



Early Learning Digest

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February 2017

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Building a Secure Attachment with Your Baby

Attachment is the unique emotional relationship between your baby and you as a primary caretaker. It is wordless interactive emotional exchange that draws the two of you together. It ensures that your infant will feel safe and be calm enough to experience optimal development of their nervous system. The attachment bond is a key factor in the way your infant's brain organizes itself and influences your child's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development.

Here are some tips for developing a secure attachment:

Learn to understand your baby's cues. Even though all of the sounds and cries may sound the same at first, your baby is communicating with you in different ways, using sound and movement. An arched back, a scrunched-up face, eyes tightly closed, fists curled up, rubbing eyes, frenetic movement - all of these signs communicate something specific about your baby's emotional and physical state. Your task is to find out what your baby is communicating and how to best respond.

Eating and sleeping provide important opportunities. Many of your baby's early signs and signals are about the need for food or rest. Increasing the frequency of feedings or adding some extra time for rest may make a big difference in your baby's



ability to engage and interact when awake.

Talk, laugh and play with your baby. Smiles, laughter, touch, and interaction are as important to a baby's development as food or sleep. Your body language, tone of voice, and loving touch are all important ways of communicating with your baby.

It is important for fathers to connect emotionally with baby too. The kind of multi-tasking required to care for a baby while simultaneously connecting emotionally with an infant can be harder for fathers, but with a little effort, dads can achieve the same results. Try bottle feeding, talking, reading, playing peek-a-boo, mimicking your baby's cooing, and holding the baby as much as possible.

Source: "How to Build a Secure Attachment Bond with Your Baby," by Lawrence Robinson, Joanna Saison, MSW, Melinda Smith, M.A., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., December 2016.

Helping Your Child Feel Safe and Secure

Safety is the core issue for children with reactive attachment disorder and other attachment problems. It is essential to build up a child's sense of security. You accomplish this by establishing clear expectations and rules of behavior, and by responding consistently so your child knows what to expect when he or she acts a certain way. Even more importantly, your child knows that, no matter what happens you can be counted on.

Here are some ways to make your child feel safe and secure:

Set limits and boundaries. Consistent, loving boundaries make the world seem more predictable and less scary to children. It is important that they understand what behavior is expected of them, what is and isn't acceptable, and what the consequences will be if they disregard the rules.

Take charge, yet remain calm when your child is upset or misbehaving. Misbehavior means that your child doesn't know how to handle what he is feeling and needs your help. By staying calm, you show your child that the feeling is manageable.

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Teaching to Care and Cooperate

Caring and cooperation are positive behaviors we'd all like to see in our children. However, very young children tend to see themselves as the center of the world. As children build relationships, they learn how their words and actions affect others. If children see thoughtfulness and cooperation modeled, they learn to collaborate, practice kindness, and do things for others.

Here are some tips to help children learn to care and cooperate:

Give your child choices. Set reasonable expectations for cooperation. Some young children are able to wait patiently while you help a neighbor. For others, that might be a challenge. Some young children might want to draw a picture on a card for a friend's birthday, while others might prefer to give a hug.

Talk with children about feelings. Teach them words that identify emotions. Children need to be aware of their own emotions before they can empathize with and respect someone else's.

Validate caring behaviors when they occur. For example, "It was very kind of you to help Amy when she fell out of the wagon," or "Thank you for helping me put the groceries away." Empower children by asking their ideas and suggestions about a situation. If one of their friends is experiencing challenging behavior, ask your child questions to extend his understanding of what is happening. "How do you think your friend is feeling?" "What do you think you can do to help?"



Explain situations and expectations beforehand. For example, when a friend or family member is coming over, you can say, "Aunt Sue is coming over for a visit. It would make her feel happy if each of us says 'hi,' smiles at her, or gives her a hug. What else do you think we can do to make her happy?"

Above all, model the values and behaviors you want your child to learn. By doing so, you guide your child to create a more compassionate world. Parents are the first and most important teachers for their children.

Source: "Teaching Children to Care and Be More Cooperative," <http://www.brighthorizons.com/family-resources/e-family-news/teaching-children-to-care-and-be-more-cooperative>, retrieved January 2017.

Helping Your Child Feel Safe and Secure

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Be immediately available to reconnect after a conflict. After a conflict or tantrum, be ready to reconnect as soon as he is ready. This reinforces your consistency and love, and will help your child develop the trust that you'll be there through thick and thin.

Try to maintain predictable routines and schedules. A familiar routine or schedule can provide comfort during times of change.

If you suspect your child might have an issue with attachment, consult with your pediatrician or a child development specialist.

Source: "Attachment Issues and Reactive Attachment Disorder: Symptoms, Treatment, and Hope for Children with Insecure Attachment," by Melinda Smith, M.A., Joanna Saisan, MSW, and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., December 2016.



If you have concerns about your child's growth and development, please talk to your child's health care provider or call 1-866-693-GROW (4769), to talk to a professional and find out how you can get connected with various resources in Minnesota.