



Keys to Building Attachment with Young Children

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Healthy attachment provides young children with an experience of the world that helps them develop trust, self-control and problem-solving skills.

This publication suggests strategies that parents and caregivers can use to work toward the formation of strong, secure attachments with young children.

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Strategies to Foster Healthy Attachment

Each child has needs, and they constantly provide clues (crying, etc.) that they need attention. **Attachment** theory essentially explains how infants use adults to teach them how to survive and supplement their functioning until they can do it for themselves. Children need sustenance, protection and regulation to feel safe and able to grow and take care of themselves. Part of what a child's attachment to others provides is a set of expectations from relationship partners. How does the child expect to be treated by others?

When an infant's needs are met in a consistent manner, he or she will develop trust in others. That trust ultimately results in the child's attachment to the caring adult. For a young child to succeed in life, becoming securely attached to a caring adult is of overriding importance. The attention to needs and attachment produce the roots of trust. Without attention and secure attachment in the early months and years of life, the child will have difficulty developing trust.

In the long term, a lack of attention will handicap individuals by interfering with their trust of people, institutions, agencies, churches, schools and government. The vast majority of children form an attachment to others, but the quality of the attachment is critical. Secure attachment helps children see others are trustworthy, while insecure attachment tends to lead children toward seeing others as not trustworthy.

According to researchers, an insecure attachment during the first year of life often is a significant predictor of later difficulties in school, work, marriage and social behavior related to crime or other behavior problems. So, what can parents and other caregivers do to foster healthy attachment relationships with young children?

Parenting Tips for Attachment

- ✓ Make Eye Contact
- ✓ Smile and Talk to Your Child
- ✓ Express Warmth and Touch
- ✓ Be Sensitive and Responsive
- ✓ Get in Tune with Your Child
- ✓ Follow Your Child's Lead in Play
- ✓ Read Together
- ✓ Avoid Overstimulation

Eight Key Strategies to Foster Attachment

- **Make yourself available.**

Young children can rely on you and come to trust you only if you are present. Do your best to manage your schedule and life so you are physically available to children when they need you. This may mean making tough lifestyle choices. Work within your circumstances to find time to be available to your children. Also, try to make sure you are mentally engaged in being available and attentive to your children when with them, not just a warm body that is present.

- **Increase your knowledge and experience interacting with young children.**

Fostering positive, attentive interactions with young children that build secure attachments requires knowledge and experience. Find specific opportunities to interact with your own or other young children by volunteering in child care or school settings, attending play or social groups, going to interactive classes with your child, etc. Pay attention to their likes, needs, desires and behaviors. Also, take advantage of opportunities to increase your knowledge by taking classes, reading books, watching videos or otherwise learning about parent-child relationships.

- **Be attentive to your child's cues.**

Fostering a secure attachment begins with attending to your child's needs. Attention begins with focusing on your child and perceiving his or her cues that care or comfort is needed (cues such as crying, holding arms out to you, etc.). Then you need to interpret the signal correctly (understand what he or she wants) and respond in a way that comforts or assists the child. Children may express a

physical need (a bottle due to hunger) or a social need (toddlers' need for someone to respond to them). Attentiveness means "tuning in" to your child's signals and recognizing when he or she needs to be held, needs to talk, needs a new toy, needs a new diaper or is tired and needs to rest.

- **Provide a quick, consistent response to your child's needs or cues.**

Children learn trust when someone responds promptly and consistently to their needs, especially during the first year of life. Infants, especially, simply do not understand "waiting" for someone. Adult responsiveness and encouragement reinforces a child's actions and behaviors. Such responsiveness is essential to healthy child development. When an infant smiles, an adult needs to smile in return. Sounds, cries, facial expressions and actions all need responses so a child learns to interact with the world. The child develops focus, interest, excitement, wonder and curiosity as adults respond. A child who does not receive responses can become apathetic and lose curiosity, interest and excitement.

- **Express warm, positive and caring responses as you interact with children.**

Whether changing a diaper or answering a question, you need to give children a warm and understanding experience with you. The extra word of reassurance, the caring touch or hug – these shape a child's experience of security. Children who experience harsh or rejecting types of interactions regularly can develop insecure attachments. Be nurturing. Be understanding.

You should give children love, affection and touch abundantly as you interact with them.

- **Respond to children in a way that is "in tune" with their cues.**

A child's cry may mean he or she is hungry, but it also may mean he or she is tired, sick, etc. Parents need to respond appropriately to a child's signals.

- **Follow your children's lead and cooperate with them in how they try to play or interact, rather than forcing them to follow your own desires for interaction.**

Sometimes parents fail to realize they are interfering with a child's desire to explore when they constantly pick up the child and say "No." A parent may interfere with children's efforts to express themselves. Cooperating with children when they make efforts to interact and following their lead in smiling, playing peek-a-boo, chasing or tickling is important. Provide opportunities for interaction, but be careful about forcing a particular activity or interaction. Instead, pay attention to your children's efforts and "mirror" them, cooperating with them as you play or help them.

- **Avoid overstimulating your child as you interact.**

Young children often can't say, "Hey, stop it, I'm tired out!" But they will look down or away, avoid you, squirm to get away or turn in a different direction if they feel too much stimulation. Younger infants may fall asleep if they are overstimulated. Watch for these signals. Put them down and leave them alone if necessary so they can relax or calm down, or just hold them calmly if they seem overstimulated.

“Parental Behavior and Attachment – Where Am I?”

Key aspects of parental behavior relate strongly to the quality of attachment that develops between a parent and child. These are listed in the table below.

Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Never, to 5 = Often) as to how often you are responsive in these ways in your interactions with your child by checking the appropriate box. This is not a scientific evaluation, but it can help you to think about areas on which to focus.

	Never	Seldom	Some-what	Usually	Often
■ Availability <i>I make myself physically available to my children as much as possible, and focus on them when we are together.</i>					
■ Knowledge <i>I pursue opportunities to learn more about and gain experience with children through reading, classes, volunteering or other opportunities.</i>					
■ Attentiveness <i>I am aware of my child’s cues for help or assistance, understand what they mean and respond in a way that comforts the child.</i>					
■ Consistency <i>I respond quickly and consistently to the cues or needs expressed by my child.</i>					
■ Warmth <i>I respond in a caring, positive and warm way to my child’s needs rather than roughly or harshly.</i>					
■ Sensitivity <i>I pay attention to what my child’s signals mean and respond in appropriate, helpful ways.</i>					
■ Cooperation <i>I follow my child’s interests and cooperate with them in play or doing tasks rather than forcing the child to follow my own preferences for interaction.</i>					
■ Avoid Overstimulation <i>I take care not to frustrate my child by watching for signals to stop or slow down interactions that are overstimulating.</i>					

Attachment Challenges

Children and parents have times when they face challenges in forming healthy, secure attachments. In such circumstances, seeking the assistance of competent professionals and receiving guidance on forming better, healthier relationships is best.

Parents need to understand that attachment challenges may result from a variety of factors, including:

- Temperament of the child
- Prenatal or birth trauma (low birth weight, extended time in medical care, fetal alcohol syndrome, etc.)
- Adoptive circumstances for the child
- Foster care circumstances for the child
- Significant family trauma (divorce, death, etc.)
- Poor family modeling for parents (parents in childhood had poor attachments themselves, etc.)
- Troubled or hostile home environment

These and other factors can, at times, significantly inhibit healthy attachment formation. All parents and caregivers should consider the possible influence of such factors in their own adult-child relationships.

The Benefits of Healthy Attachment

Children need adults to be reliable, caring and consistent in the care they provide. Children learn to take care of themselves only as well as an adult cared for them. Healthy attachments tend to develop as children’s needs are met in this manner, and this helps them see the world as responsive and caring. This leads children to a sense of security and well-being that is critical in early development.

Understanding attachment relationships is a reminder that children have essential needs for love, security and comfort that only caring and responsive adults can meet. Parents and other caregivers provide the “attachment web” of relationships a young child needs to thrive. Healthy attachments provide young children with benefits such as:

- A sense of trust
- A willingness to explore
- A positive view of oneself
- An understanding of empathy
- An ability to express emotions

The parent-child relationship serves as the original model for future relationships a child will experience. It is this first relationship a child uses as a template to apply to future relationship experiences.

The quality of a child’s early attachments has an important impact on the success of later relationships. Success in relationships during one’s life often has roots in the early moments of a young child’s experience and the attachment bond. So, love your child and build a healthy attachment relationship that will serve as a foundation for future successful relationships.

Recommended Resources

■ Books and Articles

Bailey, Becky A. (2000). *I Love You Rituals*. New York: HarperCollins.

Fun-filled, engaging book filled with activities for parents and children designed to build relationships, enhance development and improve child well-being. Very hands-on and activity-oriented, a practical and resourceful guide for parents and caregivers of young children.

Brazelton, T.B. (1992). *Touchpoints: Your Child’s Emotional and Behavioral Development*. Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books.

Best-selling reference book on a young child’s emotional and behavior development by T. Berry Brazelton. Well-written, engaging and comprehensive, a very good book for parents and others.

Karen, Robert. (1990). Becoming attached. *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1990, 35-70.

Outstanding article that details the history of attachment theory and research, and discusses implications of attachment for parent-child relationships in society. Very readable and comprehensive.

■ References

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For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.edu

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