

**The Importance of the Parent/Child Bond**  
**By Jean Landphair, MMFT**  
**Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy**

Children are born with a longing for a secure attachment – that is, a close emotional connection with at least one other person they believe they can count on. Using sophisticated brain imaging techniques, researchers have recently discovered that human brains are hard-wired with this longing. Because babies are totally dependent on their caregivers (usually one or both parents) for all their physical needs, this bond is necessary for their very survival.

Many of a baby's behaviors serve the purpose of getting a parent's attention and encouraging bonding, so they will be cared for. A baby's cries motivate a parent to take action to meet the baby's unmet needs. A baby's eyes may follow the face of the parent, attempting to keep his or her attention. A baby may smile at the sight of a parent's face, reinforcing the attention the parent gives to the baby. The simple fact that a baby is so adorable to the parents also draws them into relationship with and increases their commitment to the baby.

A baby's need for connection is not only physical, but also emotional. This need continues after a baby has grown into a child and even into adulthood, when a person can take care of his or her own physical needs. In our American culture where self-reliance and independence are highly valued, an adult's need for a secure emotional attachment is often downplayed. But it is critical for a happy, healthy life.

Without a sense of secure attachment, it is very difficult for people to have satisfying, close relationships. They may feel that they are unlovable and sense a void in their lives. Others may see them as being clingy, overly-dependent, or nagging, as they desperately seek connection. Another possible reaction to lacking a secure attachment is to disconnect from one's own emotions so as to stop the pain of loneliness and isolation. This type of person seems to be self-sufficient and not need other people. When others want to connect with them, they seem hard to reach. Some insecurely attached people go back and forth between both reactions. They are confusing to others who try to have a relationship with them. Sometimes they seem to be begging for attention and connection, and at other times, they seem to push people away. Because of humans' innate desire for close relationship, being securely attached to at least one important person in our life has a huge impact on our happiness.

In order to have a secure bond, a child needs to know that his or her parents are available when needed. This means being physically present with the child enough for the child to get a sense that the parents have their back. Quality time spent with one's child is important, but so is quantity.

A secure attachment for a child also means knowing that one's parents are responsive to one's needs. When a baby or child expresses a need, a parent should acknowledge it and respond in some way. It doesn't necessarily have to be in exactly the

way the child wants, but there needs to be some response. For a child to experience no response from a parent makes a child feel like they don't count, they are invisible, they are not worth a response. Sometimes, what we interpret as rebellious behavior in a child is the child's way of protesting the lack of emotional connection to the parent. The child's behavior is telling us that any attention, even negative, is better than being ignored or dismissed by someone who is so important in the child's life.

And finally, a secure attachment includes a sense of emotional engagement. That means a child sees the parent making eye contact when they are talking together, expressing affection through words and actions, and showing interest in the things the child is interested in. These are some examples of behavior that gives a child the feeling that he or she is emotionally connected to his or her parent.

Does this mean that a parent needs to be at the child's constant beck and call in order for the child to develop a secure bond? No. If a parent were perfectly, 100% available, responsive, and emotionally engaged, then a child would be too trusting of others as they grow up. A child needs to feel that the parent is there for him or her a vast majority of the time. This helps a child feel secure with the parent while recognizing that people aren't perfect and do let them down sometimes. A parent doesn't have to be a perfect parent to be a good parent!

Neither does a secure attachment mean protecting a child from all hurt or frustration. It is necessary for children to learn how to handle frustration in a productive manner, because frustration is a normal part of life. Young adults on their own for the first time who still expect the world to revolve around them have a rude awakening coming. This is an appropriate expectation for a newborn, but not for an 18-year-old!

Instead, we can encourage our children to explore and learn on their own within safe boundaries that we set. We can allow our children to get practice at making some of their own choices and experience the consequences of them - more and more as they mature and show that they can handle decision-making. And we can be there to comfort them when they get hurt, which is inevitable in life. Children can handle minor bumps and bruises – both physical and emotional – when they know they have a loving parent teaching them how to work through the struggles of life and cheering them on. This prepares them well for adulthood in an imperfect world.

How can parents know if their children have a secure attachment to them? Researcher Mary Ainsworth devised a laboratory test she called the "strange situation." In it, a mother and her baby were brought into a room with many toys and a stranger. After allowing the baby to play with the toys a short while, the mother left the room. Usually, the baby expressed distress at being left alone with a stranger. When the mother returned soon after, the reaction of the baby was very telling. If the baby was easily comforted by the mother and was soon able to go back to playing with the toys with the mother present, the child showed a secure attachment to the mom. If the child pushed the mom away, showed anger, or ignored the mom when she returned, the parent/child bond needed some help. Parents can watch their child's reaction to being left and then reunited

with them to get a clue as to their child's sense of security in their attachment to the parent.

What about children who never develop this type of attachment with their parents or caregivers? There is good news – they can still develop a secure bond in adulthood. This can happen in close relationships with other adults who have experienced a secure attachment. This relationship can be with close friends, siblings, or in a romantic relationship. As an insecure adult risks a little closeness in a relationship and experiences that the other person is trustworthy, the bond between them grows a little more. As that continues to happen reliably, an insecure adult can eventually gain a secure attachment. The goal of any marriage is to have both partners feel this type of secure attachment with each other. This gives both marriage partners a feeling of emotional safety, in which they can be themselves and know that they are truly loved.

It all starts with day one of a baby's life. Parents don't have to be perfect. But there are many things they can do to insure that their children have a secure attachment. This will put their children on a path to having quality, close relationships throughout their lives.

*Jean Landphair, MMFT, has a private counseling practice in Murfreesboro. She has a Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy degree in addition to her personal experience of being married for many years and raising two children. She is also President of the Rutherford County Psychotherapy Association. She can be reached at 615-785-5107 or [jlandmft@att.net](mailto:jlandmft@att.net).*