



CREATING HEALTHY ATTACHMENTS TO THE BABIES IN YOUR CARE

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Imagine you are at the airport, saying goodbye to a loved one who is leaving on a long trip. You don't know how long she will be gone or when you will see her again. How do you feel as you wave goodbye? As she walks out of your sight?

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.

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FEELINGS OF LOSS, SADNESS, perhaps some anxiety, are signs that you are attached to a person. When a loved one leaves and returns again, you may feel joy, safety, and security. Attachment to a person is likely built on shared experiences over a period of time that develop a sense of trust and connection. Babies have these feelings too. A healthy attachment supports a baby's social and emotional development throughout life.

Attachment can be defined as "emotional connections babies form with their parents and primary caregivers" (Early Head Start, n.d., slide 5). A healthy or secure attachment develops gradually over time as a result of a parent or caregiver's consistent, sensitive care. When parents and caregivers attempt to read a baby's cues (such as the ways the baby communicates, for example, by crying, laughing, turning away, screeching, pointing, to name just a few) and try to respond to the child's needs and wishes, the baby learns the caregiver is a source of comfort and security. Research demonstrates that how parents and caregivers interact with children directly influences children's later development (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Honig 2002).

Children with secure attachments learn that their world is a safe place because the people in it are caring. They learn that close relationships feel good. Children with secure attachments also learn that they can impact the world around them. They learn that their ways of communicating result in others responding and understanding them. This reinforces their efforts to continue to express themselves to others. Consistent back-and-forth exchanges that happen over time are one of the ways to build secure attachments. Children with secure attachments feel confident in exploring their environment, which allows them to learn.

The unique role of infant/toddler teachers

Teachers of infants and toddlers have an amazing opportunity to build a healthy attachment with each baby in their care. They also have the unique role of helping to support a healthy, lifelong attachment between babies and their parents.

How do infant and toddler teachers create healthy attachments with babies and support a healthy attachment between babies and their parents? It is important to realize that for most babies, forming an attachment to caregivers happens quite naturally and with little conscious effort. The responsive caregiving, shared enjoyment, and consistency of care are a part of how babies and their caregivers often relate to each other.

When you read and respond to a baby's cues, you begin to form an attachment with that child. Both you and the baby will experience this connection! Note that not every baby has the same way of communicating. Some babies send really clear messages about what they need and look for many ways to engage you. Other babies are more subtle and send signals that may take you more time to understand. Tuning in to the unique way a baby communicates preferences ("I don't like all this noise") and needs ("I am hungry") builds trust and helps you create the healthy attachment all babies need to develop well.

One way to ensure that each baby's communication style is understood is by having one teacher serve as the primary caregiver. The primary caregiver's responsibility is to care for and form a close relationship with each baby in his or her care. She or he is also the point of contact for the family and gets to know them very well. Primary caregiving happens naturally in family child care; in center-based care this practice needs to be intentional.

Useful strategies for building attachments

There are a number of strategies you may use to help you form close attachments with the children in your care. Discuss and share these strategies with families too.

To create healthy attachments with young children in your care

- Observe to better understand a child's unique preferences. Through observation you can learn how sensitive a child is to touch or how he responds to new experiences.
- Be consistent and responsive. This helps the baby know you are a trusted person. Even if you can't respond right away, let the baby know you hear him and you are on your way.
- Encourage laughter. Laughter helps people connect with each other and signals that the environment is safe and fun.
- Care for yourself. If you are tired or stressed, you are less likely to respond sensitively and consistently to the many demands babies make. Be sure you find ways to recharge.

To support parent-child attachment

- Encourage parents to read and respond to the signals the baby sends, by commenting on what happens between parent and child. "Look how he turns his head to look right at you when you talk to him."
- Help parents feel like they are the most important people to the baby. "Look at that smile; she gives you her very best smiles! Everyone can see how important Daddy [or Mommy] is!"
- Show parents how they can connect with their baby through humor. Ask about what makes their baby laugh.
- Ask parents about their experiences: "How does your baby let you know she is ready to interact with you?"

Share with parents your observations of parent-child interactions.

- Be a good listener. Parents, just like children, need to feel heard and understood. Parenting is hard work. Sometimes just being a caring listener goes a long way in helping parents feel ready to take time to read and respond to their baby's signals.

Urge parents to spend time each day playing with their child. Even 15 minutes of uninterrupted time pursuing a child's interest can help build a healthy attachment.

THINK ABOUT IT

Reflect on the relationships in your life. What are some of the things the important people in your life do to connect with you and maintain a relationship? Identify the feelings these important people nurtured in you. In what ways can you make sure you connect with each family and support healthy parent-child attachment?

TRY IT

Talk with your program director or colleagues about approaches you can take to foster strong relationships with both babies and their families.

For further ideas, visit these websites: www.ehsnrc.org/Activities/earlymoments.htm and www.earlymomentsmatter.org for information about why early moments matter and creating healthy attachments.

References

- Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC). n.d. "Attachment." In *Early Moments Matter: Small Steps Long-Lasting Effects—Birth–18 Months*. Early Moments Matter PowerPoint. www.ehsnrc.org/Activities/earlymoments.htm.
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