

ATTACHMENT IN ADOPTION

Make Secure Attachment a Priority

What is attachment?

Attachment in adoptive parenting can be understood as a close emotional bond that the child forms with their caregiver or parent. A person can have strong emotional bonds with people other than their parents. Spouses may have an emotionally-intimate relationship that qualifies as attachment. Children may form attachments to grandparents and siblings, and perhaps even with a long-time best friend. It's a deeper kind of connection that is reserved for very few people in our lives. In fact, it may be a psychological "red flag" for children and adults to attach too easily to others.



Why does early attachment matter?

Early attachments influence an individual's internal "working models" of themselves and others. It can affect how people interact in their adult romantic and social relationships. Adoption involves the removal of a child from a person to whom they've already formed a bond. The adoptee then has to learn if their new caregivers are a place of consistent safety, love, and belonging.



Secure Attachment

Children with secure attachment trust that their parent will keep them safe and trust that parents will consistently respond to the child's expression of needs. Attachment is an attunement by parents to the child's signals. Secure bonds involve expressions of affection, consistent attention, and a genuine enjoyment of the child.

Other Attachment Types

Attachment Theory also describes three non-secure attachment types:

- **Anxious:** Often fears abandonment, seeks constant reassurance, and may have inconsistent emotional responses.
- **Avoidant:** Tends to suppress emotions, prefers independence, and can be emotionally unavailable, though they still desire love.
- **Disorganized:** Often results from experiences with frightening caregivers, leading to internal conflict and difficulty forming stable relationships.

Attunement for Attachment

Parents who wish to form healthy attachment will be attuned to their child's signals, moods, and attempts at communication (both verbal and non-verbal). For example, a newborn communicates through crying and an attuned parent learns to understand which needs the child is communicating with each type of cry. An older child might communicate with words or even behavior. Attunement alone isn't enough. The attuned parent must also act upon their child's communication.

Consistently Meeting Needs

When a child is hungry, in pain, sad, bored, or otherwise expressing a need, the caregiver can build healthy attachment by meeting the need quickly and consistently. The child learns whether or not they can trust their caregiver to provide for them. Care must be taken to express love and affection while providing for a child's needs rather than unintentionally making the child feel their needs are a burden. Children who receive inconsistent, unloving, or even abusive care eventually develop insecure attachment. They may stop expressing needs and pull back from expecting caregivers to respond.

Attachment and Affection

Parents with a secure attachment to their child send signals of love to the child through affectionate touch, eye contact, speaking to the child with loving words and tone, listening to their child and responding, and otherwise showing that they not only love the child, but also like being with them. For newborns, this could include skin-to-skin contact, infant massage, talking to the child while making eye contact during feedings, baby-wearing, and other habits built upon affection.

Playfulness as Attachment

Playing together is an excellent way to build strong, healthy attachment. Caregivers can show interest in a child's world while building happy memories.

Attachment in Adoption



Attachment Activities: Newborn

- Skin-to-skin contact
- Eye contact with baby during feedings
- Use of infant massage techniques while applying baby lotion
- Baby-wearing using safety-approved carriers or wraps
- Speaking or singing to baby with affectionate words
- Meeting their needs quickly after the child has cried (feedings, diaper changes, soothing, etc.)
- Avoidance of "cry-it-out" methods for sleep training
- Cuddling

Attachment Activities: Non-Newborn

- Affection through words and actions
- Conversations with the child where the caregiver uses empathy, eye contact, and reflective listening skills
- Playful activities done on the child's level around their interests
- Activities that allow for extended physical contact (ex: holding the child while in the swimming pool)
- Cuddling together with a book or while watching a movie
- Attachment-focused discipline methods, such as "time-in" and do-overs