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Attachment: Information and Strategies for Parents

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Attachment is a term used to describe the emotional connection between infants and their parents.

Attachment is not the same as bonding. Bonding refers to a short-term phenomenon that occurs shortly after birth and describes the parents' experiences of getting to know and to feel close to their new baby.

Attachment, on the other hand, is a relationship that develops over a longer period of time and depends upon both partners, the parent and the child. Attachment is typically well established by the time the child is about 1 year old, the result of weeks and months of interactions between parent(s) and child.

Development and Importance of Attachment

The quality of the attachment between parents and children is an important factor in helping children develop into competent, happy, productive adults. Attachment is related to different patterns of behavior with long-term effects. It is through warm, caring, and trusting relationships between parents and children that children learn life-long social, emotional, and cognitive skills. When children feel safe and secure in the world, they explore the world more fully, try new things, make mistakes, build meaningful relationships with other children and adults, and view the world in a positive light. Research shows that a relationship with a supportive, caring adult can help children successfully overcome life's adversities and challenges.

Quality of Attachment

Nearly all children form attachments to their parents. The attachments are usually well established by the end of the first year and continue throughout the child's life. However, those attachments, or relationships, are not all the same. Attachments can be grouped into two categories: *secure* and *insecure*. Why are some children securely attached and others insecurely attached? The quality of the attachment is largely determined by how parents care for their babies:

Secure attachment. Babies become securely attached when their parents are consistently sensitive and responsive to their needs. Their parents consistently comfort them when they cry or are upset, and play with them in age-appropriate ways. These babies trust that they can get support and care from adults, and think the world is a safe place. Children who are securely attached explore their environments more thoroughly and enthusiastically, have more tolerance for challenging situations, regulate their emotions more effectively, are better liked by teachers and students, and are better at problem solving and showing empathy.

Insecure attachment. When parents are inconsistent or unresponsive to babies' needs, babies do not think of the world as a place of comfort, and get a message that their needs are unimportant. In essence, they learn that they cannot rely upon parents for care and support. These babies may become insecurely attached. These earliest messages lay the foundation for children's later development. Children who are insecure may manifest their anxiety in one of two patterns: avoidance or resistance. *Avoidantly attached* children often develop behavior problems (including aggressive or socially withdrawn behavior), are unpopular with other children, lack motivation and persistence in learning, and tend to be victimizers of other children. *Resistantly attached* children tend to be overly dependent upon teachers for help and attention, lack confidence and self-esteem, are less able to form friendships than other children, are socially withdrawn from peers, and are the victims of more aggressive peers.

How Parents Can Encourage Secure Attachments

Parents can do much to form secure attachments with their babies. The key is to respond sensitively and consistently, taking cues from the baby. It is similar to slow dancing, with the parent letting the baby lead.

Parents can encourage secure attachment by:

- Holding and caressing the baby
- Comforting the baby when he or she cries
- Speaking to the baby warmly
- Establishing eye contact and smiling at the baby
- Playing baby games, such as "peek-a-boo" or "this little piggy"
- Creating and maintaining a stable environment and routine for the baby
- Enjoying the baby and his or her unique self

Taking care of a baby can be very difficult and challenging for parents. To be best able to meet the needs of their babies, parents need:

- Basic needs met (food, clothing, shelter, emotional support)
- Knowledge about child development and understand the meaning of key behaviors (separation anxiety)
- Ability to examine their own childhood experiences and how those influence their current parenting behaviors and attitudes

If parents are stressed or having other personal difficulties, they may want to seek help or support from a family member, friend, or professional. To take care of a baby, parents also need to take care of themselves.

Where to Go for Help

There are professionals who can help if parents are concerned about the quality of their attachment with their baby or with their baby's development. These include:

- Local school district's school psychologist
- Local mental health association
- Crisis hotline
- Parent support groups, such as Circle of Parents

Resources

Erickson, M. F., & Kurz-Reimer, K. (2002). *Infants, toddlers and families: A framework for support and intervention*. New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572307781.

Karen, R. (1998). *Becoming attached: First relationships and how they shape our capacity to love* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0195115015.

Leach, P. (1994). *Your baby and child: From birth to age five*. New York: Knopf. ISBN: 0375700005.

Website

Zero to Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families-www.zerotothree.org

Martha Farrell Erickson, PhD, is a Senior Fellow and the founding director of the Child, Youth, and Family Consortium at the Irving B. Harris Training Center for Infant and Toddler Development at the University of Minnesota. She is the developer of Project STEEP (Steps Toward Effective, Enjoyable Parenting) and has served as an advisor to a variety of policy makers, including Vice President Al Gore. This handout will appear in Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators, to be published by NASP in spring 2004.