



by Karen Stephens

Responsive Parenting Nurtures Infants' Secure Attachments

Secure attachment, the strong emotional bond a baby develops with mom and dad — and others in their daily life, blesses a child beyond measure. It's a critical aspect of child development that deserves a lot of attention.

Research has revealed that forging strong bonds with parents contributes positively to children's overall health and well-being. For instance, securely attached children generally have better self-esteem and self-confidence. They believe they are lovable and worthy of care and attention.

Children with secure attachments are more optimistic toward life and more resilient despite hardship. The emotional stability that securely attached infants experience promotes brain development and its learning pathways, too. Children with secure attachments even have stronger immune systems.

Children aren't born with emotional attachments to others. Secure attachment, characterized by a deep sense of trust, connection, and belonging, is gradually learned starting with a baby's first moments on earth. The quality of early childhood attachments to adults, especially during the first year of life, is critical to a child's long-term ability to establish and engage in loving, meaningful relationships.

Experiences and responses babies encounter with adults influence whether they learn to trust or mistrust. They determine if a child develops faith in adults for protection and nourishment, or whether they learn to doubt their importance in the world, and their significance in their parents' lives in particular.

It's just smart parenting to do all you can to strengthen emotional bonds with children. Here's what research, and good parents, have taught us about nurturing strong attachments with children:

- Sensitivity to individual preferences and *timely* responsiveness to basic needs are basic building blocks of attachment. Daily routines, such as feeding, dressing, changing diapers, and lulling children to sleep, should take place according to the child's individual body rhythm and schedule. Be reliable, dependable, and consistent to build trust.
- Attachment is nurtured when parents respond to a child's individual temperament and interaction style. The child's eating and sleep patterns are respected and taken into consideration during daily family life.
- Observing and listening closely to children is important. Infant's vocalizations and cries, even during the first two months, can be distinguished for meaning. Attentive parents gradually learn to *bear* if a cry means a baby is tired, hungry, wet, or bored. Respond to, reassure, and comfort babies when needed. When parents take time to learn the baby's *language*, then relationships are strengthened.
- Gentle touch and physical closeness — including infant massage — contributes to the glow of attachment. A warm, loving relationship blooms gradually as children are tenderly cared for. Whether during bath time, meal time, or bed time, children who are cradled, rocked, hugged, kissed, nuzzled, and gently handled soon learn they are special to others and worthy of love.

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- Being aware of and responding accurately to children's non-verbal cues is important. Children feel more relaxed and understood when parents follow baby's lead during basic care-giving routines and play time.
- Put in plenty of "face time." The human face is the first *configuration* babies focus on with interest. In fact, babies initially can see about 8 inches away — a convenient range for focusing on a parent's face whether being nursed or bottle-fed. Be expressive with your face when you talk to your baby. Smile and maintain eye contact. Express interest, enthusiasm, and love with your eyes.
- The human voice is also fundamental. From birth, babies respond to the sound of mom's and dad's voices. It is a profound comfort to them. Talk to babies, explaining what you are doing and what they are seeing, hearing, touching, or tasting.
- Respond to your infant's early language. Giggle, play, and rest when babies invite it. This helps babies learn the give and take of language, as well as love. Once baby begins to babble and make sounds, respond in kind to show them that their actions have an impact on you. It will be their first experiments in *cause and effect*. And of course, reading and singing with children are wonderful ways to build close, loving attachment.

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- Pacing interactions to a tempo your child enjoys, and then stopping them on baby's cue, contributes to their sense of control and competence. Children become attached to people who respond correctly to their non-verbal cues. For instance, an arched back or turned head communicates that a child needs a break or less playful stimulation. When adults correctly follow the cue, as by holding baby less tightly or laying them on a blanket for some alone time, the baby learns to trust that their preferences will be understood, respected, and acted upon.
- Be aware of your child's stage of development. Nurture emerging skills with toys and interactions geared to their particular abilities. Offer a variety of engaging and developmentally appropriate toys. The success children experience from the play builds confidence as well as brain connections. Repeating baby's favorite activities actually strengthens and reinforces the brain's learning pathways. And of course, the time you spend having fun together builds fond attachment.

As you can tell, secure attachments with infants are built one day at a time. The foundation of it all is parents providing regular doses of good old TLC — tender, loving care.

Web Site Resources

- Family Support America: www.familysupportamerica.org
- Zero to Three: www.zerotothree.org
- I Am Your Child Foundation: www.iamyourchild.org

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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