



The Emotional Ties between Parents and Children

The feeling that binds us to the significant people in our lives is called "attachment." The term "attach" means to tie, to fasten, or to connect one thing to another. If one car was being towed by another, we might hope the connecting rope or the "attachment" is strong enough to meet the challenge. Each thread adds to the overall strength of the rope. Though individually insignificant, hundreds of threads woven together can create a rope that is nearly unbreakable.

The attachment relationship between parent and child is much like a rope. Each positive interaction between parent and child adds a new thread and strengthens the overall emotional connection.

Attachment is a two-way process. It is important to think of parents being connected to children as well as children being connected to parents.

When children are emotionally attached to individuals who care for them, they receive valuable support that helps them grow and develop. Children with healthy attachments are more likely to explore and take healthy risks. Through their relationships they learn about right and wrong. They learn how to interpret their experiences. They learn social skills that help them maintain existing relationships and develop new ones. And they learn to be both self-reliant and to work well with others. In short, they develop a variety of skills that are not easily learned through direct instruction. Social and emotional lessons are best learned through relationships.

Infancy is the ideal time to develop a healthy attachment. Because infants depend on others to fulfill their needs, there are many opportunities for adults to emotionally invest themselves in the relationship as they care for them. Changing diapers, feeding, bathing, rocking, and soothing all help infants develop trust and commitment. Babies' cute looks, subtle smiles, and baby fat seem almost designed to keep adults close and involved. It is in the act of caring that attachment is born.

Children have the capacity to develop healthy attachments with adults other than the parents without interfering with the parent-child attachment. In fact, a healthy attachment with a child care provider can enhance the attachment between parent and child. Just as the skills we learn at work may help us at home, so to may the social-emotional competencies learned with caring child-care providers benefit the parent-child relationship at home.

Although attachment begins in early childhood, the relationships with those closest to us remain important throughout our lives. One of the early researchers of attachment, John Bowlby, made the observation that, "All of us, from cradle to the grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from a secure base provided by our attachment figure(s)."

Applications:

Parents and caring adults can do many things to strengthen attachment with children. Here are a few:

1. Take care of yourself. It is difficult to reach out and nurture the relationship with our child if we're overwhelmed with personal problems. At times, our focus on personal problems may cause us to turn inward. Parents who are depressed, isolated, or having marital problems are more likely to have problems forming a healthy attachment. If you have a case of the blues that does not go away, get help.

2. Follow your child's lead. Every relationship is a dance. When one moves, the other follows. The best dancers learn to identify and respond to subtle cues from their partner. The same applies in relationships. When a child smiles with excitement, smile back with the same enthusiasm. When your child expresses feelings of hurt, respond to the emotional pain with sympathy and care. As you respond attentively to your child's behaviors, your child will also learn to respond appropriately to others.

3. Be sensitive to your child's needs. In infancy, children often express their needs by crying. They may cry when they are hungry, tired, need a diaper change, or simply need to be comforted. It is difficult to be too attentive to children in infancy. As children grow older, identifying needs may be more challenging. Understanding child development in general, and your child's development in particular, will help you be sensitive without spoiling (see unit on spoiling in this series).

4. Spend time playing with your child. Nothing says love like the time shared with your child. Make time to play together, read together, work together, learn together, and snuggle together. Simply spend lots of time together. Planned quality time is important, but it is often during walks, car trips, or other unplanned moments that children open up and reveal their innermost needs and concerns. The importance of quantity time should not be dismissed. As one person put it, "The key to being an effective parent is to be a good person and then hang around your kids long enough that you rub off on them."

Recommended Reading

"*Love, Your Forever*" by Robert Munsch. A story of a mother's continuing love for her son as he grows from infancy to adulthood.

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