



# Attachment 101

The relationship with primary caregivers, usually the mother and the father,

are the most significant relationships human beings experience. The attachment created between a child and his parents sets the stage for all future relationships. If they are "good enough" parents, able to respond empathetically to their child's needs, the child perceives the world as a safe place where he can get his needs met. The child will carry this sense of the world to all his future life experiences. This is the basis for a theoretical orientation known as "Attachment Theory."

In the book *Becoming Attached: First*

*Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, Robert Karen, Ph.D. writes, "Attachment theory held that getting love, reliably and consistently, makes the child feel worthy of love; and his perception that he can attain what he needs from those around him yields the sense that he is an effective person who can have an impact on his world." That sense of efficacy and worthiness creates a strong sense of self and therefore a healthy self-esteem throughout adulthood.

## Attachment

Mary Ainsworth, the mother of attachment psychology, claimed that "maternal attunement" or the ability of the mother to tune in to her baby was central to psychological development. She observed this attunement taking place in many forms including: feeding, face-to-face encounters, bodily contact, and response to infant crying.

Researchers have found that mothers and babies have an elaborate dance of behavior and reinforcement. Mothers tend to match their infant's intensity, tempo, communication, and cues, which reinforces the bond between mother and child. Without even consciously realizing it, the mother reinforces certain behaviors in her child through her own expressions and reactions. A mother who only tunes in to certain emotions in her child's emotional life sends an unconscious message about what parts of himself are okay to share in an interpersonal experience.

## Early Bonding and Attachment

Attachment is the developing bond between parent and child. Previous generations of psychologists believed that in order for a healthy mother-infant relationship to take place it had to be an instantaneous event. Fortunately, we now realize that process takes time to develop.

We often hear how crucial the first three years are for psychological development. During the first year of life a child displays a range of "attachment behaviors" such as protesting a mother's departure, greeting her returns, clinging when frightened, and following when able. Everette Waters, a developmental psychologist, established that the quality of attachment is stable between the age of twelve and eighteen months. Securely attached twelve-month-old children show signs of distress when separated from their mothers. After even a short separa-

tion these children generally reach out for physical contact like a hug. Securely attached eighteen month olds are usually not distressed by separation and generally initiate emotional contact (i.e. a greeting, a smile, sharing a toy) as opposed to a physical one.

## Adoption

While not all children who are adopted suffer from attachment disorders, as a group, they are at a higher risk for these types of problems. Attachment disorders have a range or severity and depending on the duration and severity these children can experience tremendous healing from a loving family and the proper care. Children who are adopted at a younger age, those that get to experience foster care, and kids who have surrogate maternal care (i.e. nanny programs, big sister programs, etc.) tend to do better. An organization called Half the Sky ([www.halftthesky.org](http://www.halftthesky.org)), created by adoptive parents of orphaned Chinese children, is one that recognized the need among institutionalized children for this type of nurturing attention. This fantastic group has created programs to help avoid attachment problems in Chinese orphanages by establishing early childhood education, personalized learning, and infant nurture programs.

## Attachment Parenting

Attachment Parenting International describes attachment parenting as "a philosophy based in the practice of nurturing parenting methods that create strong emotional bonds, also known as secure attachment, between the infant and parent(s). This style of parenting encourages responsiveness to the infant or child's emotional needs, and develops trust that their emotional needs will be met. As a result, this strong attachment helps the child develop secure, empathic, peaceful, and enduring relationships."

Devotees of Attachment Parenting use specific attachment tools to help create a strong bond. Well-known pediatrician and attachment parent William Sears M.D. recommends "The Baby B's" for parents who follow the Attachment Parenting philosophy. They are:

- **Birth bonding** is the belief that mother and child should not be separated during the first six weeks of the baby's life in order to promote healthy bonding.
- **Breastfeeding** is encouraged in order to help mothers better learn her baby's cues and encourage the maternal hormones which increase bonding.
- **Babywearing**, wearing your infant in a sling is encouraged in order to promote sensitivity as a parent and a sense of safety for the infant.
- **Bedsharing** is the concept of the family bed which attachment parents believe promotes better sleep and bonding between parent and child.
- **Belief in babies' cries** is the philosophy that a child's cry is a valuable sign that a parent must learn to respond to in a sensitive manner in order to help the baby feel that they can count on being properly responded to.
- **Balance and boundaries** is the understanding that parents need to learn to say "no" in order to create boundaries for their children and self care for themselves.
- **Beware of baby trainers** is the warning to steer clear of advisors who want to put your baby on a schedule, warn you not to pick him up too much, or let him cry it out. Attachment parents feel that that type of advice makes babies lose their confidence that their cues will be responded to and parents start to question their ability to respond adequately.

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