

**Developing and Maintaining “Secure Attachment”  
with Your Child for a Stronger Relationship**  
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**KEY IDEA: The main goal of parenting is NOT to teach children how to behave. The main goal of parenting, especially in the early years, is to develop a close, warm, joyful relationship with your children.**

This will make them believe that relationships are safe and nurturing. They will WANT to be better people to please you and keep the relationship whole. If they learn that others care about them, they will also learn to do the same for others: to care, to cooperate, to share, be patient, be compassionate, love and have good character. Even more important: They will learn to care for themselves and will develop good self-worth and self-acceptance.

The main goal of parenting is NOT to try to MAKE children better people by constantly correcting them or punishing them for bad behavior. (Although guiding and correcting children is certainly needed as part of the parenting toolkit!) If they learn that relationships are mostly about criticizing, shaming, condemning and anger, then they will expect this of others in their life as adults. They will also be shaming, condemning and angry at others — and toward themselves. Relationships will be viewed as unsafe and this will lead to unhealthy relationships throughout their lives, to low self-worth, and perhaps to anxiety and depression. If you develop a strong emotional bond with your child, it will naturally lead them to develop pro-social behaviors and good emotional and social health.

Children learn to care by having you care for them. If they experience care, they will learn to care. If they learn to care, they will care enough to behave correctly.

**THE ABOVE IDEA IS A VERY IMPORTANT CONCEPT TO LEARN TO BE A BETTER PARENT! SO STOP AND RE-READ THE PARAGRAPHS SLOWLY. THEN OBSERVE FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS HOW OFTEN YOU CRITICIZE AND PUNISH YOUR CHILDREN AND HOW OFTEN YOU CONNECT WITH THEM JOYFULLY, EMOTIONALLY AND WARMLY.**

**REMEMBER AT ALL TIMES: STOP WORRYING ABOUT CORRECTING BEHAVIORS AND START WORRYING ABOUT CONNECTING EMOTIONALLY.**

***“Only when children feel right can they think clearly and act right.”***

***— Haim Ginott, “Between Parent and Child”***

Learning about something called ATTACHMENT THEORY is key to becoming a better parent. Many adults were not raised using this concept, so don't be surprised if you are parenting in a way that is different from what is described below.

Attachment theory was developed by psychologist John Bowlby in the 1950s. Bowlby conducted research on how babies bonded with mothers and noted that it is a biological need for infants to feel safe. As social creatures, all humans are born looking toward our caregivers to protect us, feed us and nurture us. This ancient survival code is wired into our brains and actually is our greatest strength. Our ability to team up, cooperate and care for each other has led to the success of the human species. We continue to have this need to connect emotionally and physically with others throughout our lives.

Physiologically, our bodies evolved to expect CO-REGULATION from others. This means when we are experiencing an emotion, such as fear, we turn toward others to help us share and experience this feeling, to

make meaning of it and to calm down. Parents must be emotionally and physically present to help their children regulate their emotions.

The absence of danger in an environment doesn't make people feel safe. It's receiving cues from others that triggers our sense of safety. Having a strong social engagement system, that includes lots of safety cues, is how we grow and develop and acquire resilience.

A 2014 study of 243 people born into poverty found that children who received "sensitive caregiving" in their first three years not only did better in academic tests in childhood, but had healthier relationships and greater academic attainment in their 30s. Parents who are sensitive caregivers "respond to their child's signals promptly and appropriately" and "provide a secure base" for children to explore the world.

A number of studies show that cold and distant parent-child relationships predispose a child to later depression, adult-onset diabetes and heart disease. Poor social skills, dysfunctional relationships and anxiety have all been linked to insecure attachment.

The relationships between parent and child is what is key to developing an emotionally and socially healthy child.

Research has segmented out different ATTACHMENT STYLES based on the mother's warmth and caring.

1. A baby who is SECURELY ATTACHED has learned that when she cries a parent responds quickly with warmth, care and reassurance. This teaches a baby that her needs will be addressed in a prompt manner and she will feel safe. A securely attached child believes her parent is available and responsive when she is in distress. The caregiver's presence helps the infant learn to regulate distress. Eventually, even if the parent isn't always available, the child will learn to self-regulate. Securely attached children grow into resilient, emotionally healthy adults who can feel trust and vulnerability in relationships and enjoy interdependent relationships.
2. INSECURELY ATTACHED children do not feel confident that a caregiver will be attuned and responsive to their needs. Insecure attachment can result if a child is raised by parents who themselves are insecurely attached, which may lead them to be harsh, critical, anxious, emotionally distant or self-absorbed. It can also occur in cases of trauma, where a child is neglected, abused, harshly punished, witnesses violence or abuse in the home, is exposed to substance abuse, is exposed to crime, or just has a chaotic home environment.
  1. Insecure attachment is divided into two types:
    - ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT
    - AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

For securely attached children, the thought is: "If I call, someone will come and that feels warm and safe." For insecurely attached children, relationships can become an emotional or physical danger: "If I call, no one will come (consistently)" or "If I call and they come, they are threatening."

This threat does not necessarily mean a physical threat. When parents dismiss a child's normal developmental needs, such as the need to explore or laugh or make loud noises, it can signal to a child that his "self" is not desirable. This disapproval by a parent can lead a child to develop feelings of self-rejection that can continue for a lifetime.

Children learn to reject themselves as a way of pleasing the parent to ensure feeling safe and protected. But as a result, the child's sense of self diminishes.

### **Attachment occurs beginning at birth.**

Communication with your child began the moment you looked into his or her eyes and made a joyful connection without speaking a word. As a child grows, remember those early, happy times of being with your child and engaging back and forth with giggles, smiles and snuggles. This same emotional connection or attachment is what makes relationships strong and what we want to encourage in your relationship with your child throughout their development.

## A Parent's Emotional State Matters

Children's emotional stability is typically gauged on their ability to attach to the parent. However, the parent-child relationship is a dyad, meaning there are two people involved. The parent has to be "inviting" to the child — calm, happy and emotionally secure. Being happy means being safe and emotionally open and it gives your child the message that, "I can handle you."

If a parent is more emotionally attuned to her own needs, perhaps due to experiencing feelings of anxiety or depression, then the child learns to defer his own needs. He learns not to depend on mom because she is busy with her own emotional needs.

Many parents have anxiety related to being afraid of being judged for the child's misbehavior: "If my child throws a tantrum in church, others will think I am a bad parent and judge me." Children can be attuned to this fear and may react in fear themselves with escalated levels of dysregulation and anxiety, leading to more tantrums.

## Normal Stages of Attachment

Recognize that all relationships will have times when they feel close (attunement), then may rupture or "break," (conflict) and can be repaired or reconciled. Just because your child acts out, does not mean the child is "bad," that you are an ineffective parent, or that the relationship is a failure.

### 1. Attunement Stage

To encourage attunement, learn to match the emotional state of your child. Be "present" with your child, even if it is in a moment of contentment and pleasurable companionship. Accept that your child is a different person, with unique viewpoints and emotions.

Be curious about your child's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Avoid inserting your own opinions or thoughts.

Match your child's emotional state when talking to him (mirroring): If he is angry, put an angry expression on your face, use an angry tone of voice, and reflect back to him: "You are very angry at your sister for hitting you." This helps the child begin to identify, contain and regulate the expression of emotions. It will not make him more angry or encourage him to be angry in the future.

Research shows that babies who first experience mirroring, then experience comforting, have the best emotional health. In other words, don't immediately reassure a child everything will be OK. First respond to her feelings of fear or discomfort. When parents dismiss her feelings, she will learn to dismiss her "self." (See "Reflective Listening" handout.)

Parents must be able to regulate their own emotions and be available and responsive to the child. A parent's anxiety must not make a child's anxiety worse. If you have feelings of rage, anxiety or disgust toward your child, your child will develop an impaired view of self and risk not being able to regulate his own emotions.

Work to understand why your child's behavior "triggers" a reaction from you. Consider therapy to address how you were parented or your attachment to your parents.

Make home a safe haven. Avoid "jumping on" kids when they come home from school with questions and nagging about homework or chores. Allow unscheduled time at home for kids to play and decompress. Find time to just "be" with children in a playful, relaxed way.

Stop evaluating, fixing, and correcting. Start listening. When your child misbehaves or throws a tantrum, use reflective listening and try to understand why the child is doing what he is doing. This also helps him understand his own motives and behaviors. (See "Reflective Listening" handout.)

### 2. Breaks

All relationships have conflict. Look at behavioral problems as small events, not major ruptures in the relationship.

Parents must stop viewing a child's anger as "disrespectful," and view it as a normal relationship break.

Look at your child anew. Assume he is most often doing the best he can. Children want to please you as a parent. So try to eliminate your negative assumptions — that your child is malicious and defiant. **Children become angry and oppositional when they believe they are not loved or worthy of love.**

Understand that the power you have as a parent is NOT in lecturing and enforcing punishments to MAKE a child please you, but in engaging emotionally and empathically with your child so that he WANTS to please you. This gives parents influence over a child's behavior in positive ways, and teaches a child that healthy relationships are not about control, power or judgment.

**Never threaten to withdraw your love or support as punishment. To a child, parental abandonment is the most severe trigger of fear — a primal fear of survival. By using the relationship as a negotiating tool you teach a child to use manipulation, control and emotional threats. You teach your child that relationships are unsafe and frightening.**

Frequent breaks that do not get repaired cause mutual distancing or withdrawal by parent and child.

Do not look at repairs as “giving in,” “loss of authority and power,” “a forced apology,” or a possibility for rejection by the other. Examine how you react when challenged, questioned or forced to apologize. Do you apologize easily and gracefully? Or do you lash out in anger when challenged?

Parents who over-focus on correcting behaviors and under-focus on staying engaged emotionally with their child can have a negative influence on behavioral problems. Stop worrying so much about a child's “bad behavior,” and focus on just loving him — this will lead to better behavior and a better relationship.

### 3. Repair

Children must feel the relationship can be rebuilt after a conflict, separation or misattunement.

To do this, speak with empathy not anger. Anger threatens relationships; empathy repairs relationships.

Soothe your child when he is in distress. To change problem behavior you have to recognize and calm the arousing emotions your child is experiencing. When your child becomes afraid (throws a tantrum, cries, gets angry), soothe first, discipline later. When a child is in the fear state, he is being controlled by his emotions. His “thinking brain” is not engaged. Disciplining him at that moment is a huge waste of time and often increases his distress. Comfort, hold, and calm him. Later, when his cognitive brain is available, talk about his emotional experience and behaviors in a teaching way, not a punishing way.

Don't worry that your affection is spoiling him. Spoiling is more about failing to learn that there are consequences to actions. Spoiling is not too much love.

Children left alone to manage their feelings have difficulty learning to accept and regulate those feelings. Avoid the use of “time-out”, which isolates a child when he is experiencing strong emotions and is most in need of comfort and reassurance. One psychologist stated: “The two worst things for a mammal are isolation and restraint.” And this is exactly what a timeout entails. Use time-outs only if you are not in control of your emotions, or if the child's shame is so intense that any contact with others makes it worse.

Anger should be treated as just another emotion, such as fear or sadness. Parents should share this emotional experience to show that it is not a time to be rejected, does not have to be faced alone, and is not something to be ashamed of.

The presence of calm, matter-of-fact caregivers when a child is “dysregulated” gives the child a safe place to turn to in her time of fear. Being with another human at this time and talking about and jointly experiencing the emotions teaches a child that relationships and emotions are safe and manageable.

Use physical touch. Firm touch calms anger, gentle touch calms an irritated or annoyed child, and caresses communicate love.

Children even into their teens need ongoing reassurance, comfort and love far more than they need nagging, criticizing and demeaning.

Discipline: Correct firmly, but quickly repair the relationship by recognizing the child's shame at misbehaving. Change your tone of voice to nurturing and give gentle direction on correct behaviors.

If you continue to use shame and harsh discipline it leads to a feeling for the child that the relationship itself is in danger. A conflict now represents more than a behavioral problem and becomes a threat to both the relationship and the sense of self.

“The way individuals connect with the people close to them reveals what they've learned from past relationships. The problems they have in establishing and maintaining bonds are informative. On the

simplest level, these problems demonstrate whether they've learned that relationships are safe and people can be trusted, or that being close to others is dangerous and people are likely to end up hurting you." "Receiving Love," by Harville Hendrix, PhD, and Helen LaKelly Hunt, PhD, 2004

When in doubt, parent with love, not anger or fear. When parents are warm and caring, kids feel safe and they are more likely to do the right thing. Children lie or steal or hit because they are in "fear mode." In fear mode, we all care more about ourselves than other people. To get children to care and show empathy, they first have to be calm and safe. Only then can they love others and be compassionate.

Parents must model empathy and caring; children learn best by watching behavior, not by listening to what you say. When you model caring, kids feel this warmth and enjoy this feeling. They will then behave in ways that gets more people to give them this feeling of warmth, caring, and belonging. Caring is the only lesson to worry about teaching — good behavior will be the natural result.

Focus on establishing a warm, loving, caring, respectful relationship with your child. Don't get so busy lecturing and disciplining to teach about "bad behavior" that you do not teach or model warmth.

***When in doubt about a parenting approach ask yourself: "Will this make my child feel safe or scared?"***

## **RESOURCES:**

RECOMMENDED: Video: Attachment Theory and Emotional Regulation: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pignLj\\_bPsE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pignLj_bPsE)

Video on Infant and Adult Attachment with Sue Johnson and Ed Tronick:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0IYQGXiJxw>

[www.handinhandparenting.org](http://www.handinhandparenting.org)

"The Science of Parenting," by Margot Sunderland (best for 0-8 years)

"Parenting from the Inside Out," by Daniel J. Siegel, MD, and Mary Hartzell MEd (all ages of children)

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