

Dance of Relationship

What All Parents Need to Know About Attachment

The most complex organ in the universe is the human brain. It is now clear that what a child experiences in the first few years of life largely determines how the brain will develop and how the child will interact with the world throughout their life, according to research from the Ounce of Prevention Fund. What we have learned about the process of brain development has helped us understand more about the influence of both genetics and environment — the nature versus nurture debate. It appears that genetics predisposes the brain to develop in certain ways. But interactions with our environment have a significant impact on how those predispositions will be expressed; these interactions organize our brain's development and, therefore, shape the person we become, according to a 1997 article in Families and Work Institute. It is both Mother Nature and Mother Nurture that is shaping the developing mind of the child.

The infant brain is primed to learn, attend and absorb. The infant brain is born with 100 billion neurons. And while this is quite amazing, it is only the beginning of the story. The infant brain enters the world in a highly disorganized state. This serves the survival needs of our species since babies' brains have to be able to adapt to any culture, language and climate in the world. Babies' brains grow and develop as they interact with their environment. This makes the human baby brain completely

dependent on the sensory-rich experiences that will shape the neural circuitry of the developing mind of the child.

EXPERIENCE IS THE ARCHITECT OF THE BRAIN

The primary way the infant brain is receiving sensory input and experiences is through the parent-child attachment relationship. Attachment theory created by John Bowlby describes attachment systems in biological and evolutionary terms, across species, as meeting important functions of survival — feeding, reproduction and protection. In humans, the primary parent-child attachment relationship additionally serves to maximize a child's social, emotional, cognitive and conscience development. Through every stage of an infant and child's development, there are critical developmental needs that the parent (through the primary attachment relationship) is meeting. It is through these sensory-rich experiences that the baby brain is being activated, organized and sculpted.

Experiences shape and reshape the neural circuitry of the brain. Early bonding and attachment experiences result in a cascade of biochemical processes that stimulate and enhance the growth and connectivity of neural networks through the brain, according to research from Allan Schore. Imagine an infant or child being scared or fearful. As they get more and more distressed,

their heart and respiratory rate increases, they cry louder and more frantically as they become more and more agitated. If the parent picks the child up, gently rocks them, comforts and soothes their distress — eventually the child calms down. The parent acts as the “external regulator” of the child's internal physiological distress. The primary caregiver thus eliminates the distress and moves the child back into a state of calm (or homeostasis). The primary





caregiver is synchronizing and resonating with the rhythms and needs of the child's internal emotional states. The baby will get attached to the caregiver who is psychologically attuned to meeting their needs, reducing their distress and increasing their pleasure.

Disrupting these early primary attachment relationships will negatively impact a child's social and emotional development. Parents and caregivers do more than regulate the present psycho-biological state

of the infant; they activate the growth of the brain through emotional availability and reciprocal interactions, according to a 1988 article in the International Journal of Psycho-Analysis. We are wired to connect as the human brain has evolved as a social organ.

From birth to death, we are in relationships. The most critical of these relationships is the primary attachment relationship between the parent and child. Securely attached children who have had their

primary attachment needs met are able to focus their emotional resources on maximizing their developmental potential. Infants and children who experience trauma and attachment disruptions will have a social brain that is stuck in survival mode; the developing brain will adapt to a hostile environment. These children learn to defend (not cooperate) and avoid (not connect).

Early attachment experiences teach us the "dance" of relationship.

For the child, there is nothing more important than the parent-child attachment relationship. The most critical ingredient of this relationship is the pattern of emotional communication between the parent and child. It is within this relationship that a child feels safe, protected, comforted, loved and meaningfully attached. The child learns how to get their needs met through human connectedness. Learning the “dance of attachment” is essential as it enables the child to learn how to create and sustain meaningful, loving human connections. But we do not enter the world knowing this dance. Every single attachment facilitating behavior must be learned! Parents are a child’s first and most important teacher in this “dance of attachment.” When you respond to your child’s emotional distress and pain with empathy and concern, they are learning how to have empathy for others who are hurt or distressed.

One of the most crucial developmental tasks a child needs to learn within the context of the parent-child attachment relationship is how to modulate and/or regulate their internal emotional distress (returning to a physiological state of homeostasis; resting heart rate, resting respiratory rate, after a distressing event). It is important to note

that learning is optimized when we are in a calm-alert state. Children who have experienced chronic distress, pain or attachment disruptions often struggle socially and academically. It is hard for children to learn when their bodies are hyper-aroused or distressed. When we stop and think about a child’s day-to-day experience from their perspective, we realize how many stressors and frustrations they encounter. Children are always communicating their needs through emotion and behavior. Tune-in to your child’s emotional states. Hint: The majority of our emotional communications are non-verbal and this is especially true for children. Parents who practice positive self-care are modeling and teaching ways they manage the daily stressors of life.

We are social-emotional beings with an innate need to connect and form meaningful relationships. Every interpersonal skill that we need in order to be successful in creating and sustaining these meaningful relationships must be learned. Parents are a child’s first and most important teachers. Children are watching, absorbing, learning and imitating their parents. By age 3, about 90 percent of the child’s core brain structures have been formed. There is a growing body of research indicating that social and

emotional skills (emotional intelligence) may be even more critical to life success than one’s intellectual ability (IQ). And if you want your child to learn how to develop healthy and meaningful relationships you are their most important teacher. ☼

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Allison Davis Maxon, LMFT, is a clinician, educator and advocate specializing in attachment, trauma and adoption/permanency. She is passionate about creating systems of care that are strength-based and trauma-informed. She has 25 years of experience in child welfare, children’s mental health and trauma-informed care. She is the chief operating officer at the National Center on Adoption and Permanency. Maxon is co-author and master trainer of “Kinship Center’s ACT: An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare and Mental Health Professionals,” co-author and master trainer of “Pathways to Permanence: Parenting the Child of Loss and Trauma,” and creator of “10 Things Your Child Needs Every Day,” a video training tool that assists parents/caregivers in strengthening their attachment relationship with their child. Contact Maxon at www.allisondavismaxon.com or allisonmaxon@cox.net or (949) 939-9016.

(kids in waiting)



Ian, 17, is an athletic and an engaging young man who is funny and likes to tell stories. He loves playing sports, especially football. Ian would like to have a family to love him and support him reaching his future goals. He likes to fit in and has an adaptive personality.

He would prefer to work outside and help a dad, go fishing, play sports or listen to music. Ian loves hamburgers and home-cooked meals, and he is a regular “meat and potatoes” kind of child. Ian likes animals and would enjoy farm life. He would like to have dogs or farm animals. Ian’s ideal forever family would share his passion for sports and outdoor activities.

If you can provide Ian with that home, visit childrenawaitingparents.org or call 585-232-5110.