

What Works for Children with Attachment Issues?

by Melissa Nichols

It takes a wealth of understanding and skills to parent a child who lacks the foundational experience of a secure attachment. Unlike children whose introduction to the world has been kind, a child who has endured abandonment, neglect, and/or abuse often struggles with basic family life concepts. A child's first model of family may promote the belief that parents do not have his best interest in mind—a viewpoint that can produce myriad negative behaviors such as questioning parental roles, the purpose of discipline, and the ability to ask for help. In sum, children who have tough life beginnings can be very difficult to parent.

So, what works for a child who has attachment issues? It depends. Effective parenting techniques will vary based on the child's temperament, developmental age, learning style, and belief system. Many children who have suffered early maltreatment have a faulty belief that they are bad or defective. In their minds, caregivers treated them poorly or their birth parents abandoned them because they are intrinsically faulty or deficient. Given that belief, children may consciously or subconsciously think, "Since I am basically defective, what's the point in improving my behavior?"

Individuals act in accord with their primary beliefs about themselves, their life, and others. Actions will give clues to a person's beliefs. For example, a troubled child's actions might indicate these beliefs about self-worth:

"I'm only worthwhile when I have your undivided attention."

"I am only loved when I get my own way."

"When someone corrects me, it shows me that she does not love me."

If a parent does not address these faulty beliefs, few parenting strategies or methodologies will help. Most parenting guidance assumes that a child's core belief is positive and, therefore, the child will choose good things for himself. A negative core belief inspires very different choices.

Attachment to a primary caregiver can enable a troubled child to change faulty beliefs. Our therapy at Family Attachment and Counseling Center focuses on strengthening parent-child attachment through storytelling rather than only addressing behavioral issues. We consistently find that when parent-child attachment grows, many of the behavioral problems disappear because children begin to change their self view and understand that their parents honestly want good things for them.

In addition to healthy attachments, children need boundaries and discipline to learn how to navigate life. In our experience, children with attachment difficulties often have common perceptual problems that need to be accounted for when choosing a discipline technique. Children who have attachment issues:

- may inaccurately read non-verbal cues and misinterpret spoken phrases. In fact, they commonly place negative interpretations upon others' neutral words and actions.
- may not seek positive attention. Due to past experiences, these children may be more comfortable with negative attention because it fits their faulty belief system, tends to be more intense and undivided, and is habit forming. They also may not know when they do things right.

- may have difficulty regulating their internal emotional states. They may frequently become overwhelmed with strong emotions that block their ability to use a coping strategy.
- are often very controlling. Based on experiences with untrustworthy or absent caregivers, they may have had to take care of themselves and not rely upon other people for help—a habit that can be hard to break.
- tend to be very anxious and may mask their fear or disability through opposition. One 16-year-old youth reported that he frequently says “no” to a request right away so he has more time to understand what the person is asking.

A single parenting methodology or technique will not work well for all stages and ages. This adage may apply even more to children who suffer from attachment difficulties due to their emotional immaturity, poor coping skills, and uneven development. In order to assess whether a specific parenting technique is right for you and your child, ask yourself if this form of parenting will help:

- create a more connected relationship between you and your child,
- regulate your child’s emotions, and
- give your child a sense of accomplishment or mastery that combats a faulty belief and leads to positive self-esteem.

Parents must be purposeful in their interventions and tailor techniques to their child’s unique needs. Thinking ahead is crucial since most of us do not have the wherewithal to assess and react appropriately to a situation while we are in the midst of a crisis. In my years of work with children and adolescents who have attachment issues, I have been privy to parents’ triumphs and struggles in raising their children and have gathered their sage parenting advice:

Gauge your expectations according to the child’s emotional age and abilities, not his chronological age. Many children who suffer early childhood maltreatment experience delayed emotional, social, cognitive, and sometimes physical development. When adults expect them to act their chronological age, these children may become overwhelmed (which may, in turn, present as oppositional behavior). Observe and evaluate your child’s development separately from his chronological age to find parenting strategies that will work for him as he is now.

Be consistent! Follow through with what you say. Although a parenting technique may not consistently divert a blow up, children need to know what will happen. There is comfort in the mere structure of discipline. By following through on a consequence, you keep your word and establish a boundary that will help your child feel more secure in your presence. Do not toss out a strategy without giving it a chance to work.

What does not work now may work later. Children move through different developmental stages. As they mature, different parenting strategies may work even if they were not initially successful. For example, logical and natural consequences may not work for a child who believes she does not deserve good things or for a child who is developmentally like a two-year-old—where autonomy may be more important than self benefit. As she gets more attached to you and revises her core beliefs, it may become a viable parenting method.

Be explicit and clear about your good intentions. One way to diffuse negative interpretations is to be explicit. I witnessed one parent, for example, whose son interrupted her during a conversation. She stated very clearly, “You interrupted a conversation.” Her son kept talking. She continued,

“When you interrupt me, I have less interest in what you are saying. I want to be interested in what you are saying because I love you. It would be better if you wait quietly until I finish this portion of the conversation. I will ask you what you want when there is a pause in the conversation. Then, I will listen to what you have to say.”

Incredibly, the child did as she said. He was also pleased that he could navigate that social situation correctly and gain the response he wanted.

Ask yourself why your child is doing what he is doing. Go under bad behavior to ask yourself why a child is being so oppositional, annoying, or moody. One father considered why his son incessantly chattered. He knew the youth's birth parents had neglected and abused him, so he finally asked, “Do you talk all the time because you don't want to think?” The son replied that indeed he did not like silence because when there wasn't any sound, he thought of bad things. After the youth's explanation, his father better understood the extent of the youth's internal discord, had more tolerance for the noise, and looked for additional ways to help his son.

Calm your child before you do anything else. Research indicates that when people are highly anxious, they cannot learn new things. Children whose past includes abandonment, neglect, or abuse tend to be more anxious and more easily overwhelmed by negative emotions and environmental stimuli (noise, light, too many people, etc.). Employing techniques to calm your child before attempting to address a behavioral problem may give you more success.

Some parents have used creative calming methods, such as having their children:

- run around the house
- write, work a puzzle, or listen to music
- help scrub the floor with the parent
- move boulders
- jump on the trampoline
- take a bath

Structure to reduce anxiety. Children who experience a rocky start in life may enter new homes and situations in survival mode. Consequently, they may instinctively need to have some control over their situation so that they can feel safe. A structured, predictable environment can help to reduce a child's anxiety and make them feel more secure in the home.

Structuring might begin with routines. A large white board can tell children what will happen and what they are expected to do. Structuring can also mean thoughtfully preparing for possible problems. Parents can tell their children stories that anticipate feelings and model ways to handle different situations. Parents can also role play interactions using puppets or toys to illustrate a problem and potential solutions.

Be kind to yourself! Parenting a child with attachment issues can be an extremely isolating experience. To form a secure attachment with a difficult child, parents must find support. External and internal supports can help you be the parent you want to be for your child. Some ideas:

- Join a support group or meet with other parents who understand your life.
- Journal the progress your child makes. Track every small step.

- Allow yourself time away.
- Be thankful for the good things in your life; review them morning and night.
- Exercise and eat healthy food.

So, what works with children who have attachment issues? Many parenting techniques are helpful. It is important, however, to remember that each method is only a tool to use at a given time so the child will learn what he needs to know to be healthy. In the end, no one parenting strategy will be the ticket for a successful relationship with your child. Parenting is a process that takes time, and with ongoing commitment, healing and connection can occur.

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