

PARENTING CHILDREN WITH ATTACHMENT PROBLEMS

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What is an Attachment Problem?



Attachment problems are the result of behavioral patterns that occur during the first years and result in a child who has difficulty bonding with or trusting a primary caretaker. They cause children to form an atypical mental blueprint that includes distrust of adults & development of abnormal reactions to parental interactions & discipline. Without treatment, the child's relationships throughout life are affected.

Attachment problems result when a child's bonding process with a caretaker is interrupted during the early critical stages. This may be due to difficult pregnancy/birth, substance abuse during and/or after pregnancy, maternal stress/trauma, separations from caretakers (due to drug use, illness, or work), abuse/neglect, maternal depression, frequent change of caretakers (within a family, foster-care, adoption), inadequate parenting skills, or qualities of the child (e.g., genetic predisposition, difficult temperament, disabilities, inability to regulate emotion or sleep; chronic illness or pain which causes inconsolability).

These children do not feel cared for and underlying

emotions become apprehension and fear. They may not express these feelings as recognizable anxiety but as oppositionality, anger, or aggression. The child is often isolated and lonely, unable to trust others or give and receive affection in a healthy way. When consistent care is absent, the child learns to self-parent instead. If no one else will protect them, they will do it themselves. It is scary when a 3 to 5 year old learns from a non-nurturing environment how best to react and survive; and these survival patterns can follow throughout life. Commonly, they lack the ability to perceive right from wrong and do not develop a conscience. Because many feel the need to be in control, they are difficult to parent.

TRUST CYCLE	
Need	Child has a need causing discomfort & disequilibrium
Emotional Response	The need creates an emotion like rage or fear & the infant screams, cries, etc.
Gratification	If the caregiver responds to the need, equilibrium is re-
Trust	Trust is built.

The Trust Cycle

The Trust Cycle refers to the sequence of routine care occurring between the infant and primary caregiver during the first months. The chart (right) shows the stages of the trust cycle. One example of the cycle might be the infant becoming hungry (**NEED**) and experiencing the discomfort of hunger

(**EMOTIONAL RESPONSE**, cry out in pain). In the ideal situation, the caregiver brings a bottle and feeds the baby (**GRATIFICATION**). Over time and repeated behavioral patterns such as this, the infant learns to **TRUST** the world. In the less than ideal situation, the infant becomes hungry (**NEED**)

which brings feelings of discomfort (**EMOTIONAL RESPONSE**, cry out in pain). If the caregiver does not respond (e.g., absent, on drugs, unaware of the need, uncaring, etc.), the infant's needs do not get met and **GRATIFICATION** does not occur. Over time and repeated patterns such as this, the

infant learns to not **TRUST** the world and begins to develop a cognitive mindset and behavioral patterns to counteract not having needs met (e.g., being controlling, withdrawn, aggressive, uneasy to settle, demanding, etc.). You may know that your child was generously fed; however, consider other physical and emotional needs as well.



It is important that the natural mother remaining with a poorly attached child not cripple herself with blame for the child's condition. Many times the mother is ill (addiction, depression, etc.) in the first years and/or the child is often not "cuddly" and "responsive" to the parent due to genetic make-up or chronic pain (e.g., food allergies, stomach discomfort, etc.). The vital fact to focus on is that the problem is treatable and the mother can remedy the situation with the right treatment.



Remember, it is not the parent's job to "fix" the child, it is your job to create an environment conducive to healing and loving.

Strategies to accomplish this goal follow.

THE MINDSET

Emotionally healthy children have an innate desire to please their parents; children with attachment problems fail to consider the feelings of others. They are extremely self-centered. These children developed these personality structures as a defense to their early life traumas (not having emotional, safety, and/or physical needs addressed). The defense is designed to avoid being hurt further either emotionally or physically. These defenses served a function early in life, which was to survive. Children cannot relax when they feel a constant need to control their environment; and unfortunately, the trauma has been locked in and prevents the child from recognizing s/he is now in safe hands (either by foster care, adoption, or birth-mother who is attempting to

remedy the situation). Therefore, it is necessary to create an environment that allows the child to relax by learning to trust the caretakers in the child's life today. Unfortunately, relaxation comes with a price: the child feels complete terror about losing the power (feeling of being in control) they once felt. Their ability to control family situations must be lovingly removed, and they must be guided through the difficult reactions of feeling out of control. But first, parents must learn basic concepts that enable them to maintain a safe, loving, positive and powerful parenting style. If the parents are in control, the child will not need to be. Many foster and adoptive parents think that if they are just consistent, loving, and kind, the child will outgrow

the behavior problems. This is a good start; however, these are built-in, knee-jerk reactions in the child. They cannot verbalize why they behave in this way and they cannot be "reasoned" out of their behaviors. Children continue to perform these self-surviving behaviors that are comfortable and familiar to them (sometimes at the cost of their own and their family members' safety). The goal is to help children learn to be respectful, responsible, reciprocal and fun to be around. In order to accomplish this goal, parents must create an environment that provides a balance of structure and nurturance that is in sync with the capabilities of the child. As the child moves closer to these goals, the structure may be minimized.

Basic Rules to Consider when Parenting a Child with Attachment Problems:

Take care of yourself. If you are run down, angry, and distressed, you will not be able to effectively parent.

Be proactive rather than reactive. Anticipate the tantrums and diffuse them.

Provide a united front. Do not allow the child to play one parent against the other.

Create an emotionally as well as physically safe environment: Avoid sarcasm and anger.

Use natural conse-

quences to teach life lessons.

Use empathy when giving consequences.

Communicate in a loving manner; set a positive tone.

Use thinking rather than fighting words.

Save the enthusiasm for the positive behavior, use **neutrality** with the negative.

Allow your child to express feelings verbally. Assist with expression of emotion.

Minimize use of the television.

Only give choices you can live with.

Be consistent.

Avoid power struggles.

Assess what the child can handle and only allow freedoms and responsibilities that will result in opportunities for success.

Keep a sense of humor.

TOOLS FOR WORKING WITH (LITTLE) PEOPLE by Steve Haragon.

When unhappy with a child's behavior and in preparing to take action, ask "What tool am I using?" There are four basic tools: **The lowest level is the hammer**, an instrument of brute force. Whatever it contacts, it dents or breaks. **Next are the pliers**, less damaging than the hammer, but still a tool of force used to bend or manipulate, leaving a mark. **Then comes the screwdriver**, used to get down inside. It tightens and can also be used to puncture or deflate; and, although it does not damage the surface

like the hammer or pliers, it can be even more destructive. **The best tool, however, is the brain**, which illuminates, warms, develops, removes darkness and creates understanding. It is a different kind of tool, the source of creative solutions. Although the hammer, pliers, and screwdriver work, they do not accomplish long-term goals of growth, self-development, and self-discipline. And so, when disciplining children, ask yourself, "What tool am I using?"

USEFUL STRATEGIES for DEALING with POORLY ATTACHED CHILDREN

Eye Contact: A common characteristic of children with attachment problems is poor eye contact with adult caregivers. **Eye contact is a powerful tool.** It is not simply looking at your child. Loving yet powerful eyes send a message of safety and security to the child. **Eye contact can also be a weapon.** Be aware of how you use it. Hard, angry eyes will do more harm than good.

Eye contact should be in both directions. Gently insist the child make eye contact with you whenever speaking and when you are speaking to him/her. Do not allow the child to call you from another room. If so, have the child practice coming to you and engaging in eye contact as you speak. Use positive reinforcement and enthusiasm. When the child speaks, wait for eye contact

"Snuggle Time": An Essential Concept for Children with Attachment Issues

Babies cry and are picked up, held close, comforted, and soothed. The need for human contact and assurance is met and protection is communicated. Trust has developed. This is what went wrong for many children with attachment problems. No one appropriately responded to the cries. Maybe the child was scolded. Perhaps the person who came each time was

different, came after a while, or no one came at all. The child learned that adults are not to be trusted. This is what needs to be unlearned so s/he can learn to trust you. **Snuggling, cuddling, rocking, feeling each other's touch, looking into one another's eyes; these promote attachment and bonding.** If a child can learn an adult cares for him/her, recognizes feelings

REMOVING BARRIERS

TV, Computers, Video Games, Radio: During the first years, the normal child is learning to focus and problem solve. The poorly attached child, who has missed that window, has to be given a chance for the brain to develop channels to process information. Therefore, it may be wise to limit tv which discourages problem-solving. If it is impossible to reduce or eliminate tv from the child's life, at least be careful of the programming watched (e.g. encourage learning/problem solving and discourage scary,

aggressive shows). Instead try Legos, Constructs, Lincoln Logs, or other problem solving toys. Also, instead of individual play, encourage games that can be played by two or more family members. Time spent playing games with the child is time well spent and promotes positive conversation and sharing of strategies which will help to establish a warm, trusting relationship.



Valuables: Children with attachment problems often wreck things. While you are working on behavior, you might want to put away the expensive items, replacing with secondhand furniture, particularly in the child's room. Do not permit your battle to save the furniture to interfere with your relationship with the child.



Snuggle the child any time you feel s/he needs it, but only on your terms. Snuggle time should not be a time of manipulation.

even when s/he cannot, and is strong enough to handle his/her behavior, then the basis of trust can be built. Some parents think this is too babyish for the child. One should remember that most of these children were not allowed to experience this normal infant activity. To deny them even in adolescence is recreating the first few years.

Strategies: Strong Sitting

Strong sitting may be an effective tool to assist children with "quieting the self." Many times children with attachment problems grow up in chaotic environments where they do not have the opportunity to learn this skill. To encourage strong sitting pick a safe, comfortable spot where your child can sit free from distractions (e.g., pets, tv, etc.). You should monitor his/her sitting while doing something else. S/he sits with legs folded Indian-style, head still, and back straight. Hands can be on the floor, on thighs, or in the lap. Over time, challenge the child to focus by adding a noise or activity. Start with 3 minutes and work up to 1 minute per year of age (e.g., if the child is 8, he should sit for 8 minutes). Your job is to be a barely-there coach. Use no negatives while your child is sitting. Also, do not let the child control when s/he starts. The child may not want to do strong sitting. If s/he protests or becomes aggressive, calmly say something like this: "Okay, I know you're not very strong right now, so take some time to get all the movement out of your system, and we'll start in 5 minutes." The child will invariably counter with a time of his own, such as: "No. I'm ready now!" Smile sweetly and say, "I'm not. We'll start when I'm ready." If s/he appears incapable of doing the entire thing, allow "weak sitting" at a 3:1 ration. So s/he can sit strong for 20 minutes or do "weak sitting" for an hour. The child will most likely opt for strong sitting. If the child refuses, tell the child that if too weak to do the sitting, s/he will have to stay in his/her room and rest until strong enough to do it. **If the child has ADHD, you may start with 1 minute and work slowly up to 3-5 minutes.**

Snuggling Continued

Although it may vary by age, things you might do during snuggling time include:

- 1) Have juice or milk handy, wrap the child in a soft blanket, and hold as you would a baby. Sit in a rocking chair or Indian-style on the floor. Rock with your body.



Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

and do not give the devil an opportunity.

- 2) Try to get as much eye contact as possible. Talk using a soft, nurturing voice. Do not use this time to talk about things that s/he has done wrong.
- 3) Offer milk/juice from bottle. Make sure **you** hold the bottle. You want to enforce the idea that you can take care of the child's needs. If you permit self-feeding, s/he will receive the wrong message.
- 4) Do this once a day for 5 minutes.
- 5) Do not be afraid to treat older

kids as if they were younger. They still need the cuddling they never received when younger, and you may be surprised to find that they will sometimes accept it easily. A baby bottle might be a bit much for a 12-year-old; however, you can use a juice box with a straw or lollipop instead.

How do I cuddle an older child?

First try 1-4 above. While rocking, sing songs made up to popular tunes (*Jesus Loves Me, You Are My Sunshine*, etc.). Tell stories of their babyhood. If you did not know them as a baby, tell how you would have fed, bathed, and rocked them. Offer the drink if they want it. Make certain, for a child of any age that you hold the drink. If this does not go well, do not force it but try the straw or lollipop next time for short increments and work up to 5 minutes. Also, play games, such as putting cheerios on your nose and asking

PRAISE & DISCIPLINE

Effective discipline involves giving commands and following through with discipline. However, if you find you constantly punish and rarely praise, discipline can be rendered ineffective and misbehavior may increase. This may be due the child's lack of knowledge in how to interact positively with a caregiver or his/her settling for negative attention (versus no attention). Earning praise should not be a mystery to the child and praise should occur in a 7:1 ratio with criticism. After the punishment (time-out, consequence) is over and the child has stopped the intolerable behavior or begins to do a behavior you like, **praise desirable behaviors and allow a way back into the family.** Holding grudges and keeping cold silences serve no purpose.

the child to reach for them. Play follow the leader, tracing a pattern on their face or visa versa. If this does not work a knowledgeable therapist can teach you fun games you can play that will promote the same kind of bonding.

PROVIDING CHOICES

Allowing choice is essential in parenting but particularly so for the poorly attached child who is not accustomed to accepting fair discipline from an adult. The parent gives two choices that the parent can live with and, without influencing the choice, accepts the child's decision. This gives the child the power and control desired but in a limited way. It also eliminates blame on the parent for what has happened to the child, thus reducing manipulation of the parent by the child.



Limit Setting Tools: Giving Commands

Announcements/warnings:

A statement that lets the child know a command is coming and soon s/he will have to transition to a new activity. Give announcements when you need to interrupt the child. Resistance and protests are typical but you are more likely to get cooperation if you prepare the child for a direct command. **Example:** Announcement--"Three more times down the slide and we'll have to go home." Command--3 slides later: "David, it's time to go now." First identify the behavior you want and give the child the announcement five, ten, or fifteen minutes earlier. A child under five will not understand time but use time limit announcements coupled with amounts (e.g., one more story, three more times on the slide, after this show is over, etc.).

Warnings & Consequences

A **consequence** is loss of privilege or object that has meaning to the child, that the parent has control over, and that the parent is willing to take away. Be careful in your choice of a consequence, enforcing a limit but not devastating. Also, consequences need to vary to be effective. Try to think of the child's next privilege (e.g., choice of snack or play, bedtime) to devise a motivating consequence. Consequences are not always total removal of a privilege but, in non dire situations, can be a choice between a desired and non-desired object (e.g., "You have 2 choices, you can take out the trash and have a

Effective Commands:

Use eye contact and appropriate words. Children need to know the exact behavior you want them to stop or start, e.g., incorrect: "Stop that!"; correct: "Put those scissors on the table." Naming the desired behavior tells exactly what to do, gives the child a chance to comply immediately, and gives you an opportunity to praise. **Keep your voice in check.** Your tone should be neutral, firm, but not angry. No matter how angry you feel, try to remain calm. The idea is not to hide your anger from the child, but commands are more effective if you appear to be in control. **Phrase commands as statements NOT questions.**

Don't ask a question unless you will accept a "no" for an answer (e.g., do not ask: "Don't you think it's time for bed?") but say: "It's time for bed.")

cookie or just pick a fruit for dessert). Remember that short-term consequences are most effective (e.g., longer than a day is meaningless to the child and takes away the parents choice of consequences). Short-term consequences can help teach self-control by giving the child the opportunity to try again sooner, rather than several days later.

A **warning** is a statement that a consequence is coming unless the child starts/stops a certain behavior. Unless a behavior is dangerous, give a warning before the consequence to spell out exactly what the child can expect if the behavior continues and to

Be sure & serious: Effective commands are said as if you mean it. Children have radar and know when you are tired or do not want to argue. Do not give a command unless you mean it and plan to follow through with discipline.



Broken Record Technique

The broken record (repeating a command) is a tool for combating arguing. To be effective remain calm and do not change a word of the message. Ex: Dad: "It's time for bed, Josh."

Josh: "But it's only 8:30"

Dad: "It's time for bed, Josh."

Josh: "No one else in my class has to go to bed at 8:30."

Dad: "It's time for bed, Josh."

Josh: "It's not fair."

Dad: "It's time for bed, Josh."

Josh: "Why do you keep saying that?"

Dad: "It's time for bed, Josh."

Josh: "All right, all right, just stop saying that stupid "it's time for bed."

Dad: "Thank you, Josh. I'll be up in a minute to kiss you good night."

Notice how the parent ignored the word "stupid," staying focused on getting the child to bed. Pick your battles. If the child does the broken record back to you, do not use this technique but use a warning or a consequence.

give the child an **opportunity to take responsibility for his/her own actions.** Use a warning when the child ignores commands. Be sure to name the behavior you want stopped and name the consequence to be given. **If the behavior continues you must follow through with the consequence IMMEDIATELY.**

If the child earns a consequence and then does the behavior again a little later, don't give a second warning but go right to the consequence stating what the child chose (e.g., "OK, you hit the cat again and you have chosen time-out.").





Anger, repeated warnings and reminders, and threats can render consequences ineffective.

Consequences Continued

Consequences hold children responsible for behavior and allow children to make decisions about what will happen in their world (i.e., thus giving them control of their own fate). Consequences also permit children to learn from the natural order of events.

Natural Consequences: Natural consequences are events that occur due to the choice made by the child. Examples: if you go out in the rain without your coat, you get wet and sick; if the child refuses to eat, s/he goes hungry, etc.

Logical Consequences: A logical consequence is an event designed by the parent who decides what will happen based on the choice made by the child. For the consequences to be effective, the child must see them as logically related to misbehavior (e.g., not allowed outside for a day for going out in the rain without a coat after the rule was clearly stated before hand). Logical consequences are best when natural ones are either not immediately punishing (e.g., If a child does not brush his teeth, over time s/he will get a painful cavity) or are too dangerous to allow the child to experience, i.e., such as allowing a child run into the street and get hit by a car. Thus, the parent must set a logical consequence such as scrubbing the bathroom for not brushing teeth or not allowing the child outside without an adult for running in the street.

PARENT/CHILD CONFERENCE: A parent/child conference can foster open and safe, loving communication. It allows discussion of problems, talk of special moments, goal-setting, and evaluation of progress. Once a month, interview each child. Two simple rules apply.

Rule 1: The conference is a "safe time." Any one can call the meeting (mom, dad, or child) & the child can discuss any problem without the threat of punishment. The PURPOSE of the conference is to: EXPLORE solutions to problems, devise a PLAN, & decide on a time to EVALUATE progress.

Rule 2: If the child calls the conference before parents find out about the problem, then, there will be no punishment, e.g., grounding, loss of privileges, etc. If, however, the parents find out about the problem before a conference is called, then parents can take whatever action is needed. It is in everyone's best interest for the child to face parents.

Considerations: Sit at the child's level or below to make casual and allow for equality. With foster children, have both parents in the room to avoid manipulation or "splitting."

Advantage: The child gets to participate in decisions regarding a plan to correct the problem, learning responsibility and accountability for actions. The parent does not have to think up the consequences.

This brochure was produced to assist parents in their understanding of children who present with attachment problems. It provides a rationale for unusual behaviors as well as ground rules for parental interaction and discipline which must be consistent and loving but creatively applied to meet the special needs of the child. This document is not a substitute for therapy with a pediatric psychologist who can individualize techniques to fit your child's unique needs. The following references were used in preparing this manuscript.

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