

Building the Bonds of Attachment

It's unbelievable how quickly our hearts sing when a child comes into our lives. From a child's perspective, however, it can take some time to hear the song our hearts are trying to share.

Attaching to a new caregiver can be hard for some children who enter foster care or who have been adopted. This may be because of past hurtful or traumatic experiences; or perhaps there was some disconnect with a primary caregiver. At times attachment simply comes slowly. At other times attachment issues can become so intense or attachment is so lacking that there is cause for concern. Understanding attachment can also provide your family with a roadmap toward a stronger relationship and positive solutions.



What Is Attachment?

Children who are securely attached want to be near the people they're attached to, typically their parents or primary caregiver, and they go to those people when they feel afraid or threatened. They see these attachment figures as a "secure base" from which they feel safe enough to branch out and explore their environment.

Furthermore, they show some anxiety when the person or people they're attached to are absent. A child who is not securely attached might also seem distressed when separated from a parent or caregiver but, when the

parent returns, the child doesn't seem to be reassured. The child might refuse comfort or even be aggressive toward the parent.

The lack of secure attachment can look different for every child and can be caused by many factors, such as:

- Abuse and/or neglect
- A prolonged absence (e.g., prison, hospital stay)
- Medical conditions for either parent or child
- Mental health issues (e.g., postpartum depression)
- Environmental factors (e.g., poverty, violence, lack of support, multiple moves).

The effects can follow a child no matter how loving and secure the home is that the child is entering. It's important to remember that underlying the child's behaviors is the child's need to feel safe and to protect himself at all costs, even if that means initially rejecting love and support. A better understanding of attachment can help you understand a child's challenging behaviors, and can help you decide when it may be time to seek help from a professional.

Power and Control

Children who are dealing with attachment issues frequently struggle quietly at first. They may be manifesting stories of worthlessness and shame in their minds. In addition, the sense of being unsafe can be constantly lurking in their minds. Challenging

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behaviors might soon follow.

Victoria, a Wisconsin foster and adoptive mom, works mostly with teen boys. She shares, “Because I take teens, my boys have usually been in out-of-home care for years, and often have been in five or more placements. Most of them have issues with attachment to some degree. This manifests in a range of behaviors. I have had kids who immediately wanted to call me ‘Mom’ and were clingy . . . They grab hold of whatever adult is available.

“Other kids are very guarded at first,” Victoria continues. “But they can eventually attach.”

She goes on to share about her now 20-year-old son who, when he was first placed with her, told her, “I might be here for a while, and maybe I’ll come back someday to say hi or something, but I’m not going to be your son.” Little by little, Victoria saw the softness behind his tough exterior.

“One day,” she says, “he called me ‘Mommy’ accidentally. He was embarrassed, but it stuck . . . He was slow to attach, but his attachment is firm and real.”

Attachment issues impact children and the families they are living with because these behaviors can become pretty intense. Children with insecure attachment will often engage in power struggles in an effort to assert or regain a sense of control; they may feel empowered saying “no.” At times, it may

even seem like children with attachment concerns avoid having fun or engaging with anyone, or they may avoid or actively reject love and praise.

Parenting Roles

Protector: Let the child know it will be okay. You can do this not only with words, but also with actions. It’s important to give these messages from the heart. This can be difficult, especially in trying times, when it feels like things aren’t getting better. It can be helpful to give these messages when things are going well, not just when the going is tough.

Provider: You are the source of food, love, shelter, and soothing for the child. This can seem simple but children with attachment issues may need constant reminders. Gestures such as cooking favorite meals or leaving short notes may go a long way toward fueling attachment. Even things that may seem small to us, over time, can help these children work through their feelings.

Guide: Lead by example. Know yourself enough to know when you need to take care of yourself. Let the child see you for who you really are. Be consistent and creative. It can be helpful to establish household guidelines that can assist the child in learning how the world works.

Team member: Whether you are parenting with someone else or by yourself, you are a member of a team.

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Your team may include the person you are parenting with, teachers, daycare providers, and family. All of the adults in a child's life must come together to avoid "splitting," where the child may try to play one person against another. This may mean more meetings and advocating, but it will help for everyone to be on the same page.

Yes you can – Survival strategies

Self-Care

The first key to coming out from the fog of having a child with insecure attachment is self-care. This looks different for all parents (watching a movie or favorite TV show, reading, taking a bath, exercising, etc.) and can be the first thing we forget to do or put on the back burner. Scheduling self-care activities like any other appointment can help you keep that dedicated time to take a break. Other self-care methods, such as demanding respect by using enforcing statements, can't be scheduled and will take hard work.

Also, if you use consequences in your home, make sure they are ones that you can live with and effectively enforce. Do you really want to cancel the family trip to Disney? It is okay to wait to choose a consequence until you are not in the heat of the moment. On the opposite side, also give choices that you can live with. Do you really want to spend the money to go out for pizza or to a movie tonight?

Lastly, find ways to separate yourself from your child's struggles. Though they affect you greatly, these are their struggles.

Consistency and creativity

As a parent, setting limits and boundaries does not make you mean. Rather, you are setting up a structure that allows your

*Keep in mind
that attachment
is a process,
not an event.*

children to be successful. You can still be fun, joke, and laugh while being the authority figure in your home. If you use consequences, and a child can predict the consequence, the child is more easily taught to *not want* that consequence.

Think about supervision and consequences based on a developmental age. Children who are not securely attached tend to need more supervision at first. If you notice there are times when they seem to be misbehaving often (e.g., when playing outside), that may be a sign to increase supervision during that time or consider alternative activities.

The Goal: Secure Attachment

Secure attachment is called such because, when it is present, the child feels safe. This type of attachment helps us think logically, develop a conscience, become self-reliant/self-soothing, handle fear and worry, and develop relationships. A child with secure attachment will often be a bit wary of strangers, but will also have the ability to warm up to people who they see their caregiver interacting with kindly and comfortably. The attached child will also recognize, prefer, and show emotion to a caregiver, and this bond is reciprocal. Out of this attachment,

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children are able to grow into adulthood with a sense of worth and self.

In her words, Victoria shares the same sentiment: “With a child who reserves his heart, it is simply a matter of time and your own commitment. Give him the love and support you would give any child and he will probably eventually see that you are the source of what he needs.

“With a child who seems to attach too soon, understand that those feelings aren’t real, and that while he may never be truly attached, he will still benefit greatly from the love and support you offer. Enjoy him just as he is, as you would any child. With time, he will learn more from you than you realize, and may be able to have more normal attachments later in life.



“Know that you are making a difference to him in ways you cannot yet see, but that are enormously beneficial. Hang on. It’s worth it.”

Without a doubt, attachment issues are challenging – for both parents and children alike. However, there are positive solutions. With support and consistency, you can learn, grow, and move forward together. The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families can help you find those positive solutions. We encourage you to reach out to us – or to another trusted resource – for support and encouragement at any time.



Resources

- *Therapeutic parenting: It's a matter of attitude*, by Deborah Hage
- *Parenting with Pizazz*, by Deborah Hage
- *The Girl Behind the Door - A Father's Journey Into the Mystery of Attachment*, by John Brooks
- *Adoptive Parent Intentional Parent: A Formula for Building & Maintaining Your Child's Safety Net*, by Stacy Manning
- *Creating Loving Attachments*, by Kim S. Golding
- *Fostering Changes: Myth, Meaning and Magic Bullets in Attachment Theory*, by Richard J. Delaney, PhD
- [No Anger Zone: Maintaining a Peaceful Emotional Climate in Adoptive Families](#): This video explores how past trauma can cause adopted children to become angry and how the anger can spread to the rest of the family.
- [The Impact of Trauma on Child Development](#): This video includes a discussion of how adoptees with a history of residence in orphanages or foster homes, or who have experienced neglect or abuse may display an inability to learn from their mistakes.

Coalition Tip Sheets

- [Helping Kids in Care Build Trusting Relationships](#)
- [What Do These Behaviors Mean?](#)
- [Help! My Child Runs Away!](#)



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