How to Build Secure Attachments

What does it take to develop secure attachment? Is secure attachment only achieved with a certain kind of parenting?

Research indicates that nothing particularly magical or spectacular is needed to develop strong secure attachments. However, that doesn’t make it easy.

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Synchrony and Attachment

We know infant attachment security is built through a long history of interactions between infants and their caregivers. Like a good dance partner, the parent anticipates the young infant’s desires and responds to them effectively - the parent and infant are in sync with one another.

Not every interaction between a parent and child will show synchrony however. Sometimes parents may misread a cue, or infants may mis-step in their bid for attention, but these bumps in the road are not cause for alarm. Occasional lapses in attention and failures to read a child’s cues correctly are normal.

Insecure attachments do not instantly develop from these typical out of sync moments. Insecure attachments are built by a consistent history of out of sync interactions – and missing opportunities to repair or fix the out of sync moments. Secure attachment develops when there is an overall history of these in-sync, serve and return interactions. Across time, babies and children learn that close relationships with others are a safe place to express needs.

Bottom Line: It’s less about what parents do and more about how they do it. Opportunities for responsive, serve and return interactions come naturally from day-to-day requirements of taking care of a young child.
Staying in Sync

Here are a few examples from day-to-day life of how babies and their caregivers can be in sync with one another.

When baby...
- looks at caregivers and makes a “cooing” sound...
- is eating solid food slowly...
- cries and reaches up their arms...

Then caregivers...
- copy the same sound back in reply.
- allow baby to go at their own pace.
- picks up the child to help soothe them.

All of these behaviors, (and so many more!) help build secure attachments between caregivers and children. Of course how parents and children interact will change as they grow and develop. While young infants require parents to regulate almost all aspects of their environment, eventually children learn to do these skills more independently. When interactions reflect a balance of responsiveness and challenge, of freedom and boundaries, this enables children to develop a stronger sense of agency and security in relationships.

Parenting Philosophies and Attachment

The scientific evidence for the importance of serve and return interactions in the development of healthy attachment relationships is strong. There are a variety of popular philosophies about how to parent children to promote secure attachment and healthy development. However, there are no well-controlled studies of the long-term effects of most of these different parenting philosophies in typically developing children. Most of our knowledge about the effects of different parenting philosophies comes from personal anecdotes.

Bottom Line: Rigid adherence to any parenting philosophy may put unnecessary stress on parents, which in turn will affect the quality of interactions with their child. (Remember, more "how", less "what"!)
What is attachment parenting?
Attachment parenting, a parenting philosophy inspired by the work of pediatrician William Sears, is a set of parenting practices (e.g. babywearing, breastfeeding, co-sleeping) that can - but is not required to - support the development of secure attachment relationships.

Although well-intentioned in many of its practices, benefits of attachment parenting as a parenting philosophy has not been tested in controlled research studies. Attachment parenting practices are also not a good fit for all parents.

There are many other common questions around the science behind parenting practices like breastfeeding, sleep training, and screen time. Watch the video to learn more about what science says about these parenting philosophies.

Building Secure Attachments after a Difficult Start

While you can make a plan about things like screen time and sleep training we do not always have control over the early relationships children have in their lives. Not all children have the opportunity to experience positive interactions with their early caregivers. And in some cases, such as adoption, parents may not know much about children's early relationships. How can we build and promote secure attachment in children with a difficult start?
Children who have had difficult early life experiences may have very different ideas about how relationships work. When early caregivers are absent, inconsistent, or threatening, children’s understanding of how relationships work may be disorganized or chaotic. New caregivers, like foster parents or adoptive parents, should be aware that this understanding will affect how children initially approach relationships with new adults. For example, if children’s previous relationships have taught them to view caregivers as threatening, children may expect that same thing from relationships with new caregivers.

To build new expectations, children with a difficult start need opportunities to learn that relationships can be a safe place. Providing safety, security, and responsive interactions gives children a chance to build new models of healthy relationships. This process can be very challenging for both new caregivers and children. Therapy involving both the parent and child has been found to be effective in promoting positive attachment development and mental health.

How it Works: Parenting Programs
For parents who are interested in more in-depth information, several evidence-based programs have been developed to promote healthy attachment development in children at risk.

- Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC): a parent coaching program designed for foster parents that focuses on promoting in-sync, sensitive interactions between parents and their infants.
- Circle of Security: an intervention run by trained clinicians focused on enabling caregivers to recognize their own responses to difficult child-caregiver interactions and promote sensitive parenting.
- Parenting Management Training - Oregon Model (PMTO): an intensive parenting intervention designed for parents with children of all ages. While not focused solely on attachment development, a major aim is to develop positive patterns of interaction between parents and their children.