

Attachment: Helping Parents Encourage the Development of Attachment

Parenting Strategies that Build and Strengthen Attachment Adapted from Dr. Vera Fahlberg

The Arousal-Relaxation Cycle

The Arousal-relaxation Cycle is based on our understanding that trust, security and attachment are strengthened when a consistent adult caregiver repeatedly meets a child's needs. For example, a child becomes hungry and cries, reflecting a state of tension and arousal. The caregiver responds by meeting the infant's needs, feeding and comforting the infant. The child receives comfort, which relieves tension and promotes contentment. The parent feels secure and happy that he/she has provided empathic care for the child. The good feelings are mutually-reinforcing and reciprocal. This cycle is a healthy parent/child relationship and is repeated multiple times each day.

The adoptive parent's job, guided by the worker, is to learn to identify the needs of his/her new youngster and to meet those needs in a consistent, nurturing response. The challenge for new parents of maltreated children is that these children may express their emotional needs with problematic behavior. Parents must recognize that these tantrums, nightmares, oppositional behaviors, refusal to do what is asked, feigning illness and other outwardly-negative behaviors are often expressions of anger, fear, sadness and loneliness. They must learn ways to meet the child's emotional needs, while still being able to control their negative and harmful behaviors.

In addition to these behaviors, severely-neglected or abused youth may have attachment problems, and may be aloof or appear not to care about or for the adoptive parent. This can be very disturbing to adoptive parents. We will discuss how to address attachment problems later.

Positive Interaction Cycle

While the arousal-relaxation cycle is dependent on the child's expression of need, in the Positive-Interaction Cycle, parent initiates affirming emotional and social exchanges with the child. The cycle begins when the parent engages the child in a positive interaction. The child enjoys the interaction and reacts in an affirming manner. Both the child and parents feel a sense of self-worth and are motivated to continue to interact. This type of interaction greatly augments the attachment process.

Many adoptive parents believe wrongly that the child should “take the first step” in forming attachments with them. For adopted children, the lack of trust and their ambivalence about new attachments may make this impossible. Adoptive parents must be encouraged to regularly approach the child in a non-threatening, gentle manner to initiate social interactions. Parents must be prepared to continue to engage the child in a meaningful and pleasurable interaction without expecting the child to reciprocate in kind.

Claiming Behaviors

A third means Fahlberg recommends to promote attachment is “claiming.” Claiming is the process of assimilating the child into the family and helping the child feel part of the family. Claiming behaviors also promote the development of entitlement by the parents—the firm belief that they have a right to parent the child as their own. These activities are symbolic in that they communicate acceptance and integration of the child into family life.

Examples of claiming behaviors are as follow. These activities are symbolic in that they communicate to the child, and the world at large, that the child is a member of the family.

- Having the family picture taken that includes the child, and send that picture to family members that the child regularly visits
- Adding the child's name to the mailbox; allowing the child to sign greeting cards
- Sending out announcements to family and friends when the child joins the family
- Including the child's life-book with other family albums
- Teaching the child old family traditions, incorporate traditions the child remembers from his/her earlier life into adoptive family traditions; involve the child in developing new family traditions
- Planting a tree or flower bulbs in the yard, with the child, to celebrate the adoption and symbolize the “planting” of the child in a permanent family. Enlist the child to tend to the new plants as they put down roots and flourish.
- Having the child help plan future vacations, activities, holidays, etc. to communicate to the child that he/she is a permanent part of the family's future