

Recommendations for Promoting Secure and Healthy Attachment with Children

A child's ability to form secure and healthy relationships, or attachments, with parents, caregivers or other important persons is essential to the healthy development.

"Attachment problems" generally refer a child's difficulty in forming positive, healthy attachments to parents, caregivers or other important people in their lives. Some children who have insecure or disrupted attachments show a variety of behavioral and emotional difficulties and can be challenging for caregivers and parents. It is possible for caregivers and parents to help children with attachment problems learn to form positive and secure attachments with others.

In 2006, a taskforce from the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) published a Report on Attachment Therapy, Reactive Attachment Disorder, and Attachment Problems. This report drew conclusions and made recommendations for working with children with attachment difficulties. Below is some relevant information from that report. (Citation for the APSAC report is in footnote below.)

There are many things parents and caregivers can do to support the development of healthy attachment:

- Include all caregivers in the home (for example, both the father and the mother) in the work with the child whenever possible.
- Increase the child's environmental stability and provide a consistent, safe and predictable environment for the child.
- Focus your efforts on building and improving the parent-child relationship rather than focusing on the individual child's emotional and behavioral problems.
- Increase the amount of sensitivity and responsiveness to the child's physical and emotional needs.
- Try to "see through" the child's difficult behaviors that might otherwise push caregivers and parents away.
- Take a calm, sensitive, nonintrusive, nonthreatening, predictable and nurturing approach towards children.
- Begin to think about how your own experiences of being parented may be affecting your approach to parenting now.
- Come to understand how a child's biological dysregulation influence their behavioral actions and emotional reactions.
- Let children take the lead both in play and tasks as much as possible.
- Give children the opportunity to make choices when possible.
- Be as gentle and reassuring as possible to help the child learn to trust.

The following parenting techniques are not considered effective, and may even be harmful.

These techniques should be avoided to address attachment issues:

- Focusing on the child's individual internal pathology and past caregivers (rather than current parent-child relationship or current environment.)
- Using aggressive, psychologically or physically coercive techniques in interactions with children.
- Establishing total adult control.
- Demonstrating to the child that he or she has no control.
- Demonstrating that all the child's needs can only be met through the adult.
- Describing children in negative ways such as "manipulative, cunning, and deceitful."
- Withholding food, water, or toilet access to show the child who is in control or as punishment.
- Restraining children, enforced holding, or prolonged social isolation.
- Use of physical, psychological or aggressive means to provoke the child to "catharsis," "ventilation of rage," or other sorts of acute emotional discharge.
- Pushing children to revisit and relive early trauma.
- Viewing children as having "no conscience," or as at risk of becoming "future psychopaths." (Very few children with early or serious behavioral problems persist on a trajectory toward severe violence, most do not.)