom in restaurant

This post is a few years old but went viral this week because stories this good never die on the Internet.

Back in 2016, Briar McQueen was a new mom who was nervous about her first solo trip to a restaurant with her baby. She expected some people might be judgemental about her breastfeeding, but instead, a stranger was incredibly supportive.

"Today was the first time I went out for breakfast alone with my 8 week old son, I had just received my breakfast and hot chocolate when Jaxon started crying wanting his booby so of course I fed him, after a few minutes this older lady walked up to me, I was scared, thinking she was gonna tell me to put my boob away, instead she starts cutting up my breakfast for me and said "what a good mama you are, we can't have your food getting cold can we." I honestly could have cried😍😭 loveliest lady EVER," McQueen wrote in her now-viral Facebook post.

We totally agree and can see why this story is still being shared four years later.

This teacher's mental health check-in chart is going viral

> Erin🌼 TEACHER on Instagram: “Made this mental health check in chart after seeing @missjohnstonsjourney use a digital version for teachers on her #okayteacher Facebook…”

Teacher Erin Castillo probably never imagined she'd be sitting down talking with Kelly Clarkson, but that's what happened this month when she appeared on Clarkson's show to talk about her viral mental health check-in chart.

Castillo asks her students to write their names on the back of a Post-It note and put it in the row that best corresponds with how they are feeling so that she can check-in with ones in the bottom two sections.

If this chart looks familiar it's probably because *Good Morning America* profiled the teacher last spring. As Castillo told GMA, she never expected the chart she posted on her Instagram to keep going viral.

"To see this being used in multiple countries around the world, having [teachers] reach out from New Zealand and Africa...to hear actual stories of people helping their students, I'm really overwhelmed with joy," she said.

This is so cool, no wonder educators (and even parents) are making the same charts. This is one time when it's okay to copy someone's work in the classroom. ☺

Lena Waithe voices first gay character in a Disney/Pixar movie

> Lena Waithe on Instagram: "📡"

Disney's new Pixar movie *Onward* features the first openly LGBTQ character in the company's history.

The character is Officer Specter, voiced by *Master of None* actress and screenwriter Lena Waithe, who identifies as gay herself.

According to *Slate,* Waithe's character's sexual identity is confirmed when the character (a cop) and her partner (voiced by Ali Wong), pull over a driver who blames his girlfriend's sons' behavior for his poor driving.

Waithe's character replies sympathetically, saying, "My girlfriend's daughter got me pulling my hair out."

Onward hits theaters March 6.

NICU nurse goes viral after caring for father + son three decades apart

As first reported by the *Courier News* and then the *Washington Post,* a nurse in New Brunswick, N.J. has gone viral for being a fixture of the NICU for so long she's caring for her babies' babies.

Nurse Lissa McGowan went viral after new mom Renata Freydin's noticed the nurse in her partner's baby book looked a lot like the one who cared for her son Zayne Caldwell, who was born 10 weeks early last month.

As Freydin explained in her Facebook post: "Last Sunday, he dug out his baby book to show me. As I was looking through, I came across a picture of him as a baby and a lady holding him. I knew that lady!! I immediately asked him who she was and he confirmed that she was the nurse who took care of him during his stay in the NICU and his mom loved her so much that she needed a photo of the two of them on the day he was discharged! Well, the reason I know her is because I swore she was the nurse that had

been taking care of our baby boy for the past three days! David didn't believe me. We brought the picture to the hospital where 3 other nurses confirmed it was her! Yesterday (Valentine's Day) she was back at work and taking care of our little nugget again so we had to recreate the picture! The past 2 weeks have been filled with worries and uncertainty but we can breathe easy knowing my lil nuggets nurse is the same one that helped the man I love when he was in the same situation."

Newspapers picked up the story because it's incredible and it is so worthy of our attention. NICU nurses work day in and day out helping babies and families and it is so incredible to see a nurse like McGowan recognized for years of hard work.

Go, Nurse Lissa!

News

Caring for young children can be challenging enough on a perfectly normal day, but during an emergency those challenges are magnified. Natural disasters and emergencies—such as earthquakes, storms, fires, power outages, flooding or outbreaks that affect a wide community—obviously present a major operational challenge for childcare programs.

That's why childcare providers need to have preparedness plans for emergencies and natural disasters that are likely to occur in their communities. Be sure to discuss emergency planning with your day care, childcare program or after-school care provider.

Here are a few helpful questions to ask to make sure that your child's day care or childcare is ready for emergencies.

1. Does the parent handbook cover emergency planning? Is it up to date?

The parent handbook should serve as a guide for everything that takes place in a childcare program, from drop-off protocols to nap schedules, and it should also include information about the program's emergency plans, response, and recovery. As situations change or arise, the parent handbook should be updated accordingly.

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2. What is your communication plan for emergencies or disasters?

While 90% of childcare providers have written emergency response plans, only 70% have plans to communicate with family members during an emergency. Your provider should outline its plan of communication in its parent handbook.

3. Do you perform drills for disasters that are likely to occur in our area?

Ask whether your day care or childcare program has practiced its emergency response plans in a calm, safe environment—in other words, *before* it's necessary.

4. What is your evacuation plan?

In the rare event that an evacuation is necessary, it's important for providers to include up-to-date evacuation drills and protocols in the parent handbook. Caregivers, staff, parents and children should all know the designated meet-up point during a community evacuation.

5. Do you have a safe, designated evacuation spot in the event of a community evacuation?

Once staff and children calmly evacuate the building, there needs to be a safe shelter-in-place spot nearby. This location should be kid-friendly and have plenty of food, water and ways to keep young children occupied. The location should also be able to accommodate children with special needs and those with medical requirements.

6. What is your shelter-in-place plan?

During an emergency where parents are unable to access roads or public transportation, childcare programs need to have a shelter-in-place plan. Whether children stay at the facility or evacuate to a safe spot nearby, providers need to keep at least 72 hours worth of food, water, and medical supplies up to date. The program should also have parents write notes in advance letting children know that everything is okay.

7. Do you have post-disaster plans?

According to FEMA, more than 40% of businesses do not reopen after a disaster. If childcare programs close, parents cannot return to work and recovery cannot begin. Also, young children need a safe, secure, and familiar place to return to after a disaster.

8. How do you discuss emergencies in an age-appropriate manner with children?

A great way for care providers to introduce the concept of emergency plans to children is to have them help create emergency kits. This way children become familiar with emergency response items. Teachers should also let parents know how they plan to talk to children about emergencies in advance.

9. What are your policies for closing?

Childcare providers must give advance warning to parents about closures if there is an impending weather emergency. If roadways near the childcare program are typically out of use during an emergency, both parents and staff need to map out secondary pick-up plans in advance.

10. Are you in touch with local preparedness organizations?

Local emergency organizations can provide advice and tips to prepare for an emergency or natural disaster. Parents, care providers and community organizations should meet regularly and have the most recent copies of the parent handbook.

According to FEMA, in 2019 alone, there were 59 declared disasters in the U.S. These emergencies include earthquakes, tropical storms, fires, floods, severe storms, tornadoes, landslides, mudslides, extreme wind, and snowstorms. But basic advance preparation can go a long way toward helping parents and caregivers feel ready for emergencies and disasters, and can ensure that families and care providers stay safe.

A version of this post was originally published at the Institute for Childhood Preparedness

Learn + Play

The transition to motherhood is tough, and you deserve a little love! Join us March 28th for Motherly's Becoming Mama event in NYC for a day filled with conversations and connections that will leave you feeling inspired. Get advice from expert panels, indulge in a little pampering, and meet other local mamas IRL for a day of empowerment and support.

Register now for early-bird pricing, and access to limited VIP tickets with exclusive gift bags.

Here's what you can expect:

- A mindful mama meditation to start your day.
- Interactive panels and workshops focused on the hottest topics for new moms and moms-to-be. Check them out below!
- A healthy lunch + delicious snacks
- Pregnancy + postpartum pampering
- Personalized gifts for you + your baby

- The chance to test the hottest baby gear on the market
- A swag bag filled with surprises
- Amazing giveaways from our brand partners

Sat, March 28, 2020
10 am-2:30 pm
SECOND.
849 6th Ave
New York, NY 10001

REGISTER NOW

Here's what we'll be talking about on our panels:

Navigating the Fourth Trimester: Self-Care for Mom
While having a baby is a joyous occasion it often involves mom putting her own health on hold and speeding into overdrive to care for baby. Here postpartum experts will discuss the importance of postpartum mental wellness, and the importance of asking for help and finding support.

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The Motherhood Advantage *sponsored by Medela*
Motherhood brings so many advantages to the workplace, and yet, it's still a topic often talked about in hushed voices. We'll invite Medela to sponsor this very important panel that will evolve this working mom conversation. Together we can work to erase the Motherhood Penalty, support moms with the proper tools and lift each other up in the workplace.

Parenting in Partnership: Learning to Share the Load
There's never been a more equitable time to be a parent, and yet so many mothers still feel like they're carrying more than their fair share. Let's talk about how to create a parenting team from the start, with tips, tricks and expert advice on leveling the playing field between parenting partners.

**While many of Motherly's events are family focused, there will not be specific activities or play spaces for babies or kids. This event is more mom-focused. Babies under 1 are welcome at this event, but a baby carrier is suggested. Please use your discretion.*

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When I think about Meghan Markle, her effortless style is usually one of the the first things that comes to mind. Whether she's traveling, taking her dogs for a walk, or attending a royal event, her outfits always look timeless and put together. Yet somehow she still manages to wear outfits that feel way more accessible (even when she is donning a gorgeous—but expensive—coat we've had in our cart for much longer than we care to admit).

While I can't quite afford a personal stylist yet or drop a few thousand on a bag, I did do a little digging and found that a few of her wardrobe staples are items that I can add to my closet, with a little investment. And, if you're not in the market to invest this much, don't worry—I found dupes that will do the trick!

Here are our favorite products to achieve Meghan Markle's classic mom style:

Meghan's pick: Rothy's flats

Confession: I own *a lot* of shoes. But I wear my Rothy's at least once a week and they're the first shoe I toss into my luggage when I'm traveling because they're so comfortable and can be machine-washed. The Point is my (and apparently Meghan Markle's) favorite style because it elongates the legs and goes with literally anything you wear. I love that they're made from recycled plastic water bottles, too. And, they just launched the Mary Jane—it has a bow!—if you prefer a more dainty look with a fun twist.

$145

Buy Now

Our dupe: ASOS ballet flats

This pointed pair will give a similar elongated look at just $23. They come in half sizes and if you're unsure which size is best, ASOS offers a sizing recommendation. The material isn't machine-washable (like our prized Rothy's) but you can wipe these clean with a damp cloth to keep them looking like new.

$23

Buy Now

Meghan's pick: Wool wrap jacket

There's just something so elegant about this coat. Maybe it's the wrap waist that flatters

any body type. Or, it's the way the collared neck drapes (seriously it'll even make wearing pajamas look chic). It's become one of the most recognized pieces from Meghan's wardrobe and we are obsessed.

$750

Buy Now

Our dupe: Tahari wool blend coat

Looking for something more affordable? This coat is marked down to $83 from $360 at Nordstrom Rack. While we haven't personally tried it, at 77% off, we can bet the quality is pretty up to par with a higher-end jacket. Plus, we're obsessed with the pale blue and port wine colorways. The removable waist tie belt and shoulder cape overlay will have you feeling like Meghan Markle in just about anything.

Bonus: We love this Amazon dupe that's just under $80.

$82.48

Buy Now

Meghan's pick: Longchamp bag

On the quest for a bag that holds just about everything you need (without having to be a diaper bag)? Say hello to the Longchamp 'Le Pliage' tote. It's water-resistant, has durable leather straps and folds up into a square for each storage or packing. I've had mine for more than five years and it's still going strong—and it's schlepped a lot of heavy things over the years. Plus, it just looks nice with everything!

$125

Buy Now

Our dupe: Amazon shoulder bag

This dupe on Amazon has 59 great reviews and the large size is under $30! With three sizes, you can pick whatever best fits your style. Each bag comes with a zippered main compartment and interior pockets and yes, it even folds up just like the real thing.

$27.99

Buy Now

Meghan's pick: Birdies slippers

Are they house slippers or the most comfortable flats you've owned? Spoiler alert: They're both. Meghan has been spotted wearing The Heron style (I've been spotted wearing the slides around my apartment all day) many times and we think the velvet detail dresses up just about anything, even leggings. The no-slip rubber sole and 7-layer support means you can run around in these all day long without missing a beat.

$95

Buy Now

Our dupe: Chase & Chloe pointy loafer

While you won't experience the cloud-like softness of Birdies, you can achieve a similar look with this pair from Nordstrom Rack for under $20. Both black and tan pairs come with a padded footbed, grip sole and a flexible construction (so hopefully no blisters even from day one).

$19.97

Buy Now

Meghan's pick: Madewell denim jacket

I didn't own a denim jacket until last year and since then, I've worn it in just about every season. Over summer dresses, paired with a T-shirt, over a blouse, you name it. It add just enough extra warmth without having to put on something bulky and is machine-washable. For an extra-cool and Meghan Markle factor, roughly roll up the sleeves twice.

$118

Buy Now

Our dupe: Old Navy denim jacket

Grab this $30 distressed denim look at Old Navy. I'm not sure how they do it, but their denim jackets are *so* soft. This one is slightly fitted so size up if you're looking for a more oversized look. Just like the Madewell one, this hits right below the waist, making it great to pair with pants or dresses.

$35

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