

Parent-Child Attachment: A Key Nutrient

By Lindsay Gladstone



Catherine Sori, Picture Courtesy of Governors State University

The images of a mother cuddling her infant, a father soothing his toddler, and parents playing games with their children not only represent an idealized view of parenting, they are also examples of affectionate and responsive parenting.

And affectionate and responsive parenting is perhaps as important a nutrient to a child's growth and development as food, shelter, and education. The quality and quantity of positive and demonstrative attention children receive is directly related to the development of their self-image, their ability to relate to others as they grow into adulthood, and how they eventually parent their own children.

"The ability of an adult to have an active, affectionate, reciprocal, and lasting relationship with another adult is directly related to a child's relationship with their par-

ents," observed Dr. Catherine Sori, Associate Professor at Governors State University and Leader of the Marriage and Family Counseling.

"Positive, repeated interactions with a parent provide an internal working model for a child to emulate. How attached an adult was to his or her own parents directly relates to how attached they will be to their own children."

Sori's observations are drawn from the study of attachment theory and recent brain research. "Children need secure relationships with the adults in order to experience normal social and emotional growth and develop strong interpersonal relationships. A positive parent-child attachment creates a secure base from which the child is free to explore; trusting that the parent will be there to rely on."

Nurturing this attachment is perhaps one of the most important

aspects of parenting. Studies show that attachment influences brain development. According to Sori, the developing brain of an abused and neglected child produces more stress hormones, which are toxic to neurons in the brain.

"The negative consequences are smaller brain growth and a lowered capacity to handle emotions. Parent nurturing boosts the baby's immune system, which boosts the baby's overall health and growth."

Developing a positive parent-child attachment begins, according to Sori, with two simple guidelines. "Parents must provide structure and predictability for their children and a relaxed, enjoyable environment in which to grow."

Creating this security and positive environment begins at birth. Additional studies demonstrate the importance of touching and cuddling newborn babies. "Holding, rocking, and massaging babies builds attachment and develops neuro-pathways. Babies and parents are soothed by the physical connection," says Sori.

Sori also lists eye-to-eye contact, playing while changing diapers, talking, cooing, and singing, and responding when the baby cries as important parent to child activities. "A baby will look for a mom's reaction when she comes into the room. When smiles are exchanged, the parent and child are attuned to each other. If the mom fails to respond, the baby will give up trying and the connection is not developed."

As children grow, the interaction with their parents should continue. Reading, baking, singing, doing chores, and gardening are all activities that can be shared and enjoyed. Baby games such as Patty-Cake and Itsy-Bitsy Spider evolve into non-competitive board games and sports activities. "Whenever there is laughter and play between parents and children, attachment builds, connections are made, and positive memories are created," says Sori.

An insecure type of attachment causes emotional and behavioral problems in children, including problems with their relationships to others when they are young and as adults. According to Sori, these issues can be addressed through family counseling.

"Insecure parents are not destined to repeat their difficulties with attachment with their children. Therapy can help them make sense of their past and put it in perspective. Behaviors can be redirected, positive parenting skills can be learned, and nurturing attachments can be developed."

Free, confidential family counseling including marriage, and parent-child relationship, is offered at Governors State University through the Division of Psychology and Counseling. Governors State University is located at 1 University Parkway, University Park, Illinois. ■

For more information, call 708.534.4545.