



by Karen Stephens

Attachment and Bonding are Important for Preschoolers

Attachment and bonding should be reinforced throughout the early childhood years. The strong emotional ties an infant forms with family and caregivers needs to be enriched and further developed. Preschoolers who enjoy secure attachments and responsive child-rearing maximize benefits first seeded in infancy. These include an optimistic attitude toward life and greater resilience to stress or trauma. Refined brain development and learning pathways expand, too. Preschoolers' trust in adults, self-confidence, and even immune system get a boost from strong emotional attachments.

Here are some tips for nourishing bonds with preschoolers:

- Identify your child's temperament, whether it is "spirited," "easy," or "slow-to-warm up." Choose parenting strategies that are *sensitive and responsive* to it. Work with a child's temperament, rather than against it, to convey acceptance and respect.
- Plan family routines and schedules to maximize time together. Set priorities and refrain from over-extending yourself. With young children, it's not a matter of quality of time versus quantity of time you spend together — they need lots of both. Explore and enjoy the world together in simple ways — reading and singing together, taking walks, or playing together in the backyard or neighborhood park. Good childhood memories build bonds that last a lifetime.
- Include preschoolers in the everyday jobs and chores of family life. They enjoy a great sense of belonging when taught how to make a positive contribution. Include ways that are scaled to a child's age and abilities. Three-year-olds can help pick out cereals during grocery shopping. They can help feed pets or put their dirty clothes in the hamper.
- Preschoolers feel closer to parents they believe in. Be a good model. Behave in the same respectful manner you expect of children. Avoid fibs and *white lies* that can confuse and alienate children.
- Observe behavior. Listen *daily* to tune into children's needs. Pay attention to children's non-verbal language. Preschoolers communicate a lot through their behavior. When you respond to their behavior, they feel more accepted and understood.
- Be your child's *island of security*. Be alert to comfort needs and respond in ways that particularly soothe your child. Some children enjoy having their foreheads stroked; others just want a lap to mold into.
- Gentle touch and physical closeness are important throughout the early childhood years. During bath time, meal time, or bed time, children who are hugged, kissed, nuzzled, and gently handled soon learn they are special to others and worthy of love.
- Be consistent in your own mood and temperament. A parent's large mood swings make children nervous and edgy. Children need stable, reliable parent responses that are predictable more often than not. If you suffer from an ailment such as depression or substance abuse, seek help. Keeping your mental outlook on an even keel is a lasting gift to children.
- In your discipline strategies, be dependable, respectful, and caring in order to build trust. Focus on your discipline goals and style and practice them consistently. With your parenting partner, discuss and agree upon discipline techniques so they are compatible; otherwise parents undermine each other and confuse children. If you utilize child care services, work as a team with teachers so guidance actions are comparable and mutually supportive.

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- Be aware of your child's stage of development. Nurture emerging skills with toys and interactions geared to your child's abilities. Offer a variety of engaging and developmentally appropriate toys. The success children experience during play builds confidence, self-esteem, and brain connections.
- Rejoice in and applaud preschoolers' growing attachments to others — siblings, cousins, child care providers, and friends at school. To feel secure in your love, preschoolers need to know you aren't jealous or resentful of their attachments with others. Make sure your child has no need to feel as if loving others means he or she is being disloyal to you. Feeding a child's sense of guilt undermines a relaxed, secure parent-child bond.
- Avoid comparing siblings to each other. Focus on each child's individual strengths and talents, rather than using them to *size* children up to each other. Refrain from saying things like, "Your brother never used to act like that. Why can't you learn to be more like him?"

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- If you use child care services for your child, find the best care you can. Look for trained personnel who understand preschoolers' typical and atypical development. Be sure they understand preschoolers' attachment needs and how to help children cope with separation anxiety. You'll want to know they understand developmentally appropriate practice and curriculum so preschoolers experience success and a sense of competence. Find a program that has a good track record for keeping staff for years at a time, rather than just months. If preschoolers experience a *revolving door* of teachers every few months, they will experience a repeated sense of loss, and even abandonment. They may even learn to *avoid* making attachments as a form of self-defense.
- In simple, everyday ways, find ways to express how much you love and cherish your child. A Valentines card — especially when it's not even Valentines Day — can mean a lot. Read to your child, swing together, or give them a back massage. Don't let a day go by without saying, "I love you."

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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