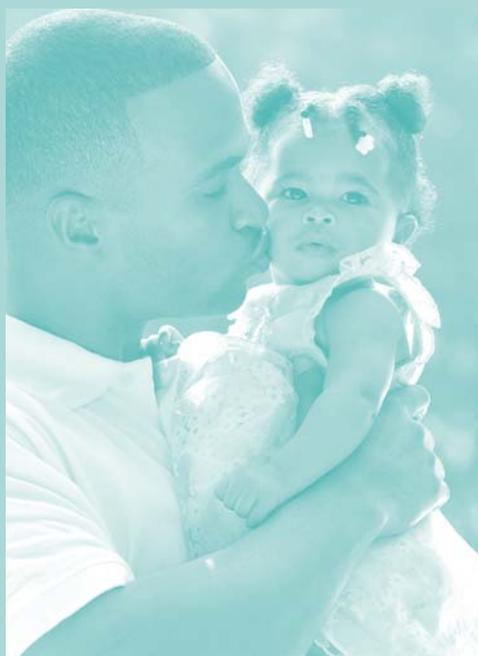


early Intervention



Attachment and Early Relationships: *Building a Foundation for Healthy Emotional Development*

Throughout life, each of us will form thousands of relationships. This is one of the most important traits of humankind. In our old age, when people ask us about our most important moments in our lives, you can bet that almost every one of them will involve relationships with others. Some are enduring and intimate, like our best friends, some are fleeting and superficial, like the chatty auto mechanic we take our car to for repairs. Together, these relationships help us build families, communities and societies.

In our quest for relationships, at least one author, Dr. Bruce Perry, identifies the concept of attachment bonds as the first core strength of human emotional development. Initially, he points out, these attachment relationships are created through interactions with our primary caregivers, usually parents. These first relationships help define our capacity for attachment and set the tone for all of our future relationships.

What is Attachment and Why Is It Important?

Attachments are the emotional bonds that infants develop with their parents and other caregivers. The ability to form and maintain healthy relationships begins in the earliest stages of childhood. The success of the attachment bond depends on the parent's ability to understand and respond to the infant's physical and emotional needs. When the parent and baby are in sync with each other, then the baby develops a *secure attachment*. The baby feels safe, knowing that mom or dad will be there when needed.

The success or failure of the parent-baby attachment bond has a life-long effect on the way your child feels about him or herself and about others. Individuals who experience confusing, frightening, or broken emotional communications during their infancy often grow into adults who have difficulty understanding their own emotions and the feelings of others. This limits their ability to maintain or build successful relationships.

When people develop a secure attachment bond, they are better able to:

- Develop fulfilling intimate relationships
- Maintain emotional balance
- Feel confident and good about themselves
- Enjoy being with others
- Rebound from disappointment and loss.

Sensitive caregiving, responsiveness to a child's emotional needs, and recognition of the child's own thoughts and feelings are primary factors in promoting

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Secure relationships are not just with mom and dad, but with grandparents, siblings and other caregivers and they should not be left out of the process.

secure attachments. It is still important to realize that secure attachment does not happen overnight, that one does not have to be a perfect parent all of the time in order to bond with your baby, and that there is no simple formula for meeting a baby's needs. The need to become attached seems to be universal, but it is important to realize that there are cultural differences in the way attachments are formed. It is also vital to remember that secure relationships are not just with mom and dad, but with grandparents, siblings and other caregivers and they should not be left out of the process.

Parenting Tips for Bonding with Baby

1 Learn the developmental stages of babies. While every baby is different, it is easier to respond to your baby's needs if you have some idea about what is age-appropriate. For example, you may be frustrated because your newborn isn't smiling at you no matter how hard you try, but often newborns don't smile until about six weeks after birth.

2 Learn how to communicate with your baby. You have to develop and use all of your nonverbal communication skills to build a secure relationship. Never underestimate the importance of holding a baby, since touch is as important to your baby's development as food or sleep. Your body language and nonverbal cues are vital. By watching how your baby responds, you should be able to adjust accordingly. Eye contact and facial expressions are extremely important. The act of feeding can be very soothing for a baby. It is a great opportunity to watch for cues for the baby's needs. Talking and singing to your baby in a soothing voice helps the infant you voice and they often enjoy listening to you.

3 Establish routines and boundaries. As your baby gets older and grows as a toddler, it is important that they learn predictability and stability in order to develop secure attachment bonds. By developing routines and setting some limits and boundaries you will be reminding them that you are lovingly in control.

4 Take care of yourself while caring for you baby. Babies sense your anxiety and stress. While they need outside help to calm down, if you are upset you are probably going to simply add to their stress. Try to get adequate sleep, ask for support around the house, and schedule some down time for yourself.

Working parents often struggle with their own feelings and, mothers in particular, may be anxious because of their inability to respond to their baby's needs 24 hours a day. Keep in mind that being with your baby 24 hours a day is not necessary to develop a secure bond. What matters is maximizing the time that you do have and by ensuring that your baby has a caregiver who also realizes the importance of attachment.

By giving your all to the attachment process, you cannot spoil the child. In fact, the more responsive you are to an infant's needs, the less "spoiled" the baby will be as they get older because they have a solid bond of trust. Children with secure attachments tend to be more independent, not less. By building this "first strength" from the beginning, you will be giving your child the best gift of all, the gift of healthy human relationships that they will use to build a successful and secure life.

This article was written with the assistance of many articles that appeared in the websites listed in this issue and *Early Childhood Today* magazine.

Books and Videos on Attachment and Early Relationships

Books

Attached at the Heart: 8 Proven Parenting Principles for Raising Connected and Compassionate Children. Barbara Nicholson and Lysa Parker. New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009. (Call # WS 105.5 .C3 N624 2009). This book, by the founders of Attached Parenting International, is a comprehensive look at attachment parenting, from an overview of attachment theory and child development research to strategies for everyday situations.

The Attachment Connection: Parenting a Secure & Confident Child Using the Science of Attachment Theory. Ruth P. Newton. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2008. (Call # BF 723 .A75 N565 2008). This book sorts out the facts about parent-child attachment and shows how paying attention to the emotional needs of your child, particularly during the first five years of development, can help him or her grow up happy, secure and confident.

Babies in Mind: Understanding Your Baby's Psychological Needs. Jenny Perkel. Lansdowne, South Africa: Juta Books, 2007. (Call # WS 105.5 .C3 P447 2007). This book explains how to give babies in their first year of life what they really need from a purely psychological perspective.

"Don't Get So Upset!:" Help Young Children Manage Their Feelings by Understanding Your Own: A Guide for Caregivers. Tamar Jacobson. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2008. (Call # WS 105.5 .E5 J17d 2008). This book shows caregivers how to get in touch with their own emotions so they can better help children with theirs. Information includes emotional development, early childhood behavior management strategies, and self-reflection.

What Babies and Children Really Need. Sally Goddard Blythe. Gloucestershire: Hawthorn Press, 2008. (Call # WS 105.5 .C3 G578 2008). This book examines the crucial early years from a child's perspective. It focuses on how parents and other adults can provide the time, love and attention children need to be healthy, happy children.

Videos

Preschoolers: Social & Emotional Development. 23 minute DVD videodisc. Magna Systems, 2008. Closed-captioned. (Call # WS 105 .P928s 2008). This program shows how preschoolers learn to play cooperatively, make friends and express emotions.

To Be a Father. 30 minute DVD videodisc. Parents Action for Children, 2005. (I Am Your Child Videos Series). (Call # HQ 756 .T627d 2005). This video provides information on how fathering begins even before birth, how dads can connect with their children right from the start, what fathers can do to foster a close relationships with their children even when they live miles apart and how fathers can overcome the challenges of parenting under special circumstances, like separation and divorce.



Separation Anxiety in Infants and Toddlers

Separation anxiety is the fear that young children have that their parents will leave them.

- Separation anxiety typically starts around 8 months and is most intense between 10 months and 18 months.
- Separation anxiety normally begins to resolve as children age and begin to remember that parents return after leaving.
- Separation anxiety usually stops by age 2 years.

Parents can play a big role in helping with infant separation anxiety. Here are some practical suggestions that will help diminish the possibility of ongoing anxiety as your child grows older.

- Although parents should spend significant amounts of time with infants in order for healthy bonding to occur, begin making it a point to leave your baby for brief periods, once he or she is about six months of age.
- Begin by choosing a caregiver that is a familiar person to your infant and plan for brief interludes of not more than half an hour, initially.
- Give your infant a hug and kiss; say "goodbye" calmly, and assure your child that you will return.
- Offer extra assurances to a waking infant who seems fearful by spending a few extra minutes to hold and offer comfort. Then calmly place the child back into the crib and say "goodnight."

Even infants can sense when a parent or caregiver is anxious about leaving them. Parents are encouraged to be both patient and consistent in helping their children work through separation anxiety.

Illinois Public Health Association

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Calendar Ahead

July 22-25, 2009

Autism Society of America 2009 National Conference
St. Charles, Illinois

CONTACT: ASA, ellacott@autism-society.org

July 23-26, 2009

15th Annual Convention of the MAGIC Foundation
Wheeling, Illinois

CONTACT: The MAGIC Foundation, www.magicfoundation.org or
800-3MAGIC3

October 7-9, 2009

11th Sharing A Vision Conference: "Endless Possibilities"
Lombard, Illinois

CONTACT: Susan Ferry, 217-824-9185 or www.sharingavision.org

Web Sites Concerned with Attachment and Early Relationships

Attachment Parenting International

<http://www.attachmentparenting.org/>

Helpguide.org: Understand, Prevent & Resolve Life's Challenges

<http://www.helpguide.org>

MommyThink

<http://www.mommythink.com/>

Parentingweb: Information and Interaction for the Nurturing Parent

<http://www.parentingweb.com/>



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