

Parenting and Attachment:

BONDING FOR SECURE ATTACHMENT

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Our first relationship -- the attachment bond -- establishes the core strengths on which we form our relationships, sense of security, resilience to stress and emotional flexibility. The brain at birth is programmed to connect us to one very significant person. How we relate to that special someone will profoundly influence every part of growth-- physical, mental, emotional and intellectual. Learn about the skills that contribute to creating a secure parent-child bond.

Parenting, the brain, and attachment

Why has the attachment bond become a cornerstone for parenting? According to the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, the attachment relationship is the primary predictor of how well a child will do in school. This relationship also predicts all other aspects of health and well being in a developing child.

Why has one relationship taken on such importance in recent years? The short answer is that brain technology and research has made greater strides in the past fifteen years than in all preceding years. For the first time we can view the living brain – the “control center” for the nervous system and everything that takes place in the body. Newfound technology has led to discoveries that overturned many former assumptions about the brain and made us aware that:

- * The brain at birth is the least completed organ in the body – and remains so for from three to five years
- * The brain is capable growth throughout life –adding new cells as well as new connections to other cells.
- * Brain development is determined by experience before and after birth – genetic factors are no more influential than experience.
- * The brain seeks relationships –throughout life, and especially in infancy, relationships grab and hold the attention of the brain.
- * The most profound experiences in infancy occur in relationship with one primary caretaker – beginning in the last trimester of pregnancy and lasting for at least two-and-a-half to three years of age.

Parenting and secure attachment

What makes the attachment bond secure or insecure? In order to have a secure base from which to explore the world, be resilient to stress, and form meaningful relationships with themselves and others, all infants need a primary adult who cares

for them in sensitive ways and who perceives, makes sense of and responds to their needs. Attachment is an instinctive system in the brain that evolved to ensure infant safety and survival. Primary caretakers are often the natural mothers, but they need not be. A father, another relative or a non-relative can function in the role of primary caretaker, provided they sustain a central role in a child's life for at least the first three (and preferably the first five) years – the period when a child's brain develops most rapidly.

Each attachment occurs in a unique way. Infants vary in what it takes to calm and soothe them or what they find most pleasurable. Caretakers also have their own preferences, but the attuned caretaker will observe and follow the lead of the infant. Relationships characterized by secure attachment have the following attributes:

- * The adult aligns their own internal state with that of the infant or child and communicates this alignment in non-verbal ways that the child understands. This “communication” forms a bond of trust that makes the infant feel that s/he is felt, known and respected. For example:

- * The child cries; the adult feels concern and acts in ways that communicate this concern.

- * The infant smiles and wants to interact in a positive manner. Seeing this, the adult understands and accommodates the infant's desire for joyful play.

- * Through this mutually attuned interaction, the infant learns to attain balance in his body, emotions, and states of mind.

- * The comfort, pleasure, and mutuality of the attuned interaction create a sense of safety within the infant and inspire interpersonal connection to others

“Attachment parenting” and relationship bonding

Attachment parenting is a set of infant centered practices that have been used by parents for many years to promote optimal growth and development. Understanding and practice of the attachment bond was introduced by new brain scan technologies and world wide video studies that caught and analyzed the relationship between mother and infant based on the subtle nuances of emotionally attuned and mis-attuned relationships.

Attachment Parenting vs. “parenting to create a secure attachment bond”

“Attachment Parenting” is a name coined by pediatrician Dr. William Sears for his theory of parenting practices intended to foster emotionally secure attachment in infants. Dr. Sears and Attachment Parenting International promote 8 principles that focus on ways of attending to needs for “proximity, protecting and predictability.” Many of these practices such as breast feeding, holding, and touching have been recommended for nearly 60 years.

Parenting that intends to create a secure relationship bond based on revelations only recently made visible will focus more on emotional communication. This will be the case because even mothers who love and care for their children can fail to provide their offspring with good attachment experience if they don't play with them, don't emotionally communicate with them, or frequently misread, misunderstand, or ignore their baby's cues.

The ability to manage stress and remain emotionally present from moment to moment enables a caregiver to fall in love with their infant and create a secure attachment bond. A caretaker who is depressed, traumatized overwhelmed or distracted won't be able to connect emotionally with her infant.

Attachment bonding and parenting styles predict the future:

Previously, we could only speculate as to why important relationships disappeared, disintegrated or became contentious. But thanks to new insights into brain development, we can understand why what first brings us together may not be enough to keep us together.

Human beings are highly social creatures. Our brains are designed to be in relationship with other people. Interactive communication shapes both the structure and function of the brain. The technology that brain scans have made available in the past fifteen years proves this point. Attachment experience directly influences the development of children and is directly responsible for activating or not activating their genetic potential. Interpersonal relationships and the patterns of communications that children experience with their caretakers directly influence the development of their mental processes.

Secure attachment establishes the basis on which the child will form relationships with others; their sense of security about exploring the world; resilience to stress; ability to balance emotions, make sense of life, and create meaningful interpersonal relationships in the future.

Parenting need not be perfect for secure attachment

Parents don't have to be perfect to create secure attachment in their children. Attachment is not "destiny", because the brain remains flexible throughout life. Relationships with parents can, and do, change. If communication with the infant is secure at least a third of the time or more, that is enough to support a secure relationship.

Repair, an important part of the attachment process, contributes as much to optimum development as joyous interaction. No caretaker will interpret a child's needs correctly all the time. And, as the child grows, there will be times of disagreement between the pair. The caretaker that sets limits and initiates repair as soon as the child indicates a desire for re-connection, strengthens the child's feeling of safety within the relationship.

For example, Mom says, "you can't play with fire" or "you must brush your teeth before bed." Infants and toddlers, unable to see things from an adult perspective, are easily put off by requests they dislike, which temporarily severs the relationship with anger and tears. The attuned caretaker is not intimidated or put off by this disruption in closeness. If the child is angry or pouting, the caretaker understands the child's feelings, but remains calm and firm. Relatively soon, the dependant party (the child) gives up because they need to reconnect. An attuned caretaker will respond positively and immediately.

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